Reputation restoration
3 simple steps to handling negative online comments and reviews

BY NICK BULLOCK

The Internet often brings out the worst in folks. “People are nastier through email and online than through the phone,” says Amanda Johns Vaden, senior partner at Southwestern Consulting. “It’s much easier to be aggressive online.”

Given the power of word-of-mouth marketing, this can pose a problem for hobby retailers. Anonymity and faceless interaction can push customers to share an unfair opinion with the world, sinking a store’s reputation in the process.

But there’s one thing these commenters don’t expect: a response. Give them one, Vaden says.

“You want to stop the commenting or the sharing and “liking” [on Facebook],” she says. ‘And the best way you can do that is to get in the middle of it.’

There are, however, a few guidelines to follow when reaching out to disgruntled customers online.

1 Look for trouble. It may seem like Twitter, Facebook and other social media, as well as review sites such as Yelp, are only good for providing unhappy customers with a place to rant.

That’s not the case. They also provide a way for hobby dealers to respond to issues and quell discontent.

First, one must know where the discussion is taking place. Large companies often employ someone with the sole job of monitoring the Internet for negative comments. But the Internet is a big place, and most hobby dealers can’t afford to pull an employee — if they even have employees — off the sales floor in order to check Facebook.

Vaden suggests a few shortcuts. By setting up Google alerts (www.google.com/alerts), hobby retailers can receive daily or even hourly emails citing any use of various keywords and phrases. Dealers should set up alerts for the names of their stores and their personal names, as well as those names in conjunction with key phrases such as “bad experience” and “customer service.” It also can’t hurt to set up Google alerts for notable geography-specific and store-specific keywords.

Google alerts encompass anything searchable, including Facebook comments and tweets. But to cast a wider net, Vaden suggests using an application such as TweetDeck, which allows users to search the Twitterverse in real time for those keywords and terms.

Monitoring the online conversation surrounding one’s store may seem like an unnecessary and time-consuming chore, but by scanning Tweetdeck and Google alerts while store traffic is slow, hobby retailers can ensure they are able respond quickly to negative comments.

2 React quickly and concisely. In this case, speed is a friend. Once a business owner addresses a commenter’s online complaint, the stream of follow-up comments tends to dry up, Vaden says. Until that first contact is made, however, the negativity will flow freely.

Therefore, it’s important that hobby retailers respond to negative comments the same day they’re posted, she says.

And the manner of response is just as important as the speed, Vaden says. The goal is really twofold: 1) to stop the conversation, not join the conversation, and 2) to demonstrate that a customer’s feedback is taken seriously.

To accomplish both, she says, all that’s needed is a short response that apologizes to the customer’s unhappy experience and provides a way for that customer to directly contact the hobby dealer.

“You want to make an overt statement, and then you want to address it privately,” Vaden says.

Never attempt to explain away the issue publicly, and never respond more than once to the same commenter about the same issue in an online medium, she says. Often commenters just want to complain, and once they’re politely confronted, they’ll stop. If they don’t, simply respond with another request for a private conversation — preferably over the phone or in person. That last part is important, because any email communication — even if meant to be private — can easily be copied and pasted online.

If done correctly and respectfully, both the original commenter and any other customers following the exchange will be impressed that the hobby retailer took the time to address a complaint.

“It shuts them up and makes a statement to everyone else,” Vaden says.

And you shouldn’t feel obligated to provide restitution. Simply acknowledging the complaint is often all that’s necessary, she says.

3 Fish for praise. An underrated way to combat negative reviews is to solicit positive reviews, Vaden says.

No, this doesn’t mean demanding an employee post happy remarks on Facebook or paying someone for a glowing review on Yelp. In fact, such practices are often against the policy of many review sites and tend to come across as disingenuous anyway, she says.

Instead, when a loyal customer praises one’s hobby store, ask that customer to post that praise on Facebook or Yelp.

“If someone has a good experience, then they’ll do it,” Vaden says.

Chances are most customers will share positive experiences with their friends anyway, especially in the close-knit hobby world, she says. They just don’t think to do so online.

So ask them.