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## Telling Our Story

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# EMBRACE THOSE ONLINE REVIEWS

"I HATE  
YELP."

"Yelp doesn't  
treat us  
fairly; it filters  
out all our  
best reviews."

"What right does  
Yelp have to  
publish reviews  
of my business?  
I don't want  
them! Just leave  
me out of it!"

## REVIEWS IN GENERAL, PARTICULARLY POSITIVE ONES, CAN BE A MASSIVE BOON TO ANY BUSINESS

BY WELTON HONG

You've probably heard comments like these, and you might well have heard them coming from your own mouth.

Without question, Yelp is a massively popular online platform for reviewing local businesses. But that popularity doesn't mean it's exactly beloved among people who run small businesses, including funeral home owners and directors.

A few years ago, it probably seemed preposterous that Yelp or other major review platforms such as Google and Facebook would even include death-care businesses in their listings. No one would judge the services provided for a recently deceased family member by selecting from one to five stars, would they? Those sites are for restaurants and repair shops, right? Not burial and cremation.

Wrong.

Yelp doesn't care whether you deliver pizzas or provide cremation services. If you have a small business, you'll end up with a Yelp listing. The same is true for Google and Facebook, along with some other, smaller review platforms.

While I used Yelp as my example because it's the poster child for complaints of "this third-party site is trying to ruin us," such concerns fit all the review platforms.

But I'm here to tell you there's a better way to deal with Yelp, Google, Facebook and anywhere else reviews of your business might appear.

As funeral professionals, you are undoubtedly familiar with Kübler-Ross' model of the five stages of grief. It would be crass to belabor the metaphor, so I'll keep it simple: A lot of small-business owners are stuck on *anger*, and they really need to move on to *acceptance*. In fact, there's another important step after that. Don't just accept that your funeral home will be reviewed – embrace it.

I know how much of a headache negative reviews can be, and I'll talk about how to deal with those later in the article. But reviews in general, particularly positive ones, can be a massive boon to any business.

## HOW REVIEWS HELP

The first way your business is helped might be obvious, but it's still worth discussing. If you generate a lot of positive reviews, families searching for burial and cremation services online for both at-need and preneed situations are more likely to choose your funeral home than one with fewer and/or worse reviews.

Note the part where I said, "A lot of positive reviews," because that includes two key elements. Of course, you want positive reviews, but it's almost as important that you have a lot of them. You need both quality and quantity. Yes, it's always good to get some five-star reviews (most platforms use the one-to-five-star system), but if that's all you have, you won't be legitimate to most online searchers. It's not a sufficient sample size. You're much better off having a 4.4 average rating on 50 or so reviews than a perfect 5.0 rating on a handful.

If a rookie baseball player went 3-for-3 in his first game, you'd be happy for him, but you wouldn't crown him the next Ty Cobb. He won't have a 1.000 batting average for long. You wait to see how he does over a full season.

That's why you need to generate a lot of reviews. In addition to legitimizing the sample size, it just plain makes your funeral home look more established and reputable.

Because overall ratings show up in organic (unpaid) search results for your industry, more people will click through to your site. There, you can show off positive reviews (and testimonials) to help convert those visitors into clientele. These are key aspects of your business' online reputation, which is a massive factor in generating both traffic and conversions.

But review quality and quantity don't only benefit you by appealing to people searching for deathcare services. They also influence search engine optimization, the process of ranking higher in search results than your competitors.

For example, when your funeral home is well reviewed on Google (which has more than 73% of the search engine market share), that's a huge factor in how often you show up in Google's "Local 3-Pack," a free listing that's displayed very prominently in search results for your location and specialty. It's prime real estate that acts as spectacular free advertising for your business.

Additionally, the more content Google discovers about your business, the higher you will rank in search results. All those reviews are essentially addi-

tional “content” to Google, adding to your legitimacy in its eyes.

Finally, consider the importance of great word of mouth to a funeral home. As more people are searching for death-care services online, these reviews are taking the place of word of mouth.

You can say how professional and trustworthy you are on your site (and you should), but that doesn’t hold the same weight as members of the community saying the same.

## DON'T FREAK OUT OVER NEGATIVE REVIEWS

The big fear about review platforms, of course, is that your business will occasionally get bad reviews. That’s true even if you do everything right. And that’s obviously incredibly frustrating.

Some people are hard to please. Some will misunderstand some aspect of the process and be incredibly critical. It happens. It will happen to you, and it will happen to your competitors as well. For the most part, it’s something you just need to accept.

Here’s an example I often provide

to clients: *The Godfather* is one of the most universally acclaimed movies in film history. On the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), it holds the top overall rating (tied with *The Shawshank Redemption*) of 9.2 stars (out of 10). So, everyone must love it, right?

Actually, while more than 700,000 IMDb users have rated *The Godfather* 10 stars, more than 30,000 other users rated it just one star. Yes, one star. Tens of thousands contend that one of the greatest films of all time is actually one of the very worst.

Granted, some of them are just trolls, but that isn’t the point. No matter how great a job you do, you will occasionally get negative reviews. The key is to generate so many four- and five-star ratings that you mitigate any potential damage from one- or two-star ratings.

With that said, there are also ways to more directly deal with negative reviews. If you get one, reach out immediately to the reviewer and thoughtfully (and politely) investigate the situation. By doing this and offering heartfelt apologies, you can often get the reviewer to modify or even delete a negative review.

Also, understand that no matter how it might seem, most people who take the time to review a business do so positively. On Yelp, more than two-thirds of ratings (68%) are either five or four stars. Only 16% are one-star reviews.

Here’s where I acknowledge that generating reviews in this industry is a bit different than doing so in others. It’s one thing to boldly ask a customer for a review after you’ve painted her house. It’s another to ask a

family member for a review after you’ve provided funeral services for a family member.

Still, the processes are not as different as you might think. You can still send follow-up emails that ask for genuine feedback on your firm’s performance, along with a link for a review if the recipient is so inclined. It just must be a more nuanced and thoughtful request than is common among other business types.

If you know a family was particularly thrilled with your services – and if the time is right – go ahead and mention that a brief review would be greatly appreciated. I’ve seen this work wonders for many funeral home clients.

One important thing to note is that Yelp has a pretty strong policy against soliciting reviews, and that policy has only become stricter over the past year. Accordingly, I advise against directly soliciting Yelp reviews through any structured online process. If you want to inquire informally in person, that’s typically fine. But it’s better to be safe than sorry since Yelp can administer tough penalties when it believes a business has violated this rule.

Review solicitation really isn’t a problem for Google and Facebook. There are automated tools that make it easy to directly solicit reviews to these platforms with a couple clicks, and the verbiage can be customized.

However you address review generation, remember that it’s incredibly important for your funeral home’s success going forward. If your business only has a few reviews or has a poor overall rating on the key sites, it won’t matter how good your website is or how much money you spend on ad campaigns. The review issue will undermine all of it.

So put focus on generating great reviews, be ready to mitigate negative ones if you can and monitor your online reputation regularly. Today, that’s foundational to successfully marketing your business online. ☰

*Welton Hong is founder of Ring Ring Marketing (funeralhomeprofits.com) and author of Making Your Phone Ring With Internet Marketing: For Funeral Homes.*

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