

10 Ways to Turn Around Negative Word of Mouth

No matter what you sell or what industry you're in, **you're going to experience negative word of mouth**. It just happens. Things break, problems come up, and employees have bad days. But it's how you handle negative word of mouth that separates you from everyone else.



Remember: **Negative word of mouth is an opportunity.**

A great response strategy can convert angry and upset customers into loyal, raving fans. The rule of thumb is that while unhappy customers talk to five people, formerly unhappy customers you win back talk to 10.

So get out there and embrace the negative word of mouth. Start responding. You'll stop the negative, you'll earn new fans, and you'll generate a ton of respect.

#1: You can't respond to conversations you don't see.

Great response starts with great listening.

Set up Google Alerts for your brand and industry key terms, keep a close eye on your Facebook page, listen on Twitter, and read all Yelp, TripAdvisor, and Zagat reviews. Make a list of any forums or communities where your customers congregate and regularly check in on them.

Whether you're paying attention or not, the conversations are happening. But a great listening program makes it easier for you to **catch negative buzz and spot issues before they catch momentum** and become much harder to turn around.

A screenshot of the Google Alerts creation form. It includes fields for "Search query:", "Result type:" (set to "Everything"), "How often:" (set to "Once a day"), "How many:" (set to "Only the best results"), and "Your email:". There are "CREATE ALERT" and "Manage your alerts" buttons at the bottom.

#2 Determine if it's worth a response.

Not all negative comments are worth a response, and not all critics are worth trying to win over. Sometimes, as hard as it can be, it's best just to move on.

Avoid these situations:

- The criticism is on a really small blog or forum, and **your response will only bring attention and credibility** to an issue nobody saw in the first place.
- **It's a blatant attack** that's clearly rude and outrageous – and anyone who reads it can see the critic has a personal problem.
- **A known crackpot who is only looking to pick a fight.**

There's just no way to win in these scenarios. So stay out, move on, keep your head up, and *focus on the wrongs you can right*.

#3: Act quickly.

When you're facing negative word of mouth, time is not on your side. The longer you wait to respond, the angrier the customer will get – and the more likely others will pick up on the issue and spread the negative buzz.

At the very least, say this:

"Hi, my name is _____ and I hear you. We're looking into it now, and I'll get back to you as soon as possible. If you have any questions, contact me directly at _____."

A message like this does two things:

1) The ranter knows they have your attention – there's much less incentive to keep spreading the anger, and

2) It makes a real person with real contact info available, so if they're still angry, you've at least given them a place to vent other than online.

#4: *Speak like a human.*

The only thing worse than ignoring upset customers is to respond with a canned corporate response. If you thought they were mad now, wait until you see how they react to an excerpt of your policy terms and fine print.

Show empathy, bring a friendly tone, and use your real name. And if the forum supports it, it helps to include your actual photo.

It's easy to yell and scream at an anonymous company. But when someone shows up and says, "Hi, this is Emily and I'm so sorry for the trouble..." – it changes everything.

The critic now realizes he wasn't yelling at a giant, faceless company. He was yelling at Emily. Quickly, the anger fades – and you'll often get an apology.



Check out how Zappos replies to this fan. It's human, it's friendly. And even though they couldn't immediately fix the problem, you can bet this fan will be back.

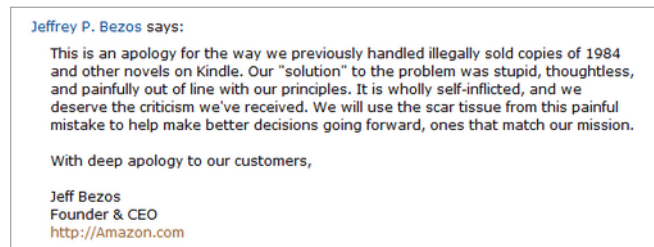
#5: *Offer a real apology or don't apologize at all.*

A strong, direct apology will always earn more respect than a flimsy, kinda-sorta' apology.

Consider the difference between an apology like "We're sorry you feel that way" to "**Absolutely, positively unacceptable**" – which was the headline to FedEx's blog post after an employee was caught throwing a package over a customer's fence. (<http://blog.fedex.designcdt.com/absolutely-positively-unacceptable>)

The post included a straightforward video from Matthew Thornton, a senior vice-president at the company. (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ESU_PcqI38)

And it doesn't get much better or more direct than Jeff Bezos' apology for how they handled pulling copies of 1984 and other novels off Kindles:

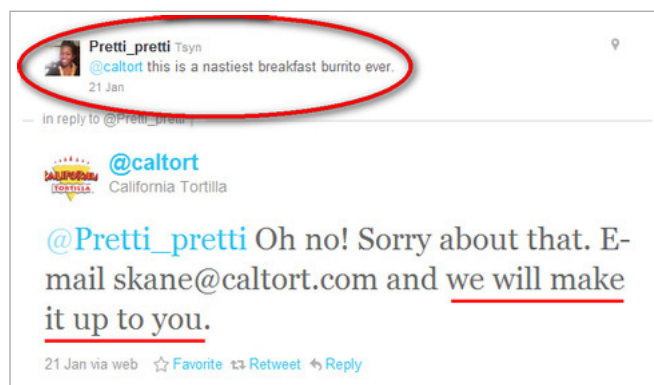


#6: *Offer to make it right.*

Apologizing is part of turning around negative word of mouth, but actually fixing problems is how you really win over critics.

We all make mistakes. **It's how we fix them that people remember.**

At burrito chain California Tortilla, **making it up to customers is part of every response they send when someone is upset.** It's this simple:



#7: Never get into a fight.

Any time you win an argument online, you're losing. All anyone really remembers is that you're a fighter.

This doesn't mean you can't respond, explain your side of the story, and start a conversation. You just need to be in the right mindset:

1. Don't get emotional.
2. Remember it's a real person. Just as they see you as a faceless company, it's easy to see them as just another complainer.
3. The critic is actually doing you a favor. They're helping you learn to be a better company. For every person who actually speaks up, many more walk away quietly – never to return.

For more on how to reply, check out this quick explanation from Jeff Diamond of Oakland's Farmstead Cheeses and Wines (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RJ_DJGDIIMM)

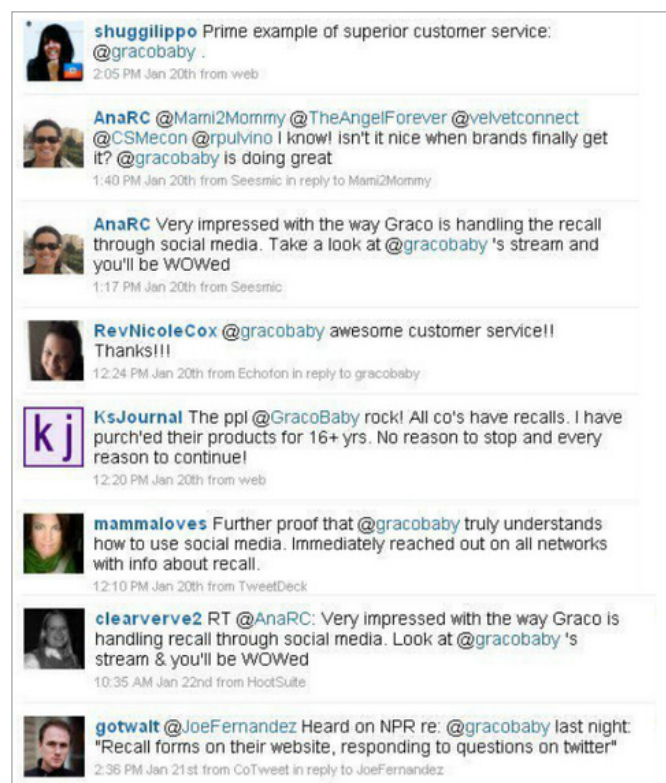
#8: Keep the discussion in the open.

When a negative issue comes up, a common gut reaction is to ask to move the conversation offline. But when you do this, **the world can't see all the effort you put into fixing the problem.**

Nobody sees the private email where you give that sincere apology. We can't search for that phone conversation where you politely explain why the situation happened in the first place.

But when you do it online, in public, you earn word of mouth. **For the same effort and cost, thousands more people see that you actually care about customers.** Plus, you save on all the people who now don't need to call in (or write a similarly angry post) to find an answer to the same question.

Graco's quick and transparent use of Twitter during a recall of more than 2 million strollers, for example, helped get an important message out much more quickly, showed customers how much they cared, and it just might have saved some lives, too. (<http://goo.gl/313DT>)



#9: Use fans and third-party sources to help tell the story.

What you say about yourself isn't as powerful as what others say about you. It's true when people are promoting you, and it's true when people are calling you out.

When their brand was under attack from a competitor-led PR campaign, UPS' Debbie Curtis-Magley and her team pointed to third-party content from news articles and industry experts to help explain the full story. (<http://goo.gl/6ERki>)

And even more powerful than experts can be the voice of your fans. You never want to put them in an uncomfortable situation, but it's OK to ask for help sometimes. For example, a blogger might share how they're frustrated with a particular product feature. In which case, you might turn to your Facebook or Twitter fans with this message:

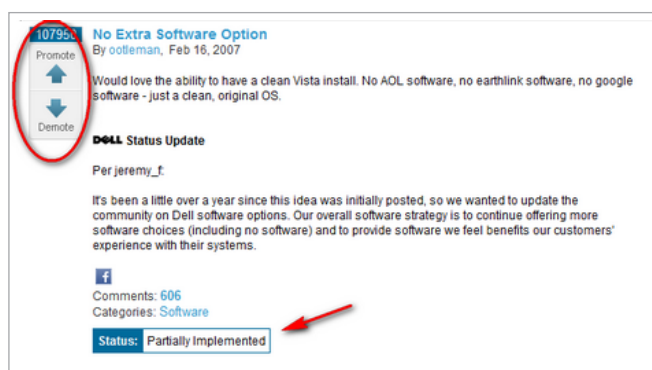
"Hey guys! Chris over at [blog name] is having trouble with [feature]. Can anyone help share how they're using it?"

#10: Involve them in the fix.

If someone's criticizing you, it's often just a form of tough love. They're doing it because they care. They see potential, and they want you to do better.

So instead of seeing them as critics, start looking at them as frustrated fans who might have some worthwhile ideas.

On one hand, Dell's IdeaStorm is just a big list of things people think they're doing wrong. But it's actually a release valve – a proactive community that gives people with ideas, suggestions, and complaints to share and vote on their favorites.



A platform like IdeaStorm isn't right for everyone, but giving your biggest critics a way to get involved is. Try inviting yours to customer advisory boards, beta tests of new products, and brainstorming sessions.

So see! Negative word of mouth doesn't have to be so bad after all.

How do you handle critics? How are you making the most of negative word of mouth?