

Monitor Your Small-business Reputation

A key element to the success of any small business is its reputation. Knowing what people are saying and how they feel about your business is important.

“A classical approach to evaluating your reputation is to do some type of study,” says Glenn Muske, the North Dakota State University Extension Service’s rural and agribusiness enterprise development specialist. “Yet unless the study is done by an unbiased, trusted outside source, the information received can easily be misleading.”

So how can a business owner get an accurate picture of what is being said about his or her business?

“A good place to start is with trusted colleagues, mentors and others in your network,” says (Insert name) of (Insert title and county). “The people you ask must be those with whom you have established a relationship through time and who you know will provide you accurate information.”

“Often employees do not fit this category unless they have been a part of your organization for years because of the disparate level of authority you, as the owner, have,” (Last name) adds. “Yet developing a flow of information that your employees are voicing is something you should work on.”

Just as with employees, family and friends may not be the best source of information. While well-intended, they are biased, and this is not the time that you want simple agreement.

“A tool that exists but is little used by many small-business owners is online, particularly in the social media world,” says Muske. “It is easy to set up some tools to automatically monitor what is being said about your business.”

Online comments are growing in popularity. They are easy to make, and quite often the person can remain anonymous in doing so. Everyone has heard stories of how some of these comments have been picked up and spread rapidly through the Internet.

“There are sites - take the tourism industry, for example - that encourage feedback on your business,” says (Last name). “Not monitoring this information can mean your business reputation is ruined before you even know it.”

Thus, you not only must monitor your reputation but take steps to respond when negative comments come forward, whether they are verbal, in writing or online. Even if you don’t know who made the comment, you need to:

- Assume it has some validity, take it seriously and check it out. This means listen.
- Respond quickly.
- Ask what can rectify the problem. If it is an anonymous complaint, determine what you would want if you were the customer.

- Let others know what has been done once the issue has been resolved.

Protecting your business reputation is key in protecting your brand and long-term viability. It is worth your time and effort.

These are just a few ideas you may want to consider. For more tips about protecting your business reputation, contact your local Extension Service office at [insert phone number and email address]. Also visit NDSU's small-business support website at www.ag.ndsu.edu/smallbusiness and sign up for the monthly newsletter, or visit www.eXtension.org/entrepreneurship. You also may want to check out support sites such as www.sba.gov or talk with a volunteer at your local SCORE (Service Corps of Retired Executives) office (www.score.org).

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