



The Builder's Guide to Online Reputation Management

Builders can't hide their reputation. It's highly visible and immediately accessible with just one click. Do you know what it takes to improve your online reputation? We've got some tips and tricks to highlight the positives and make right any negatives.

Consumers have changed. Today, savvy consumers check online reviews for just about everything they buy. A new home may be a consumer's largest lifetime purchase decision. You think they aren't going to check out who's building and providing warranty service? And unfortunately, negative reviews are more common than positive reviews. It probably does not feel fair, but it is a reality. Builders need to turn their reputation into an asset by doing two things:

1. Highlight the positive. The vast majority of buyers probably love their home and think their builder is fantastic. Positive opinions are out there, but they are not always online - It's your job to help bring these positive stories to life.
2. Make it Right. We all make mistakes, but how you manage your business, employees, and customers and how you respond to an issue is highly visible to anyone considering your brand. Define your online reputation before someone else does it for you.

8 Steps to Improving Your Online Reputation



1. First, set expectations with your buyers. Home buyers need to understand that home building is a very human business. Mistakes will happen, but buyers must understand and believe you will be there to correct any mistake. Be humble and remind them that this is a human business, but that you are committed to them. Make this part of your pre-build process and make it easy for buyers to give feedback.



2. Audit and monitor your brand online. There are numerous tools available for free or at some cost that will email you anytime your brand is mentioned on social media or select websites that we will discuss further in this whitepaper.



3. Respond to negative reviews quickly and publically. Don't let bad reviews cause further damage to your brand by going unanswered. Not only will delays allow the current situation to get worse, but you may lose sales that are pending. Solely responding privately may be the worst thing you can do. That said, there are right and wrong ways to respond.



4. Recruit satisfied customers to write positive reviews. Focus on Google +. You need at least 5 reviews before your star rating will be displayed in local search results. There are three times in the building process you should ask for reviews: One, right after the buyer signs the contract. They are euphoric, probably appreciative for any extras or discounts you may have extended to them. You have not even had time to make mistakes. Two, after a successful walk-through once follow-up items are addressed. Three, anytime your client sends a thank you note or expresses sincere appreciation for your team's efforts. Ask them if they will help by reviewing your business on Google +. Send them the direct link to the URL via email and then follow-up to thank them or send them something as a token of your appreciation.



5. Be proactive! Stop bad reviews before they happen by being proactive in seeking feedback. There are many moments of truth for builders. One of the most important is right after a walk-through of the home. The consumer has a chance to identify all the things they feel needs to be addressed before closing. Be like the good doctor who calls his patient after a procedure to see how they are feeling. Address issues quickly and effectively and negative reviews are unlikely to be posted. The other critical time for home builders to check in is after warranty service calls. Are you making it easy for consumers to file a claim? Are you responding to them in a manner that meets or exceeds expectations you help set? Ask them and then follow-up. The money you spend now will save sales later.



6. Be accessible. Stop brewing bad reviews by making sure it is easy to contact senior company representatives. A bad review is often in response to a delayed response to a problem you would normally immediately fix. If they know they have your attention, they are less likely to write a bad review. Don't ask them to write a bad review by being inaccessible.



7. Own or control your page #1 search results in Google. When someone searches for "[Your Brand Term]" or "[Your Brand Term] Reviews" you need to own these pages. For your brand term, this is pretty easy. By setting up your major social profiles and linking to them along with other pages/sites you control, you will be there. We recommend the following: LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube, Pinterest, Twitter, your blog, and sites you control such as your profile on Career Builder and your builder profile on NewHomeSource.com.



8. Push negative content down by promoting positive news and reviews. The only way you can push negative content to page 2 of a Google search is to get 10 other things to be considered more relevant. You have to be more relevant to the consumer's query to win the rank and satisfy consumers with the content you have. This is all about SEO.

A Benchmark Audit

The first step to managing your reputation is to assess your current reputation. Start with a benchmark audit to determine your current online situation.

3-Steps in the Audit Process:

1. Gather and categorize reputation results through relevant lenses. We pull 3 pages of Google search results for keyword searches that are reflective of your reputation. Our main focus is on page 1, but on page 2 and 3 are your best opportunities to promote positive references.
2. Identify the results on pages 2 and 3 that you want to promote and develop a plan for making these results more relevant. You want to cause things you own/control or are highly positive to be considered more relevant in the search results.
3. Continue to monitor your reputation online. Update your audit sheet bi-weekly while actively seeking to drive changes in the results, but monitor at least monthly for changes. Set up monitoring of your brand mentions. Many tools are available for free or at moderate costs.

Gather and Assess Your Reputation Through Google Search Results

You need to view your reputation through three lenses: (1) a general brand view, (2) the view as someone looking for brand reviews, and (3) the view as a potential employee. We can assess your online brand reputation by using Google to search for:

[Your Brand Term Only]

[Your Brand Term Only] + reviews

[Your Brand Term Only] + careers

For each search above, we are looking for two key things : (1) Positive information on sites you own/control or influence, and (2) results that are harmful to your reputation on the first two search results pages. Ideally, you will own/control most of page 1 and what you don't own is influenced by you or favorable to your brand. Further, we do not want negative reviews, particularly on the first 2 pages of Google search results. Based on your own situation, you may choose to modify or add to these guidelines. Just be consistent.

We care most about what shows up near the top of search results. Page 1 of Google is key since less than 6% of searchers will ever get to page 2 and less than 2% will get to page 3 (Source: Advanced Web Ranking's 2014 Google Organic CTR Study)



Monitoring Your Brand Online

Monitoring your brand is easy and many tools are available. Some can be costly, but free options exist. You need to monitor two things: (1) your social media mentions and (2) anything showing up in Google search results. For social media monitoring, one of our favorite tools is Trackur.com. They have a 10-day free trial and costs \$97/month after that. Want a free option? You can set up Google Alerts at no cost. To use it effectively, you need to know a little about Google advanced search operators, but it's easy to set up and manage.

How to Set Up a Google Alert in 3 Easy Steps

First you need to have a Google account. It's free and you can access all the tools Google offers at no cost.

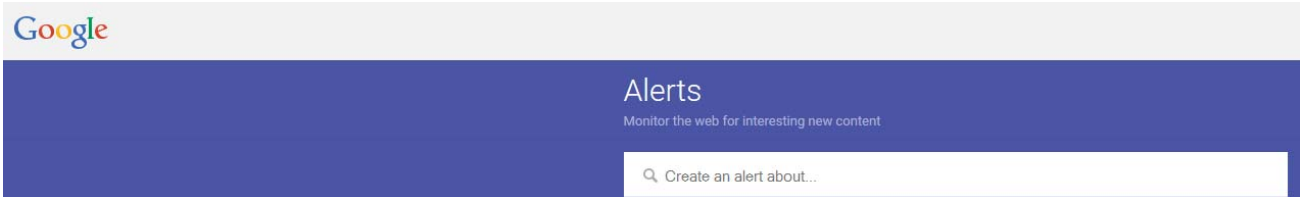
1. Go to Google Alerts: www.google.com/alerts
2. Set Parameters for the Alert

Type in the search query and modifiers you want. Since we don't want to track mentions on our own website, we use the qualifier '-site:www.yourwebsite.com'.

3. Select Your Options for the Alert

For most of us, we only need to decide how often we want email alerts to come when Google finds something new. The options are: "As-it-happens," "At most once per day," or "At most once per week." Then just hit the "Create Alert" button. You can edit or delete the alert at any time.

That's it! You can set up as many as you want. You might set up alerts to track your executives mentioned in the news, specific negative review sites, competitor brand mentions, and community names. Each alert will send a separate email, so make sure you are being specific and sending at the frequency you want.



Responding to Negative Online Reviews

Home building is a very human business and we, as humans, all make mistakes. The internet amplifies those mistakes making them more visible. Gone are the days when you would address an issue that made it into print media and then quietly went away. Online reviews don't go away. They have to be handled differently than other potentially negative public relations issues.

Don't let negative brand or employment reviews cause further damage by going unanswered. Delays allow the current situation to escalate leading to lost sales or potential employees. That said, we believe there are right and wrong ways to respond.

It is uncomfortable to admit mistakes and takes courage to publically acknowledge them. Online, that is exactly what you have to do. This is important for two reasons: (1) When done right, it keeps the PR issue from escalating, and (2) it minimizes the ongoing damage of negative information that remains visible. This second point is what differentiates handling online vs. offline reviews. Potential customers and employees are going to see your response or lack thereof. Reviews handled with care will both prevent additional negative reviews and reduce the impact of the bad reviews.

We believe a builder should respond to a negative review in a timely, authentic, and humble manner. A personal and conversational tone is generally preferred. Here are some guidelines:

Show empathy: Apologize and express that you understand the pain/inconvenience caused. It does not matter if what they are saying is 100% accurate, you don't want to debate or seem defensive. Try to understand their point of view and how the situation made them feel.

Demonstrate your contrition: Empathy alone is not enough. Express how your actions were wrong and what you are doing to fix it. Show that you are taking steps to make amends and prevent similar issues.

Without making excuses or sounding defensive, stress the positive: This is the tricky part, but an opportunity to turn lemons into lemonade. Let's assume something positive (e.g., company growth) contributed to unintended employment related results. In this case, you should point out the jobs and advancements made possible through your growth, but admit to the negative consequences.

Ask for feedback: Ask the poster to come back and comment on how you did with resolving the issue. When a prospective customer or employee reads your response, they should be thinking: "Some of the reviews I see here are bad but at least the company has acknowledged the issues and are seeking to find a resolution." If someone wants to come to work for your company, they want to believe your story.





Pushing Negative Reviews Down in Google

You really can't push negative reviews down in a way Google would approve. What you can do is make positive results more relevant so they outrank bad or negative items in the search results. When you get a highly ranked bad review, you want it to go away. Fair or not, this is unlikely to happen on its own and you probably cannot force a bad review to be removed. So, what are you to do?

It is time to promote the positive. Glowing third party reviews are the best reviews to promote, but you also have pages in your direct control that can be promoted. Third party reviews and your owned or controlled pages will rank higher if they are deemed more relevant in search engines for the consumer's query. Some basic on-page search engine optimization (SEO) can make a huge difference in getting these pages to rank better. For example, if you have a consumer reviews page on your site, make it consumer friendly and add appropriate copy, title tags, URL's and header elements. Assuming the key on-page factors (URL's, Title Tag, H1, Image Alt-tags, and body copy) are handled, you are half way there.

The more difficult task in improving search rank is getting highly authoritative and relevant sites to link to your landing pages. For every search query, what is relevant changes. Want a list of the most authoritative links for your search term? Getting links from pages that Google returns for a specific search term represents what Google considers to be relevant and authoritative. But how are you going to get these sites to link to you?

Search for "[Your Brand Term] Reviews." What comes up? When you do this type of search with your own brand term, most of what you will find are pages you own or control. Often there are aligned business partners willing to help you as well. So, where do you start?

1. Handle any Negative Reviews. Review any negative reviews on page one or page two of the Google search results. Make sure you have responded to the reviews to mitigate any ongoing negative impacts. See our tips for responding to negative reviews on page 5 of this whitepaper. If there are slanderous items, you may be able to work with the site owners to get items removed or a disclaimer added.

2. Make Sure You Have Solid Online Business Profiles. Check to see that you have robust profiles created for key builder and social sites. We recommend the following for home builders: Google My Business (formerly Google+/Google Places), Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and your NewHomeSource.com Showcase page. If you are not linking to these from your main site, you need to. Consider also having a presence on Pinterest and Houzz. All of these sites should be optimized for SEO. While you will not always have direct control over on-page SEO elements (e.g., Meta Title Tags) on these sites, you can usually control much of the copy on the page and decide how and from which page to link.

3. Add or Update Your Career and Review Pages. Make sure you have a content rich, SEO optimized pages for careers and reviews on your own website. There is no reason these pages should not rank highly within Google search results for career and review related searches. If you can link directly to these pages from other sites you own, that will help. Some businesses even have an "workat[company].com" site to help showcase employment opportunities.

4. Promote Positive Pages by Linking to Them. Review your audit for positive links from third party sites. Positive articles or reviews are like gold. Promote these by linking to them. If you have glowing reviews on Glassdoor, link to them with a link that tells the user what to expect such as "Check out our employee reviews on Glassdoor." Are your Glassdoor reviews a little shabby? Don't link to them. Instead link to other third party and owned/controlled pages that are more reflective of your brand. This part of the process takes some careful planning. Map out the pages you will want to promote and from which sites/pages a link would be beneficial to consumers. Title the links in a way that makes it very clear what the user is likely to find by following the link.

**For more information regarding our Online Reputation Management packages,
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