

There's more to online reputation than TripAdvisor

While it may garner more headlines, TripAdvisor is not the biggest review platform out there. With Facebook quietly working to up its game, operators need to be having a wider discussion about reputation management, and how they can be actively influencing their online appeal, says Carlo Platia, chief executive at Feed It Back.

TripAdvisor is a Marmite platform – you either love it, or you hate it. Regardless of which side of the fence you sit, the platform represents a paradigm shift in influencing the way customers choose where they go to eat and drink. What causes friction, is that control, in the main part, has been taken away from operators, and the platform has often been found open to skulduggery and underhand tactics to drive down the ratings of competitors, or boost personal ratings.

While TripAdvisor continues to dominate headlines and panel conversations, thanks to pithy responses from operators calling out nit-picking customers, or maverick journalists highlighting its flaws by setting up London's top-rated restaurant – which in fact was a garden shed in Dulwich – the platform isn't the biggest player in the game and should only form part of a wider discussion about online reputation management.

In fact, TripAdvisor only accounts for 29.1% of all reviews left across the major platforms, coming significantly behind Google that accounts for twice as many reviews with a 60.7% market share. There has been relatively little fluctuation between these numbers since we have been tracking them over the past year, and due to the fact Google also has a notoriously difficult and clunky function for reporting fake reviews, it has to be questioned why TripAdvisor is so prominent in the news cycle, when Google is the biggest player. But, could all this be changing?

Quietly in the background, Facebook, the platform with the third highest share of reviews at 10.2%, has been rolling out significant changes to the way its review platform works, the biggest of which saw it remove its 5-star rating system in September last year and switch to a recommendation method, offering a binary yes/no choice.

The decision to do this was taken after trialling a new 10-point review scale across the platform. This hybrid 10-point score would have been created by an algorithm that took into account a business page's existing five-star review rating score, alongside recommendation scores, and in doing so provided operators with much more wriggle-room for mediocre experiences. Instead the decision was taken to adopt the binary approach, arguably because the platform wanted to tailor its targeted approach specifically around what users like and dislike and there was too much variation in the 10-point scale.

Now that the new system has rolled out, users with Facebook business pages will have noticed that they still retain their rating out of five on their homepage. This is because it takes into account historic reviews using the old grading system, but moving forwards the algorithm will only take into consideration new recommendations.

At the same time as rolling out the new recommendation system, Facebook also unveiled a function whereby users can leave 'Rich Endorsements' which include both photos and text. What's particularly interesting about this, is that it made the recommendation process easier by suggesting attributes, or tags, for the user to suggest, such as whether they liked the 'ambience' or 'latte art', for example.

As a result of these changes, which were slowly rolled out across all pages from September, we have seen increased volatility in average review scores, with the new methodology driving feedback from customers with polarised opinions. This has seen the average social review rating increase from 4.1 to 4.2, although Facebook's calculated score has moved from 4.3 to 4.6.

One suggested positive of the new system, was an expected increase in the number of reviews, as the process of requesting a recommendation from a customer would be quicker and easier for both the customer and the business. But, despite this, our data reveals that, since the roll out, the percentage of reviews left across the platform has remained relatively stable around 10%, despite the enhanced user experience. The failure to achieve this can be partially attributed to customers who do not have a strong opinion, either positive or negative, not feeling compelled to leave a review.

Another benefit of the new system is a more robust feature for flagging suspicious recommendations, which can be flagged for a number of reasons, crucially including: recommendation not relevant and unfair recommendation. This gives businesses the power to take back control and omit bogus reviews in a quick and easy fashion, which simply isn't available on either TripAdvisor or Google.

The switch to a binary yes/no recommendation, has made it increasingly important that operators are monitoring and paying attention to the content of the recommendation, rather than just the score, so that they can glean insight on what the drivers are behind people feeling compelled to leave a positive or negative recommendation.

This focus shouldn't be isolated solely to Facebook. There is a wealth of data and insight about how guests think your business is that already exists across a Facebook, Google and TripAdvisor, that you need to actively, track, capture and analyse. Equally important, is engaging with disgruntled customers and utilising the golden window of opportunity to turn a negative review into a positive.

Tracking the data from hundreds of thousands of reviews through our case management platform, we have identified that the window of opportunity to reach out to a customer who has left a negative review post is 48 hours. Strike during this period, acknowledge the customer, address their concerns and you can turn a disgruntled customer, who will not only share negative reviews online, but also with families and friends in person, into a brand advocate. Fighting for guest recovery is imperative given today's increasingly fickle consumer and the fiercely competitive nature of the industry.

Looking good online has never been more important. Consumers have become habitually ingrained to sense check every decision they make online. This isn't limited to where they choose to eat and drink. It encompasses every facet of their life: from searching for a new house, looking for a job, or buying a product online. An excellent marketing or PR campaign will be rendered redundant if the customers who have entered the top of the sales of the funnel, log online to sense check a service or product and see that it has two-star rating.

There's no hiding, you have to be actively influencing your online appeal. This involves looking past just TripAdvisor, tracking innovation across the major platforms as they vie for market share, and introducing systems for efficiently monitoring, tracking and engaging with customers.