



Expand2Web Podcast #2 PDF Edition

Yelp to Business Owners: Claim Your Profile and Engage in the Conversation with Yelp Users

Don Campbell Interviews Yelp Business Outreach Manager Luther Lowe

Don Campbell: Hey, Luther. Thanks for joining me today. I just wanted to follow up on a conversation we had last week. I think you reached out to me over Twitter based on some articles that were going around the web and we had this real great conversation about Yelp and how small business owners can work with Yelp. So, I appreciate you being on the podcast to help share some of that information with my listeners.

Luther Lowe: Absolutely, Don. Thanks for having me on.

DC: So, one of the things we talked about last week on the phone was just this, I talk with a lot of small business owners that are really happy with Yelp because they've got a really great profile. They've got some really good reviews and as a result they rank well in Google. So they get a pretty nice stream of customers just because they've got a good presence on Yelp. And I've talked to a number of other business owners who are a little frustrated because they've got some negative reviews and you had some really good tips for how to handle these. Your role at Yelp is business outreach, is that right?

LL: Right. I've been at Yelp for just over a year and my specific function is to, just to be a liaison to the business community, helping business owners with sort of best practices, things like responding to reviews that they've received, unlocking the free business tools, like going to biz.yelp.com and just generally being a, you know, educational provider for the business community on Yelp.

DC: Yeah, that's great. I mean, you're the perfect guy to answer some of the questions that I get and I have to admit I think, maybe in the past some business owners said, "Yelp is a little bit arrogant toward the businesses because they..." I think Yelp is really centered around the user community. But I've noticed a lot of changes that Yelp's been doing and probably your coming on board and reaching out to people proactively as one of them, right? I think that some of the things you brought up last week were really important for business owners to know. So when you talk about being a liaison to business, what kind of

tools are on the Yelp site for business owners, like what should they do to sort of get in on the conversation?

LL: Sure, yeah. I mean just your really point, definitely we've, though we've had for well over a year, tools that allow business owners to engage and become involved on the site. Frankly, we could have been doing a much better job at just educating the business community and that's partly why my role is created. And so, what I strongly advise business owners to do, really you got kind of two categories. You've got business owners who maybe don't have a presence on Yelp and when I say business owners, I'm talking about local small to medium-sized businesses, you know, personally thought as kind of maybe a brick and more, like a coffee shop. I mean a good rule of thumb is if there's a face-to-face interaction.

So if you're doing, if 95% of your customers are via e-commerce, Yelp isn't really a natural fit for you but what I recommend to business owners who's looking at engaging their customers on Yelp or checking their customers to Yelp is to go to biz.yelp.com. And what that is, is essentially a dashboard of free tools that we give to the business community. Now, if you don't have reviews, it will allow you to populate a page full of information about the business. So, let's say, you're a coffee shop in Minnesota and you don't have any Yelp reviews, you can get on there, talk about your history, your specialty. You can recommend other businesses that you work with. You can post coupons and announcements and events. And then, what will happen is presumably you've produced, will aggregate over time and at that point you can actually send messages to customers and thank them for the reviews privately.

We actually have a public kind of feature that business owners can use to be kind of involved in a public way in a conversation about their business. So that's for business that doesn't have reviews. You can actually go to biz.yelp.com and create a page. For business owners that does have reviews, you can unlock your page and the messaging features will be activated pretty much right away once you upload a photo and...

DC: But this is a case where maybe somebody's already left a review about your business but you haven't ever claimed your Yelp profile, is that right?

LL: Exactly, exactly and it's funny you mentioned Google results. I mean, a lot of small business owners discover Yelp by googling their business name and finding that they have 7 reviews and that they've been reviewed on Yelp and that's from that point that...

DC: In fact I always recommend to my clients to fill out their Yelp profile and I think there's a place you can link to your website in your Yelp profile for your business, right?

LL: Right. there's...

DC: And so that...

LL: Instead of information about the business, a phone number, website, you can put that all in there. You can also put hyperlinks in the News and Announcement feature. So, for example, there's a tennis coach in San Francisco who uses his News and Announcement feature to link off of his Yelp page to his website that has older testimonials that were written by clients before Yelp existed that he wanted to share as well as links to his video site which has rich media of him actually performing his tennis instruction.

DC: That's a great tip. So, if you go inside your Yelp profile then in the News and Announcement Sections you could potentially use that to link to other areas of your website.

LL: Exactly, exactly.

DC: I have found, you know, I would help the small business owners set up their profiles in Google local and Yahoo local and I found that having a Yelp profile is one of the things that Google looks for to sort of validate your business. So, it's also really important for business owner to have that just as a, you know, to help their whole Search presence and just sit there, how they show them the Search results in general.

LL: Yeah, I mean, I don't know. I think, we all wish we knew how Google search worked. We would be millionaires living on our part of the island but I think to make a general statement, Google tends to like sites that are driven by user-generated content such as Wikipedia sites that are self-policing and over time have great information.

DC: Well, if you look in the web references section on anybody's Google profile, if they've got a Yelp profile that shows up as a reference for their business. So, definitely...

LL: Oh, cool. I didn't realize that.

DC: Yeah, certainly something Google looks at. So, I'm sorry, I kind of cut you off but you're basically saying, "Go and clean that Yelp profile," and go and you can add, what, photos to there. You can add something, like you can add news and announcements and all kinds of information about your business, right?

LL: Right. History, specialties, there's even sort of a B2B component. So, if you got, say you're a framing shop, I've heard of a recent example of a guy who does painting and photograph framing. He has some clients that he sends a Christmas card blast to his clients and so he actually links to a direct mail firm he works with. So it's almost like a B2B business. It's linked on Yelp and this business owner is basically saying this is a direct mail firm I use to send out my Christmas cards. So it's a way for business owners to have a voice and say and in a sense recommend other businesses.

DC: Wow, that's great. So, earlier you mentioned something about business comments and I think that is one of the ways that you're addressing this. I kind of get the sense from certain businesses, let's say they're in a field that's, not like a restaurant, where they don't typically get a ton of reviews especially on Yelp but then, for some reason, somebody has a bad day and leaves him a bad review and they don't have very many other reviews and they kind of feel helpless with the situation. Because they can't really, if they don't already have a lot of traffic and reviews coming in, negative review sticks there for a while. I think that you mentioned business comments as a way for the business owner to take part in that conversation. Can you explain a little bit about that?

LL: Yeah, absolutely. So, when you unlock your free tools by going to biz.yelp.com, there are 2 ways that you can join the conversation about your business. The first is by sending private messages to individuals who've written reviews about your business. And frankly, I recommend doing that for every review you receive, even it's positive, simply saying, "Hey, thanks for the feedback."

DC: Okay. So you can basically send anyone who leaves you a review, you send them a private message, either thanking them or asking for some clarification or whatever on the review, right?

LL: Exactly. I mean let's take, let's just take 3 examples. Example 1, I get a positive review. You know, in that case if I'm a business owner, I just say thanks for the feedback. Example 2, I get a negative review. I start off by saying, "Thanks for the feedback," and then I say, "You know, I'm deeply sorry that you saw a fly in your soup. We deeply regret the incident and we're taking measures to ensure flies don't buzz around the restaurant, whatever". Whatever, you know, whatever corrective action you're taking and we'd love to get you back in here to reconcile the situation and give us a second shot.

Now, what Yelp users can and very often do is actually go back, update the review and say, "You know, I'm going to upgrade my 2-star review to a 4-star review because the business owner contacted me and on second thought, there was a miscommunication and I'm going to go or they'll go back and try it and review you again." So, that's a good way to manage a reputation on the site.

Now, sometimes there'll be an instance where maybe there's something factually incorrect on the page. Maybe the reviewer says, an example I often give is let's say there's a bar and a patron goes in, writes a review 3 months after they've visited the bar and said, "You know, I like this bar a lot but I really like Black and Tan, and they didn't have Guinness on tab." Now in this 3-month stand, the bar owner has actually added Guinness to the list of beers that they offer and so now, with this public comment feature that launched fairly recently, business owners can get on and say, "Thanks for the review, Molly. We actually have updated our beer selection and so we'd love for you to come back in and have that Black and Tan."

DC: Right, right. Okay, good. So, then they can leave a comment that way in public, right?

LL: Exactly and so I would recommend on the public comment feature not to, certainly don't use it as a way to get into a public argument with a customer just like you wouldn't want to get in a shouting match and if you own a crowded café, with one of your patrons and, you know, there's bystanders watching. It's almost analogous. You won't actually have to be as diplomatic as possible and I strongly recommend using the private messaging tools first before you use the public messaging feature.

DC: So, I've noticed there's some guidelines on the Yelp site for how to handle this, kind of along the lines of what you're saying, "Start off by reaching out privately." If they don't respond, then you'd leave a public comment but be diplomatic about it and I think the sort of spirit of it was turn this into a positive customer satisfaction experience if you can, right? Use this example to show that you're watching, you're responsive instead of discrediting someone. If people see that you're being fair about it and reaching out and trying to resolve the situation, they may discount that person's review themselves if it doesn't match up with what they're seeing.

LL: Exactly, Don. I'll just add 2 points to that. One is that it's important to keep in my mind to put everything in a perspective for business owners and not look at their Yelp page like it's a stock ticker and understand it as Yelp users are creating information about a business. They create a lot of information about themselves. So, users are actually sizing up other users and not necessarily letting maybe a negative Nancy who's 9 out of the 10 reviews they've written are negative, influence their decision. That's the first point I make.

The second point I make is that in my outreach to the business community, getting out and meeting face-to-face with a lot of business owners, they say that engaging negative reviewers actually has been a huge net positive form because you essentially somebody who's been a vocal, you know, somebody who's vocally negative about your business and turning them around into somebody who becomes one of their best customers.

DC: Sure.

LL: So, that's, and time and time again, I've seen examples of this. So, there's, again, not taking offense, by a negative review, taking it as feedback. If it's something that seems just outlandish, as an outlier, but it's factually incorrect, use the public commenting tools to diplomatically approach it but use that as an opportunity to turn them into a vocal advocate for your business.

DC: Right, yeah. I've seen that work, too. So, what about the fact, I mean, I know that some businesses have said that some of the reviews that were on their profile went away and is there any sort of rule of thumb or, I mean, is there anything that you know of that causes that to happen?

LL: So, there are a number of reasons. One of the most common questions Yelp gets is, one of the things that we address on our FAQ page is, “One of my reviews disappeared. What happened?” And there are a couple of reasons a review will disappear. First of all, any user can take that review with them and basically disable their Yelp account.

The second is there’s, you know, some reviews will violate review guidelines. Those get flagged pretty quickly. This community is self-pleasing. An example of guidelines would be certain forms of hate speech. Another example would be writing a review that’s not in the first person, like I don’t like, “I’m giving the salon 1 star because I don’t like my girlfriend’s haircut.” Ten people could write that same review and so, that doesn’t...

DC: Okay, right. Maybe that person never actually patronized that business, right?

LL: Exactly, and that violates the review guidelines. And then, the third and probably the most common basis for misunderstanding is the review filter. So, Yelp has mechanisms in place. They’re constantly screening our 6 million plus reviews and ensuring, and looking for patterns of abuse, trying to maximize trustworthiness on the site. In other words, not all information is featured about a business but the best information. You want a system that, you know, their aim is to both protect business owners from competitors going in and knee-capping them in a sense, going in and writing a fake one. You know, Car Mechanic A going in and writing a bunch of fake reviews about Car Mechanic B but also...

DC: Drive-by reviews.

LL: Exactly, but also, you know, you want to protect consumers from the shady dentist who says to his secretary, get on and create 20 fake Yelp accounts and write a bunch of 5-star reviews. So I think one of the things that’s made Yelp a market leader in this space and something that consumers trust is that we do have mechanisms in place that try to ensure that shells are not featured on business pages and that kind of content...

DC: Basically, you have sort of an algorithm that looks and says, “Hey, maybe this person just signed up yesterday. They left a review. They didn’t add a photo or anything or maybe, they haven’t logged in for a while.” So, it’s trying to single out people who aren’t really part of the Yelp community. Is that accurate or not?

LL: I think, you know...

DC: Generally.

LL: Frankly I don’t know all the sort of things that go into the secret sauce. It is sort of like the Google algorithm, you know. We don’t want, you know, if a lot of people understood deeply how it worked but they didn’t attempt to name it...

DC: To name it, yeah, right.

LL: But basically the idea is that, yeah, you want to ensure that ultimately the content is helpful to consumers and so sometimes the legitimate review will be affected by that review filter. We hate it when that happens but it's an automated system to avoid human bias and overall, it works out pretty well. And what I would say to a business owner who maybe has had a couple of reviews not be featured on their page is that you can take heart in the fact that this is a very popular review site and well, one or two of your reviews isn't appearing. You're actually, you have been exposed to dozens if not hundreds of new potential customers who were searching specifically for your kind of business.

DC: Right. Well, this has been great. I really appreciate you joining me here. I think there are a lot of good tips in here. So, it sounds like for business owners, whether they have reviews or not, they should go out to the business owners' section in Yelp and sort of clean their business on there, and fill out that profile.

LL: Definitely. I mean, if you remember nothing else from this conversation, just go to biz.yelp.com, join the conversation or start the conversation about your business. Get involved.

DC: And I think everything - those private and public comments is a big deal, too, right?

LL: Absolutely, absolutely.

DC: So, any last tips that you have for business owners. I mean, is there anything I didn't cover that you think would be really important for our small business to know about with Yelp?

LL: I think that it's just important to keep in mind that these are your customers and these are your most vocal and opinionated customers and so, we've discussed a lot of it but the idea is don't take a particular review to heart necessarily. If you do see patterns or recurring things coming up in reviews, maybe like stale bread, take it as a serious form of feedback.

DC: Right.

LL: But understand that the Yelp community is, these are real people. These are your customers and certainly, it's much more helpful to you and your business to be involved in the conversation and actively engage than simply pretending it's not happening.

DC: Yes, I agree. So, if anybody has a question, I'm going to put the links in the blog post for this and I know that you're on Twitter. What is your Twitter ID in case people want to follow?

LL: Sure. On Twitter, I'm [lutherlowe](#). And also, feel free to e-mail me – luther@yelp.com.

DC: Great, okay! Well, thanks a lot, Luther. I really enjoyed our conversation.

LL: Great. I did, too, Don. Thanks so much for having me!

DC: You bet. Take care.