

# The Yelp Monster

## Wrestling with the Online Reputation of Your Business

by Nicholas Crawford • nicholascrawford@gmail.com



Date night is tonight, and you have to pick a good restaurant. What do you do? Ask a friend for a recommendation? Probably. Look in the Yellow Pages? Probably not. Imagine that conversation if the food is disappointing: “You found this dump in the Yellow Pages!?”

The chances are pretty good that you might do a quick web search, likely with your phone, to see a list of options. You scan the map for a spot that stands out with a quick click on the reviews to see what other people are saying. You do this looking for the closest hardware store when something breaks, and you do it when you need a 24 hour pharmacy right now. Guess what:

people are doing that right now to find a tree care company, and it is urgent that you are aware of what they find.

There are a bunch of online review sites, but the key players for contractors to focus on are Yelp and Angie’s List. As online directories, having current information there is the first step. You can update your company contact information and post photos to put your best foot forward. Quick tip: While arborists love showing off adrenaline-fueled trucks and chainsaws, customers care about the finished product and want to see the results of a beautiful and tranquil landscape.

Here comes the hard part with online reviews. People can be negative. The candid feedback is what gives the whole system credibility, but it is difficult to hear about a company that you

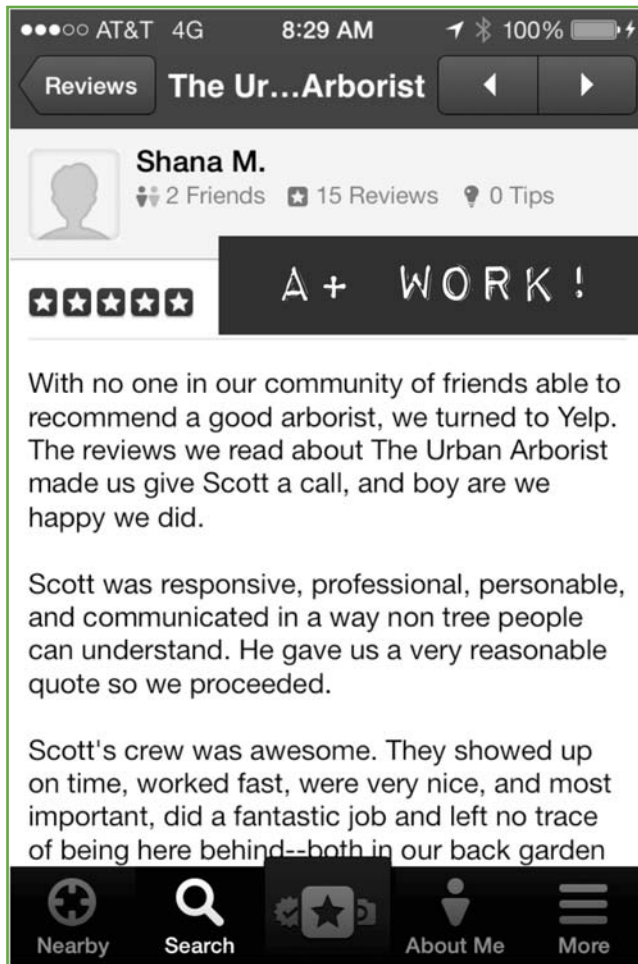


Figure 1: This screenshot shows a positive comment left by a YELP reporter. They gave the reviewed company a 5-star rating and a glowing recommendation.

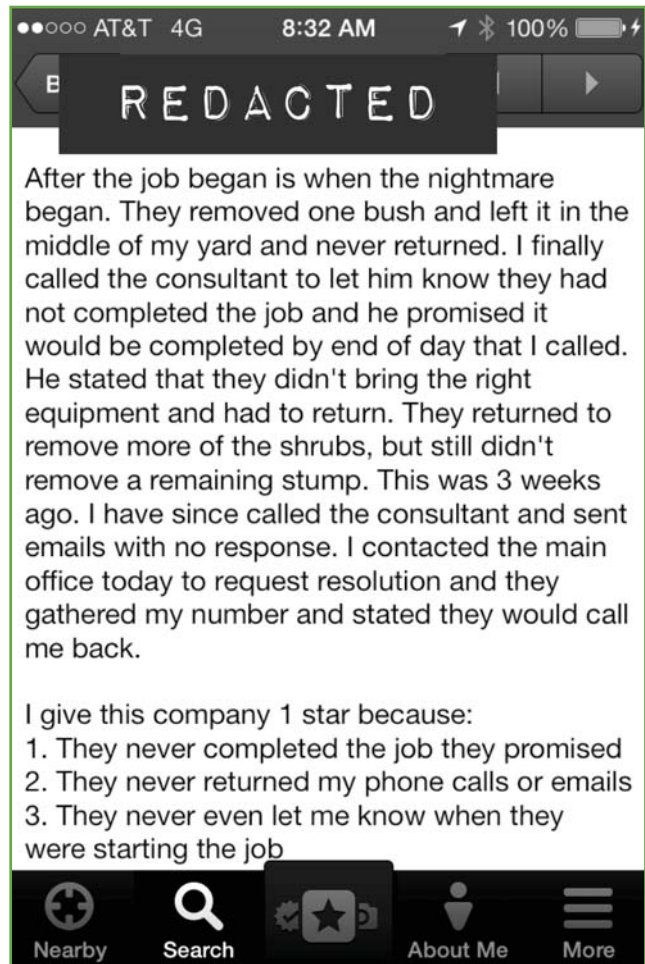


Figure 2: The company reviewed in this screenshot did not fare as well - they reviewing consumer gave them 1-star and a poor review. The company name has been redacted.

have poured into with your heart and soul. Take a deep breath, ask some friends, but keep this in mind: you are better off drowning the negativity with positive feedback. You can respond directly with “I’m sorry that we didn’t meet your expectations that day...” but NEVER start an argument. Every visitor to that site will be watching to see if you handled it with class and grace, working to a customer-centric resolution, or if you wanted to prove them wrong, consequences be damned.

In fact, your online reputation is an imperfect reflection of how you do business. Very often, folks will create a Yelp account just because they are so angry with a company that it seems like their only outlet and seems like a way to help others avoid the same problem. Just like businesses have worked hard to manage their word of mouth reputation before online reviews, it is just as important in the digital era.

Finally, realize that the power is shifting from the business to the consumer. A generation ago, it took a small claims court action to hold a contractor accountable when today, even the possibility of a negative review can lead to a lot of freebies for a pushy customer. For the good and the bad it brings, a strong online reputation shines a spotlight on the stars in an industry. Fly-by-night operators will never be able to compare to a reputable and established company when the customers are doing their research.

*Nicholas Crawford is a Board Master Certified Arborist at The Davey Tree Expert Company in San Francisco. He can be reached at [nicholascrawford@gmail.com](mailto:nicholascrawford@gmail.com).*

## 10 Tips for Building Your Online Reputation

*by Nicholas Crawford*

1. Keep the online profiles of your company up to date with accurate contact information. Try searching for your own company’s name online then claim and update those listings, including Google, Bing, and Yahoo’s directories.
2. Focus on complete customer satisfaction in everything you do. Even a neighbor might leave a review. You might get a review from someone who went with another company but wants to share how you handled the bidding process and how responsive you were from start to finish.
3. When you have an unhappy customer, remember how much leverage they have on your future business. Cutting your losses is often your best bet, but it is a reminder too of how important clearly written proposal specifications can be to avoid he said/she said disagreements down the road.
4. When you get a thank you note from a customer, encourage them to leave a positive review. Never offer a discount for a positive review – it leaves a bad taste and can show in a review that seems disingenuous.
5. Consider the pros and cons of offering coupons through Yelp or Angie’s List. As contractors, it can attract business, but it can have unintended consequences. Did the price get inflated to offset the coupon? Will they cut corners to make up the 10% discount? These thoughts will run through the mind of certain customers. For that reason, discounting fixed prices like mulch or firewood or offering a free hanging flower pot for any customer spending over \$1000 can be much more attractive.
6. Never respond in anger to a negative review. If you know the person, reach out to them offline to see if the issue can be resolved so they ideally will delete their review. If not, either say nothing or say something that would inspire others reading it to be confident in your professionalism.
7. Keep the focus on flooding your profile with positive reviews. Two reviews with just one star can look bad if they are the only ones. But two bad reviews out of a hundred? Looks much better! Actually, having some critical feedback adds credibility to the positive reviews.
8. Write positive reviews of your top business suppliers. The place with the best nursery stock? They would be perfect. Be specific about what you really like about them, and let them know you left a review.
9. Keep everything in perspective. Reviews are important, but they are just one part of your online strategy. Still, for contractors, they probably matter more than having a Facebook page or Twitter account.
10. Communicate the online review feedback to everyone involved immediately. If a positive or negative review comes in, tell the crew right away, and be sure the person responsible for that customer follows up to thank them or resolve the issues.