How to Respond When You’re the Target of Bad Press



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As a 15-year publicist, I can tell you that simplistic, feel-good adages don’t always hold true. Not all press is good press; in fact, in our current culture of basically *every*thing going online instantaneously — whether it’s true or not, confirmed or not — bad press can be quite damaging, running the gamut from words that wound, at the least, to total ruination, at the worst.

To take just one timely example: In the late summer of 2023, popular entertainer Lizzo was sued by three of her former dancers for creating a hostile work environment and for sexual harassment. The damage was immediate (including the cancelation of the Made in America festival she was headlining, omission of her name from a song Beyoncé performed

only hours after the case was announced, others coming out of the woodwork with similar allegations) and the backlash is ongoing: criticisms of her lack of accountability, haters predicting her doom, the press having a field day with the negativity surrounding a pop sensation known for her stance on body positivity.

Basically, bad press can transform into a bad reputation in a New York minute, so you have to take it seriously. If you don't grab the reins of the narrative, someone else will – and then they'll be in charge of the direction in which the subsequent news goes, not you.

Though most of us don't have to deal with the immense notoriety that can come with immense fame, we all live in the same world at the same time. If you're in business for yourself in the digital age of the early 21st century, here are three types of bad press you're likely to encounter and starting points on how to handle them.

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Scenario #1: Negative reviews

Everyone's a critic these days, right? Customer comment sections of websites are free and virtually anonymous to access, not just allowing bad reviews but almost inviting them. Let's face it: Are you more likely to post about a positive experience you had or to wield the power of a negative testimonial when you're unhappy with an experience? The point being: if there's a forum to publish a bad review of your company, your service, or your product, you'd be a unicorn not to get at least some bad reviews at least some of the time.

What can you do about it?

- Don’t take every negative review to heart. Many are just one voice about one encounter, and reasonable people (the kind of people you want as clients) understand that one two-star review does not outweigh a multitude of four and five-stars and does not accurately reflect the whole of your enterprise.
- Do not respond personally to what amounts to a personal anecdote – especially when you’re coming from a place of reactionary emotion – and train your staff to refrain in kind. No exceptions.
- Instead, appoint a spokesperson from your internal communications team or hire an external crisis management specialist to be the voice of your company when something needs to be said, and then rely on that person to ensure consistency and accuracy of messaging.

Related: 3 Tips for Dealing With Negative Reviews Like a True Entrepreneur

Scenario #2: Troll comments

Like it or not, trolling is another thing that’s not going away in modern society. Many faceless, nameless lurkers on the internet (hello, Reddit) and especially on social media are only too eager to initiate potentially inflammatory conversations or instigate conflict, usually just for a sense of self-importance. Trolls love to weigh in on comments that have gone viral or well-noticed posts – the more eyes that see their contributions, the better. Sometimes troll comments are just ridiculous and can be ignored … but sometimes, especially when there’s a lot of them on a related theme, it’s time to look at how to respond.

What can you do about it?

- Have a system in place to address or resolve the comments. Don’t wait until your brand is trolled to devise a plan of action.

- Assess the volume of commentary. If we're only talking about a few derogatory comments, it's okay to hide or delete them.
- But if there's a significant amount, you need to search for the kernel of truth in them and look into doing things better to create a new truth. If an apology is called for, have one curated by an expert. Trolls are trying to get a rise out of you, but a PR pro isn't emotionally invested, and so won't rise to take the bait.
- Whatever you do, don't clap back. You can *respond*, but don't clap. There's a time for silence, such as when the comments are simply unfounded and do not call for redress. But silence can also make things worse when a response is warranted. If you think you can easily kill off the bad buzz with a direct, objective, fair response, go for it.

Scenario #3: Dislike of your brand

An article critical of your brand just got published. Ouch. A food critic didn't like your new tasting menu. A fashion blog panned your new yoga pants. Your customer service department got three thumbs-downs in a row. Professional criticism can feel like a personal attack when you're the one ultimately responsible for quality control, and your natural first impulse is to get upset, followed by a desire to sling some mud back at the source. Don't.

What can you do about it?

- Instead of recoiling from the sting, lean into it for a few minutes, considering the level of validity of what's been said.
- If you can find some – and you probably will (I truly believe the media isn't out to get us business owners but, rather, serves as neutral "secret shoppers") – just

acknowledge the experience and what you can learn from it.

- Call a team meeting to investigate any changes worth making to improve the situation, like trying less salt in the soup or adding a question about customer satisfaction to the end of your call center’s script.
- With new best practices in place, feel free to broadcast them loud and clear via a press release, a posted blog on your website, or a newly added product description line.

Yep. Negative press is a reality of doing business. The bad news? The situations discussed above are becoming more widespread by the day. The good news? Because they’re so ubiquitous, you’re not alone in learning how to navigate them with tact and finesse. When you see red flags waving on your business landscape, view them as an opportunity to forge ahead smarter and stronger, and you’ll be better equipped to act rather than react.

https://www.entrepreneur.com/leadership/3-kinds-of-bad-press-and-how-to-handle-each-of-them/458014