

Building Positive Buzz for Your Camp with Online Ratings and Reviews

Most camp owners know that the best marketing tool is good *buzz* or word-of-mouth, and that bad word-of-mouth can negatively affect a camp. In the internet age, word-of-mouth can now mean discussions in chat rooms, postings on internet forums and reviews posted on ratings websites. Studies show that the internet is now the number one source of consumer information – ahead of newspapers, TV and even friends. In other words, when people think about sending their child to a new camp, they first do a web search to see what they can find out.

You may already be using the internet to promote your camp via your website, camp directories and e-mail lists. While you can control and target your website and promotions, you can't control what is said about you on other sites.

So how can you be sure you're getting good buzz on the internet, and prevent bad buzz?

First, remember that managing customer impressions starts at camp. Make sure your staff is trained to quickly and effectively handle problems and complaints. We all know that an issue which is resolved graciously and quickly can produce satisfied and loyal customers. A problem that festers will produce an angry critic of your camp.

Next, be aware of what is being said about your camp on the internet. Regularly search for your camp by name (as well as any nicknames that kids may give the camp.) You'll probably be surprised at how many places your camp is mentioned: MySpace pages, forums, blogs and more.

Also search for *camp ratings* and *camp reviews* sites, and bookmark them in your browser so you can check them regularly. While there are several national ratings and review sites, such as CampRatingz.com; ePinions; and CampInsight.com -- there may also be local sites in your area. To find the local sites, simply include the name of your city in the search; for example: *camp ratings San Francisco* or *camp reviews Philadelphia*.

Once you've found and bookmarked the review sites, check each to see if your camp is listed, and that the basic information is accurate. If the camp is not listed, you should see if there is a way to add it yourself to be sure the listing is accurate. If there are errors in the information, look for a way to contact the site operator with corrections.

Finally, check the review sites, and the other sites you've found in your searches, to see what is being said about your camp. Think of this as an opportunity to find out what your customers *really* think and say to one another... good and bad. In the past, this was information that was only shared at school or on the soccer field – however these sites now allow you to be privy to these comments.

At some point you will likely find negative reviews -- perhaps even lies and defamatory comments. If a review is severely damaging, you may contact the site operator to see if it can be removed. Very likely the answer will be "no." Review sites don't remove reviews -- good or bad -- unless they violate the site's rules. Otherwise, there would be no negative reviews -- and the sites would be worthless to consumers.

At this point, some owners begin making threats of legal action. This is almost always a waste of time. Rating and review sites operate as public forums on which people can post their opinions. The sites are protected by law, and operators are not liable for the opinions posted there. The rating and review sites are often represented by the Electronic Frontier Foundation or the ACLU, so any legal battle will be costly and almost certainly fruitless.

So let's talk about what you can do instead of making threats:

Fortunately, most review sites have a process for you to respond to reviews, and this is worthwhile. The tone of your response should be reasonable and positive. It's good to acknowledge the complaint (even if you believe it's false or exaggerated), and respond to it directly (especially if it's a valid complaint.)

For example:

"As the reviewer says, we've had some problems with bunk plumbing; which we've revamped over the winter."

"Thanks you for your comment. We were unaware of the busing problem and it has been corrected"

In other words, try hard to put the complaint to rest and sound like the "good guy"-- making the person who wrote the bad review seem less credible.

How about a negative review that says something you can't really respond to, like, *"This camp sucks and it's filled with mean, spoiled kids."*

In that case, simply talk up the camp's positives: *"I'm sorry the reviewer didn't get along with fellow campers. Our camp has grown more popular each year and is accredited by the ACA."*

Hopefully you won't need to deal with many negative reviews. Instead, focus your energy on getting positive reviews. Your best assets are you current customers. Your regular customers are likely to say good things about your camp, so encourage them to write online reviews.

First, visit the major rating sites, and find the URL (web address) of the page where your camp is mentioned. Then:

- Include the URL on your camp flyers, and a link on your camp's website ("Rate Camp Paradiso at...").
- If you have an e-mail list, you can use it to ask your customers to submit ratings and reviews.

- Be sure that staff associated with your camp visit the rating sites and post reviews.

When submitting reviews, ask your staff and customers to talk specifically about the best features of the camp, or good experiences they've had. Reviews that simply say "awesome camp!" don't carry much weight with readers.

Once you get some positive reviews and ratings on the web, publicize the fact! Include your ratings, and excerpts from reviews, in your ads, flyers and on your website.

Remember that people *will* talk about your camp on the web; so make sure you know what is being said!

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