

Do one-star reviews really motivate businesses to do better?

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We've all been there. You're hangry, the waiter ignores your table, and the food that looked like perfection on Instagram is tepid when it finally arrives.

In the heat of annoyance, the one-star review for the restaurant feels like a tidy solution: an emotional refund for a meal gone wrong.

But in the F&B industry, one click can dent a reputation that took years of sweat, rent and 16-hour shifts to build.

I've drafted my fair share of one-star reviews, only to cool off before posting them, but the impulse did make me ponder: Who leaves these reviews, and why? And how should businesses respond?

FROM BAD MEAL TO DIGITAL WARFARE

In my years of covering and consulting in the F&B world, I've noticed three archetypes when it comes to one-star reviews.

First, the Righteous Avenger: They had a genuinely bad experience and want justice: a refund, an apology, or simply recognition that something went wrong. They're disappointed – sometimes rightfully so – and their one star is a call for recourse and a hope that the issue will be fixed so the next customer doesn't suffer the same fate.

Then, there's the Performative Critic, whose review is less about feedback and more about flair. They're less motivated by the desire to improve the business than a sense of being discerning, witty or superior.

These two involve what psychologists call "expectancy violation". When reality doesn't match our expectations – especially after we've paid for it – we feel wronged. And when that frustration meets the instant gratification of a review button, the line between feedback and cold hard vengeance blurs.

A rapid-fire one-star review can be useful when it flags blind spots that deserve attention. But it can also be unfairly punitive, turning a temporary irritation into a permanent scar.

And finally, there is the Malicious Saboteur, whose motives are quite different. They're bots, trolls, upset ex-staff, or even competitors, exploiting the anonymity and low stakes of digital platforms. They leave vague, generic criticisms because they've often never stepped foot in the place. Their intention is to harm the business itself.

This played out recently when Restaurant Ibi, run by MasterChef Asia winner Woo Wai Leong, was hit by a wave of one-star Google reviews – 11 in

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Dissatisfied customers can be turned into loyal regulars – if businesses handle them well.



Responding promptly and graciously to bad reviews helps to publicly signal that the operator is proactive and cares deeply about its business, says the writer. Handled well, a bad review is not the end of a reputation, but the beginning of a stronger one. PHOTO ILLUSTRATION : ISTOCKPHOTO

quick succession, allegedly from suspicious accounts with no other activity. The restaurant owner filed a police report, after receiving a WhatsApp message threatening to unleash "300 more" bad reviews.

HOW SHOULD BUSINESSES RESPOND?

But that one anonymous click can be a gut punch for businesses and outweigh hundreds of positive experiences. This effect is even sharper for new or small businesses.

As Dr Jean Liu, associate professor of psychology, health and social sciences from the Singapore Institute of Technology, points out, when there are only a handful of reviews, a single unfair rating can disproportionately distort perceptions.

Negative feedback also carries disproportionate power because people assign greater weight to bad experiences than good ones, the classic "negativity bias" in psychology. In fact, one 2023 study which looked at online retail in the UK found that just one negative review – three stars or fewer – reduced the purchase probability of readers by around 42 per cent.

So, how should businesses respond when receiving legitimate negative feedback from customers?

Many may lash out defensively online, while others go silent, hoping it blows over. Neither approach is helpful.

As a brand strategist who helps businesses navigate communications and reputation, I approach waves of one-star reviews with a fundamental

question to consider before responding: Who is this coming from? Are these loyal customers airing real frustrations, persuadable critics, or trolls who were never customers at all? The distinction matters.

Trolls are best documented, reported and ignored – engaging them only fuels the behaviour and lends legitimacy where none exists. Genuine but dissatisfied customers, however, cared enough to explain what went wrong, and that feedback is worth listening to.

After all, most people never publish reviews. It is a small group of "super reviewers" who produce the bulk of them, which is why platforms skew towards clusters of one-star and five-star ratings, according to SIT's Dr Liu.

In her analysis of Google reviews for nine tourist

attractions in Singapore, she found that while many five-star ratings had no accompanying comments, one-star reviews almost always included an explanation – suggesting that people feel a stronger need to justify criticism than praise.

For businesses, this means resisting the temptation to dismiss all negativity as hostility and distinguishing between justified dissatisfaction and noise instead.

Complaints – even when blunt – reveal unmet expectations, and that provides an opportunity to examine where lapses occurred, strengthen internal processes and close the gap between what was promised and what was delivered.

I have seen this time and again in the F&B world. Some of the most devoted regulars I know

began as dissatisfied customers who returned because the owner took responsibility instead of offence by reaching out personally to acknowledge the mistake, address the steps they are taking to improve their operating procedures, and re-invite them back for an improved experience.

Even if reconciliation never materialises, responding promptly and graciously helps to publicly signal that the operator is proactive and cares deeply about its business. Purchasing decisions today go beyond the product – people buy values alignment, and return to businesses whose actions reflect the standards they believe in.

Handled well, a bad review is not the end of a reputation, but the beginning of a stronger one.

In fact, researchers from an Australian university found that when hotels responded to negative reviews, potential customers inferred that the business was more trustworthy and more concerned about its guests compared with hotels that remained silent.

A 2019 study of international travellers who left negative reviews also showed that when a hotel apologised and addressed its lapse in service, customer satisfaction improved noticeably.

THE DIGITAL DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

The digital era has made businesses more vulnerable than ever, but also more empowered.

Businesses no longer have to engage a publicist or attract the attention of a journalist to tell their side of the story. They can respond directly. And they can invite happy customers to share their experiences, using social media to humanise their team, and show their process for fixing mistakes.

And for genuine diners who feel legitimately aggrieved, the next time you feel the urge to avenge a disappointing meal with a one-star broadside, take a breath and consider this simple checklist.

First, ask yourself: Was it a systemic problem or just a service slip on a busy night? Second: Could a quiet word with the restaurant resolve it faster than a public takedown? And third: If you still choose to post, ground it in clarity rather than fury – explain what happened, what didn't work, and what would have improved the experience.

While we cannot control the architecture of the digital world, we can control how we choose to inhabit it more responsibly.

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