

In my perfect world, when someone trashes a business and the business responds, Yelp should require that the reviewer respond to that business (a response that can remain anonymous) or else the review is removed. There should simply be some sense of accountability. Without that, you actually get people demanding better deals in the store or else threaten to post a Yelp review trashing us. And stores taking advantage by offering deals to people in exchange for high ratings, a practice that you can actually find referenced in some reviews.

We don't ask for reviews (which is probably dumb, because if you do ask for reviews from good customers, you're likely to bolster your ratings... but I just feel funny about it) and we actually fired an employee who posted a fake positive review for our store. Seriously. That wasn't the only thing he did, but it was way up on the list.

And finally there's Yelp's own business practices. We signed up for a 6-month campaign, \$315/store/month, where you essentially buy a higher placing when someone's looking for bike shops, and you get a high-rated review moved up to the top. Bad reviews aren't eliminated, they're just moved down the page. We told the (very aggressive) Yelp rep that we'd just be doing this for the busy season, end it after 6 months, and then perhaps restart again the following year. 6 months went and the billings continued. Phone calls and emails couldn't stop them. I finally had to call the bank to have the payments stopped. Crazy!

Could Chain Reaction ever get a 5-Star yelp rating? I don't think so. Could be that I'm just rationalizing, but as long as we try to be inclusive, and take care of as wide a variety of cyclists as practical, we're going to have situations where we're not the ultimate source for, say, fixie parts, or cotter pins for that 34-year-old Firenze in the basement. Our location in Redwood City has a broader range of demographics than most, giving us a much wider clientele than the typical shop gets to deal with. That appeals to my sense of egalitarianism, but gets in the way of becoming a super-specialty-retailer that can give white-glove treatment to everyone coming in the door. Am I trying to rationalize? You bet. But I think I have solid ground to do so. I think, on balance, Chain Reaction has more heart than most. I think my staff does an awesome job. And when we fail, we feel badly, and work to make things right. Hopefully that comes out in my Yelp responses.

In the end, I think consumer review sites like Yelp are a good thing. You get a sense of what the shop's like, reading both the review and, if it's there, the reply from the business. I'm just not a fan of the complete anonymity and lack of accountability, which, as I mentioned earlier, could be easily fixed by simply requiring a dialog between reviewer and the business. A dialog that could remain anonymous! But a dialog nevertheless. In my perfect world, of course. --Mike--