

Rant Control

NO SMALL BUSINESS wants bad press, but with sites like Yelp and Twitter giving consumers an instant soapbox, it's sometimes unavoidable. Recovering from it is all in the response.

San Francisco's Pizzeria Delfina (pizzeria.delfina.com) found a clever way to use bad reviews and build buzz by printing one-star reviews on T-shirts. According to Craig Stoll, chef-proprietor at Delfina, the idea came from one of the pizzeria's managers, who also happened to design T-shirts. "We sell other shirts, but these we made just for the staff," Stoll says. "They wear them when they want."

In keeping with the pizzeria's fun, off-beat personality, many of the staff members sport shirts with sayings like "The pizza was *soooo* greasy. I am assuming this was in part due to the pig fat."

Stoll says most people see the Yelp reference and laugh: "One of the customers asked, 'Do your owners know you're wearing the shirt?'"

Despite a few negative reviews, most of Pizzeria Delfina's more than 600 Yelp reviews are positive. Some even reference the shirts, causing other business owners to emulate the idea and the media to take notice.

"This thing just went viral," Stoll says. "We were in the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times* and on NPR. Honestly, I'd rather be the center of attention because our pizza's so amazing or our staff is so charming, but it's been fun."

Here are three tips for responding to bad reviews:

1. Remember, now everyone's a critic. In addition to monitoring local press, you can keep track of mentions on blogs and review sites for free by setting up Google Alerts (google.com/alerts) with your business name or other terms. Some customers now vent their frustrations on Twitter, so TweetBeep (tweetbeep.com) offers a similar alert system for Twitter mentions.

2. Get creative. Printing one-star reviews on T-shirts shows that a business has confidence and doesn't take itself too seriously. Other small business owners invite Yelpers for a repeat visit to their business or respond to comments via Twitter.

3. Keep your cool. Not every comment requires a response. Stoll mentions

that Yelp now gives business owners the chance to respond to negative reviews, but that can escalate the problem if you're not careful. "At first when Yelp came out, we would obsess about it, but now I don't take too much stock in it," Stoll says. As long as there are other positive reviews, a few negative comments are unlikely to scare away customers.

BY SUSAN JOHNSTON