



How Fake Reviews Can Cause Your Firm to Get Sued by an Online Review Site

Generally, the consequence for taking a shortcut with your search engine marketing is some sort of disciplinary action from Google. But a law firm in San Diego is getting more than an SEO problem; the online review and business directory, Yelp, is suing the firm, claiming their employees posted fake reviews to the company's Yelp profile.

The firm owner, Julian McMillan, believes there is no merit to the case and that the lawsuit is more about retaliation. "They're an Internet bully and they abused their dominant Internet position for advertising contracts," he told ABC News. "Here they are trying to squash my freedom of speech in small claims court, which awarded me back \$2,700 for my advertising contract."

Marketwatch suggests that the law firm in San Diego, McMillan Law Group, is not an isolated matter. Yelp says it has been stepping up efforts to squash fake reviews and taking on advertisers that they believe are getting reviews which are not genuine.

This is a serious problem for Yelp. Their core business model relies on consumers getting accurate feedback. Some believe Yelp, which went public one year ago (NYSE:YELP), may be trying to bolster their image with investors who have enjoyed a nearly 300 percent gain in their stock value.

Litigation in Place of Innovation

What is most odd about this strategy is that by suing companies, Yelp seems to be more interested in litigation than innovation. Spam is a part of life on the internet and it's up to the internet brands to develop filtering techniques, which Yelp has attempted.

Last year, one of our clients reached out to their client base to encourage more reviews on their local profiles. They asked clients to go to Yelp and Google+ Local to share their experiences. The results were positive; over a two-month period, five clients posted positive authentic reviews to the firm's Yelp profile. Even though these were genuine reviews, posted by five different clients from five different IP addresses in and around the firm's city on five different computers, Yelp filtered all of them. The filtered reviews are only visible to Yelp visitors who scroll down to the tiny link that says "## Filtered."

Imagine if Google's response to web spam was to take spamming websites to court. Would flexing their litigating muscle make them look like a stronger, smarter company? Probably not. Instead, they innovate. Rather than suing spammers, they have effectively proven that they can outsmart them with algorithms that make spammers' efforts futile. Yelp's resources should probably be spent developing better filters and coming up with more efficient ways to detect and filter questionable reviews.

Whether McMillan's case is retaliation or not will be determined by the courts.





However, as we have always suggested, keep your online marketing efforts genuine. We always discourage shortcuts and when asked about fake reviews or review-generating services by our clients, our advice is the same. It's better to spend your time and energy getting real clients to post real reviews than to come up with phony aliases to improve your rating. Since some companies choose to litigate rather than engineer their way out of a problem, it's especially important to avoid artificial reviews and other online marketing shortcuts.

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