

If You Aren't on Yelp, You Should Be



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Announcer:

Welcome to Paychex THRIVE, a Business Podcast, where you'll hear timely insights to help you navigate marketplace dynamics and propel your business forward. Here's your host, Gene Marks.

Gene Marks:

Hey everybody and welcome back to the THRIVE podcast. My name is Gene Marks. I am here speaking with Emily Washcovick. Emily is with Yelp. She is Yelp's small business expert and Emily, stop me if I'm getting this wrong, you're also host of the Yelp and Entrepreneur Magazine's Behind the Review podcast. Everything good, right?

Emily Washcovick:

Yes, that's absolutely right.

Gene Marks:

Good. So first of all, tell us a little bit about yourself. What does it mean that you're Yelp's small business expert? And also tell us a little bit about this podcast as well. I'm very interested in it.

Emily Washcovick:

Yeah, absolutely. I've been with Yelp since 2014. A lot of my role is focused on educating business owners on the free tools available to make the most of their presence on our site. So pre-pandemic, I would go to conferences, trade shows, conventions, all sorts of events where I could meet business owners in tons of different categories and really get them over that hump of fear when it comes to online reviews and into an engagement perspective, and really think about Yelp and other online review sites as a funnel to stay connected with existing customers and get in front of new customers.

Emily Washcovick:

In the course of those many years on the road, meeting with business owners, we also would host events sometimes, so we would bring thought leaders together, really create some content or education for them, that took a big shift during the pandemic and my team was no longer out in the field. We were really all virtual like many folks were, and so my role changed pretty significantly to virtual education as well as this podcast that we launched with Entrepreneur Magazine in November of 2020.

Emily Washcovick:

The concept for that show is kind of cool. Every week we interview a business owner and someone who wrote them a Yelp review. So really trying to take that competitive edge that we have by having the consumer dialogue, and really bringing those Yelp users to the conversation. It allows us to elevate a lot of great things, what businesses are doing really well that's standing out and making them review-worthy, if you will, but it also gives us a chance to hear from business owners. What are they doing to stay in touch? How are they leveraging their online platform? And I love it because we don't just find business owners that love Yelp or love reviews. We know sometimes reviews can be a struggle, and so, we try to share all those perspectives and experiences from different business owners as well as how that connection's made to their customers.

Gene Marks:

So when you say you have on a business owner and then a customer who wrote a Yelp review, a bad Yelp review, a good Yelp review? I'm assuming it's mostly good Yelp reviews, right?

Emily Washcovick:

Actually Gene, we could run the gamut at Yelp. We do typically highlight those positive reviews, but there have been tons of episodes where maybe a consumer wrote a less than five star review to begin with, maybe the business owner got in touch or a change was made or an adaptation happened and then maybe that consumer upgraded their review. We've also had the case where a consumer shares their experience, maybe it wasn't five star, they still love the business, but they had some feedback. And then the business can tell me, Emily, here's how we evaluated this feedback. Here's how we maybe implemented it. And also Gene, something I love is when businesses say, you're entitled to your opinion, but we're not going to make an operational shift because of this. I think those learnings are really important too. Your business isn't made for everyone, and so you're not going to create this five star experience for every potential consumer out there. And sometimes those reviews can help you just as much as a positive does.

Gene Marks:

It's funny too because as a Yelp user, and I look at Yelp all the time. First of all, it's amazing how relevant Yelp has stayed over the past decade or so. I mean, some of these platforms have come and gone and Yelp, I think, is as popular as ever and as important as ever. And you're right about that. To me, it's the number of reviews. I mean, if I see thousands of reviews for a place, you're going to expect that a few people are going to be trashing this place because you can't service everybody.

Gene Marks:

I run a business. I'm a CPA, if you haven't figured out by the way I look, and we have about 600 clients and my whole thing is if 80% of our customers and clients are happy at any given time, we're doing fine, because you can't make... right. So, I guess that's the same attitude that you have to have as a business owner when you're on Yelp. You can't please them all. You shouldn't get so upset if you get a bad review.

Emily Washcovick:

Absolutely. And I mean there are so many studies done that show business pages with perfect five star ratings perform less positively than maybe a four and a half star or four star page. And sometimes that's about building consumer trust. It maybe doesn't look so real or trustworthy if it's tons of five star and no criticism. The other thing though, is consumers focus a lot on the business owner response. So sometimes a critical review is a chance for the business to reflect their customer service practices, and that's what stands out more to the potential consumer than the criticism itself.

Gene Marks:

It's fair enough. It's funny, also as a user, if I have a bad experience at a business, I don't leave bad Yelp reviews because I don't know man. I'm like, it's a small business, maybe they're having a bad day. I just don't want to sit there and trash somebody's [inaudible 00:06:11], and yet I don't know if that's right or not. Maybe I should be informing the business owner. They have a right to know. I guess, do you ever think that for every bad Yelp review it's representative of more, of a bigger problem and do you ever talk about that with the business owners that you interview?

Emily Washcovick:

I've actually had a lot of business owners point that out to me. We thought maybe this was off and then when this person wrote it, I knew that was the reflection of many opinions. And I think that's probably true. The thing that I really focus on is, if we're not going to go online to do that feedback, positive, negative, indifferent, it's great to share it directly. And so I think that's where as consumers we can be better. Ask the manager or ask the owner if they have a minute to talk with you and provide that feedback. I personally think that's a better route for criticism, of course. But I also think that a lot of business owners are in a place where they take that criticism online less harsh than they used to and they really look at it as someone trying to get in touch.

Emily Washcovick:

Before I came to Yelp, I worked for Marriott actually, and I was a front office manager, so I was dealing with all the reviews that were coming in to the hotel through Marriott's platform and then through other platforms. And what I often found was, I would sometimes get little insights of tiny things that I could change or alter that would make a huge impact and also things I would've never seen, the after hours feedback of maybe how the check-in process has fallen apart. And I think that's where as business owners, if you can remove that emotion of it feeling so personal and look at it as an opportunity to have additional eyes and ears in your business, it can be very helpful.

Gene Marks:

I'm going to ask you to be as objective as you can here, because obviously you're a Yelp person, but every business that I talk to, everybody's got limited resources. They only have so much time in the day. They only have so much money to spend. Tell me if you think I'm being unreasonable in saying, if you devoted your efforts, if you're a retailer or a restaurant and you just focused on Yelp, no Facebook, maybe just a one page Wix Websites to just, you know, you want to know... I mean, can't Yelp serve as your primary place to be online? And if you have limited resources, don't you think that that would behoove many types of businesses because that's where their customers are?

Emily Washcovick:

Yeah, I really do. I think the biggest thing is, Yelp is a search engine. So many consumers who turn to Yelp already know what they need. They have the budget for it, they just don't know who to spend with. And so Yelp is bottom of the funnel when it comes to all the places you can be listed online.

Emily Washcovick:

Now, if I'm a business owner with limited resources, whether I'm just focusing on Yelp or I'm focusing on a couple of different places, the most important thing is the free profile on Yelp. So every single business has the ability to claim their free page or add their business to Yelp for free. And the reason that's so important is because if you're not listed there, you're not even being found.

Emily Washcovick:

The other element to this, or layer to this is, if someone searches on Google or Yahoo or Apple Maps, Yelp is going to be a natural search result that's appearing very high in those rankings or it's pulling Yelp data directly. Apple Maps for example, that's pulling all Yelp data. So as a small business owner, at the very least

you want to have your free profile claimed, because then you can make sure you're in the right categories, your hours are correct, you are linking through to that Wix site, for example, if that's the basic just splash page approach.

Emily Washcovick:

The other thing about the Yelp profile is, if you have that all completed, you're already showing up when people have gotten your word or your business name, pardon me, from some other place. Many consumers might get a referral from a friend, might see something in their community, a sign or a poster, they're probably getting information from a couple of areas, but they're very likely turning to the internet before they reach out to the business. And so having that information available and accurate is of utmost importance.

Emily Washcovick:

The other thing about Yelp, and I'll stay on the free tools here, is you can do so many things to really increase how you're showing up. So for example, adding photos to your Yelp page with captions. If you're in certain industries, and particularly if you have niche offerings, you really want to play those items up on your Yelp page so that you can be found for those things. And I think at a bare minimum, every business should have all of their online profiles that are free claimed and completed. The last thing I'll say about getting that free page completed is, when your Yelp information is up to date and accurate, it's being pulled to almost every other site out there aside from Google, so that Yahoo or Bing page for your business will be pulling that Yelp data, so if you have it accurate there, it'll be accurate across the web.

Emily Washcovick:

I've been at Yelp for a very long time and I do think it's important to have it claimed and to have a strategy for when you get those reviews. I like to be proactive instead of reactive when it comes to that stuff, it kind of helps remove the emotion. But I also think that we can't pretend that businesses don't have to have a footprint on a couple of platforms. And so I always want to be the first one to say, Yelp, Google. But then also probably having some sort of social presence or like you said, at least that splash page, so that we can get some brand consistency. And when we're talking about brand consistency, that's where I think you just need this brief elevator pitch about what you do, that's reflective across all of those platforms.

Gene Marks:

You talk about Google, it is sort of the elephant in the room and it's really tough to compete against a company like Google and Google reviews when as a business owner, I almost feel like I have to have a presence on Google. It's just because people search on Google and they're looking for a company, a restaurant, retailer. And then of course if you set up a profile there, your reviews come right up and it's just like it's this natural first, but you have to go to Yelp to find that business, if you're searching on Google. Do you know what I mean?

Emily Washcovick:

Yes.

Gene Marks:

It's a separate, you have to make a separate effort. I guess just, how do you position yourself, Yelp? Where does Yelp position itself in this environment where you are going head to again the world's largest search engine?

Emily Washcovick:

Absolutely. So two things. First, I encourage almost every industry of business owner to do a Google search for their industry and their city. You'll see that Yelp is going to be one of those top natural search results. So that's just the power of Yelp's SEO. It's been built up over years.

Emily Washcovick:

The other thing is Yelp has a dedicated group of individuals that always go to Yelp first. We have those millions upon millions of searches and users that are active every single month. But truly what I think is important is having both of those pages claimed so that no matter what kind of user you're getting in front of, they can search your name and see that representation equally. And that's not equal in terms of quantity of reviews or star rating, but making sure that information is accurate.

Emily Washcovick:

Now, when it comes to managing both of those pages, the way you respond or represent your business is probably going to be the same. The biggest difference though, is going to be the work that Yelp has done around trust and safety. We do take a little bit of a different approach to content moderation and curation at Yelp. It's against our terms of service and content guidelines for business owners to ask for reviews. We think that creates an innate bias and we would much prefer that they happen naturally. But on Google for example, that's different. And so a lot of users turn to Yelp because they find it more trustworthy when it comes to that review content. When they look at a Google for example, it might have much higher volume, much more inflated star rating, and part of that is because the different approach that Yelp takes to trust and safety with our review recommendation software that we use.

Gene Marks:

Very, very interesting. And yet it's funny, like I said. Even with the growth of Google, I still trust Yelp reviews more than I do Google reviews. And it's funny that you bring that up about soliciting reviews. There's a lot of that that goes on on Google. And with Yelp it's just that much more difficult.

Gene Marks:

All right, I mean now let's pivot a little bit. Let's give some actual real life advice for all the people that are listening right now. Tell me a little bit, I mean you've talked to thousands of business owners, users of Yelp, they have their business listed on Yelp, so let me first start off by asking you about industries. I know your premise is anybody in any industry can be on Yelp of course, and it does serve all industries, but are there any industries that are more, just if you're a business, you need to be on Yelp. I mean, restaurants and retailers seem to be the number ones, but are there any other industries that you can mention that have had some surprisingly good responses, you know what I mean, or experience while being on Yelp that you wouldn't necessarily consider?

Emily Washcovick:

Yeah, absolutely. The way I try to describe Yelp is, obviously, us as consumers eat three times a day. We hopefully don't need to get our car fixed that often or our roof repaired, so the way people think of Yelp as a restaurant site makes sense. That is where a lot of people turn for their searches and that's what we're looking for more often. But it's actually pretty interesting to know that when you break down our different industries by which are most reviewed, the highest is home and local services. I had to pull up our little fact sheet here because we do share this data quarterly and we update it, but right now, home and local services is the most reviewed category, followed by restaurants and then shopping. So you're right, retail and restaurants are going to be the ones you think of as the home industries for us.

Emily Washcovick:

Very important for you to have your page claimed in that industry. But home and local services have really exploded. And if we think of what's happened in the past two and a half years, that makes a lot of sense. Many of us as consumers changed the way we were dining out, the searches were still happening, but we were maybe looking for things like curbside pickup or takeout, but home services really blew up from the perspective of people just spending more on their home and turning to a site that they trusted to find those home pros. So home and local professionals are very much on Yelp. And what I always say, Gene, is

sometimes those are the industries where you can still get ahead of the curve, because maybe you are one of just a dozen or a couple hundred in your area that are active there when you are a service provider.

Emily Washcovick:

You know, mentioned that you're a CPA. My dad actually owned a payroll company for years. He just sold it. But him and I would have this debate all the time. "Emily, businesses are the ones looking to use me, not consumers. Yelp doesn't matter for me." And I would say, "Okay dad, I understand. You think of Yelp as b2c, but in reality you need to think of Yelp as a web presence. And so if the receptionist or the business owner who's looking for an alternative to Paychex or ADP goes to the internet, they're going to still find you there. And now their expectations for how many reviews you have are of course different than say a restaurant. But that presence is still valuable."

Emily Washcovick:

Health and medical is another industry that a lot of people don't think of when they think of Yelp, and we've really had a lot of growth in that area as well. You can find providers there. Back in the day, you would just be able to search based on your insurance pretty much. And now you can begin a search on Yelp and match that up with other information that you have for that industry or that search.

Gene Marks:

So health and medical, professional services, retail, restaurants, and leading the list is services in the home. These are all, if you're listening to this, you're watching this and you're in any one of those industries, it sounds very, very important that you would want to have that presence on Yelp. Let's talk a little bit about some tools, some hacks for Yelp. I mean, first of all, what drives you crazy about business owners that aren't using some of the features in Yelp? Why are you not doing this? Is there any two or three things you can think of saying, man, this is standard operating procedure and then so many business owners like overlook it? Can you offer me a few?

Emily Washcovick:

It's a great question. I think the biggest thing for me is, when business owners are paralyzed by fear or they're avoiding online reviews because they think consumers go there to complain, that's when they're missing the most opportunities. So I've seen plenty of business owners just never even claim their free page because they think, well, if I don't claim it that it's not attached to me. All those reviews are still out there talking about your business, so by leaving it unattended, you're really sending a signal to potential consumers that's bigger than claiming it. And so avoiding it is probably the thing that just drives me the craziest.

Emily Washcovick:

Now, when it comes to managing the page, I like to talk about Yelp as a little bit of a set it and forget it type platform when it comes to that basic information. So business owners that maybe just claim it and then run away, that infuriates me, too. No one knows your hours like you, no one can tell us the top three categories that you service like you. So take that 20 minutes, click through, our business user profile does a really good job guiding you nowadays that's evolved a lot over the years, and fill out those sections because those keywords and phrases that you include in your about section or in your photo captions, those help you show up. So the business owners that tell me, "Well, Emily Yelp is a consumer site. It's where people talk about us, not where I can talk about my business." That's wrong. And so the claiming is the first thing that I wish they would do.

Emily Washcovick:

Now, the second thing is waiting until you get a review to decide how you're going to respond. That just drives me crazy because that really puts a lot of stress and pressure on you. You as a business owner are wearing so many hats, every single day is different, you don't know what it's going to throw at you. And the

last thing you need is an alert that says, you got a negative review and then you feel like you have to stop your whole day and figure out your online response strategy. Give it a little thought as you're going through this process of claiming your profiles. Look at some other businesses that reply.

Emily Washcovick:

Now, when I give advice for how to reply, it's pretty basic. Use the public comment almost every time. And that's because it shows who you are to other people. Next is, thank the reviewer, so that's how you open it. Thank you so much for sharing your feedback. Address something that they mentioned in their review, just one thing, you don't need to get into the nitty gritty of every detail. And then lastly, close it out by taking the conversation offline. So offer them a way to get in touch or tell them you sent a direct message. That very concise and direct response is what you're going to want to have planned in advance. You might not have the words all written out, but have that structure so that you don't need to do the emotional gymnastics of writing an entire response when you get that review. You can almost plug and chug and insert items to a template, if you will.

Emily Washcovick:

Third and final thing that drives me bonkers, is when business owners do not reply to positive reviews. Maybe they have this plan for the critical, they're really zoned in on if we get a negative review, here's how we're going to turn it around and they miss the chance to thank the people who love them. So take the time, customize those public comment responses to positive reviews and keep it simple. You don't want to write the same thing every time, but it doesn't need to be a novel.

Gene Marks:

Emily, it's always challenged me to figure out how to use Yelp for outbound marketing and maybe the platform is not designed for that. And if it's not, that's completely fine. But you think about, say you're running a business, you're running a restaurant. Say you've gotten 2000 positive reviews over the past few years. It would really be amazing if, hey, we're going to offer a special, or we're doing something out of the ordinary next week. I would love to reach out to the people who've given us these reviews and let them know that we're doing this, if you wanted to come by, that would be awesome.

Gene Marks:

Does Yelp provide... I mean, Yelp has advertising tools, so you could do that. Although my thoughts on advertising, I mean you can keep your thoughts yourself. I tend to go... it's like Google Ads. You know when you do a keyword search, then you get these promoted ads at the very top of the, you scroll down to get to the organic people because the ones up top seem less. I kind of feel that way on Yelp as well. Like okay, they're advertising, but I'd want to get to who's coming up in the organic search, just me as a user.

Emily Washcovick:

Totally.

Gene Marks:

Is there any other tools that Yelp provides to help the businesses that list on them engage with their communities, more so than just one on one, but just to help them market their business? Or is there anything that you hear that might be coming?

Emily Washcovick:

Yeah, absolutely. I think the biggest thing is, when you're advertising, for example, those ads are cost per click based. So you're totally right. A lot of people scroll past those, but you're really only paying for that placement if someone engages with you, so that's a benefit. And that's pretty standard. Any online advertising is going to operate that way.

Gene Marks:

And by the way, let me interrupt you and say that the ads certainly serve a purpose. I mean, if you want to spend the money on ads and it's there, people click on the ads.

Emily Washcovick:

Or sometimes people see number one in the ad is number one in natural. You see that quite a bit, too.

Gene Marks:

True.

Emily Washcovick:

The thing though, beyond that layer of just cost per click advertising is a couple of our features that really do allow businesses to do exactly what you mentioned. Yelp Connect is a paid feature that launched during the pandemic. You can kind of think of it like a social post. Every business on Yelp already has a network of followers or engaged users, and when you post a Yelp Connect post, it'll send that directly to your followers and it posts it on the front of the Yelp page at the very top, so it's really promoting things like you mentioned, a special, an offering, things you want to get more attention on.

Emily Washcovick:

We've also rolled out a lot of profile enhancement features for a lot of those industries that just don't have as high of volumes of reviews. So for example, you can do portfolios on Yelp, which we see a lot of local and home pros do, where they're uploading images, they're putting price ranges for certain project types. They're really able to communicate with the consumer proactively about what sets them apart.

Emily Washcovick:

And then the last thing that I can think of that speaks directly to what you're talking about, is one of our features called Business Highlights. Business owners can pay for this feature. We have over 30 different highlights. Think of things like women owned, over 20 years in business, open 24/7, different things that would really make a business stand out. You can choose a handful of those and those are displayed with your business in search results. So those will really incentivize certain consumers to choose you in that list by highlighting something that might really matter to them in their search.

Gene Marks:

You have a really cool job. I mean, it's fun to talk to all these business owners and teach them. You have stuff about a platform that they really rely on for their livelihoods. And I'm sure all the time you get feedback from people saying, "I never knew Yelp could do that." Or, "That that's something new that's going to help me bring in more customers." It's a fun job.

Emily Washcovick:

I always say, over the years I've been so fortunate to meet business owners that have taught me just as much as I'm able to teach them. But still to this day, one of my favorite things is, almost any business owner I talk to, I can find some element of their profile that they haven't maximized. And that's just what I love about this is, business owners are worried about so many things. When we focus in on one thing like Yelp for example, or online reviews, we can really grow a business in a variety of ways, but it's all about understanding how you take what you're already doing in person and reflect it digitally through that presence.

Gene Marks:

Emily, how can people get ahold of you?

Emily Washcovick:

Great question. The main place is to go to business.yelp.com. We have everything there from how to claim your page to my show, to all sorts of resources and advice that you might need to use Yelp. I always also share my email address. I've been sharing it as I've been presenting for years, so you won't be a stranger if you drop me a line. It's Emilyrw@yelp.com. And then the last place I would send people is blog.yelp.com. Over the past two and a half years, we've really doubled down on that site and written a ton of articles that have a lot to do with Yelp and some that really have nothing to do with Yelp. And so if you're looking for more insights or learnings there about operating your business, it's a great place to check out.

Gene Marks:

Emily Washcovick is Yelp's small business expert and Yelp and Entrepreneur Magazine's Behind the Review podcast host. Emily, do you do it just on your own, that podcast or do you have our co-host?

Emily Washcovick:

I host it by myself, but I do have the support of a lot of folks at Yelp. We write articles for each episode and we really promote the show in a variety of ways, so I'm lucky to have a team that helps me out.

Gene Marks:

That is awesome. I'm assuming you can find it on iTunes and Spotify and all the usual places, right?

Emily Washcovick:

Any podcast platform.

Gene Marks:

Emily, thank you so much. Great conversation, great advice. Hopefully we can talk again in the future. I. Have a feeling you're going to be at Yelp for a while. Like I said, it's a great job. Thanks for coming on.

Emily Washcovick:

Thanks so much for having me.

Gene Marks:

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Speaker 2:

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