

business issues

FIVE-STAR EXPERIENCE?

BY ANNE SCARLETT

Wisdom from online rating platforms: how architects, engineers and construction firms can best generate and manage feedback.

WHEN YOU'RE PICKING a new restaurant, especially in an unfamiliar city, how do you choose?

Do you ask a concierge? Or a local friend or business contact? Or basically the entire world via the internet?

In our private lives, many of us scour online or social media ratings and reviews to help inform our decision-making process. There is no shortage of opinion out there—ranging from Yelp!, Trip Advisor, Amazon, Google and Glassdoor to platforms like Facebook, Twitter and even Instagram, and everything in between. Positive comments and high scores attract new clients, some of whom may not have had prior knowledge of the brand. Conversely, negative comments and low scores will likely cause a would-be buyer to completely dismiss the company without a second thought.

With so much hinging on online and social media reviews, it's no wonder that companies are bending over backwards to ensure that their clients and customers "say something nice or nothing at all." These days, companies will even curtail a potential negative review by reaching out immediately after an experience or a purchase to obtain feedback. Often, their language offers to make something "right" when they don't yet know if anything went "wrong."

In turn, this phenomenon has elevated a buyer's quest for perfection. Our expectations of both services and products are sky-high, and we don't hesitate to speak to owners and managers to request replacements, upgrades, pro bono services, money back, etc. More than ever, we know we are likely to obtain resolution, because the company doesn't want a negative review to mar their rating—or worse yet, spread like wildfire across the internet.



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Shifting gears, how do these types of occurrences impact the business community, specifically AEC service providers? Anecdotal evidence indicates that our prospects and clients have even higher expectations (is that possible?) of service providers than ever before. Think about it. Let's say you are the campus architect for a large university. In your private life, you discover that people bend over backwards like never before to satisfy you. Wouldn't you demand that same level of immediate excellence at work when selecting an engineering firm for a project? Or perhaps you have always had high expectations (not a bad thing) but now your demands are more immediate.

Even further, if an issue arises—and do they ever!—clients want it resolved ASAP with prudent professionalism. So while there is not (yet) an official online platform for clients to publicly rate AEC service providers in the nonresidential market, we need to be mindful of how quickly our reputation can go south. If problems persist—whether complex or mundane—your client may indeed spread the word by mouth or online.

So what best practices can the AEC industry adopt from those companies in other sectors that have created mechanisms to manage their online reputation? Here are a few.

Proactive problem-solving. If there is a problem on the project, preemptively address it. Rather than ignoring or minimizing a situation and hoping it will go away, shine a spotlight on it (momentarily) and make resolution the top priority. Once you take steps to fix the problem, your client may actually regard your company as *more* competent and responsive relative to if the problem had never occurred in the first place. In other words, fixing problems is an opportunity to build loyalty. And if you don't believe me, think about those times when an airline upgraded you after a cancelled flight; your landscaper offered to replace plants that didn't survive; your cell phone provider credited your account for a full month due to a brief technology glitch; and so forth. Regardless of reactive or proactive approaches, companies earn loyalty with swift, meaningful resolutions. I'm sure if you think about it, there are several occurrences within the last few years where a company earned your loyalty because of the speed and method in which they resolved a problem.

Sidenote: Consider including a line item on your internal project team meeting agenda to specifically identify red flags and potential issues. This suggestion is not intended to foster or belabor negativity. Instead, it's intended to have an eyes-wide-open approach to the project, every step of the way.

Ask for client feedback, relentlessly. It can be time-consuming for a client to respond to feedback requests, and some are more forthcoming than others (especially while a project is in progress). But if you respond with your own thoughts on how you will specifically incorporate their feedback in the future, it's rewarding for both parties. The client will feel heard, and your genuine response and action steps will surely serve as another deposit in their figurative loyalty bank. Conversely, if the feedback is something that you feel is a misunderstanding or even unreasonable, then you've created an opportunity for dialogue.

Vary feedback formats. Depending upon the phase of your project, different feedback approaches are appropriate. At the conclusion of a project, candid responses are best gleaned from a focus group led by an unbiased party, such as an outside consultant, an internal marketing professional or a firm owner that was not directly involved with the project. At key project milestones, ideal feedback will involve a scheduled "how are we doing" discussion amongst the project leadership. And then, during the day-to-day grind, smaller feedback tools—such as a thoughtful one-question questionnaire or a short survey—can unearth pesky issues before they develop.

Sidenote: Make sure your responses to the feedback are documented in writing and are included within the project's records. When handled properly, it is highly encouraging for the client and the project team to later reflect upon the process and progress.

Client satisfaction is Goal #1; testimonial generation is a bonus. The top priority for collecting feedback (and responding with action) is to satisfy your clients. But as demonstrated by businesses in other sectors—particularly those with abundant online reviews—capturing testimonials is a tremendous benefit to the process.

Sidenote: Since the nonresidential side of the AEC industry does not have an official online feedback platform, you'll need to ask clients for permission to use their testimonials within your own marketing materials. Testimonials are far more impactful with an accompanying name, title and company name. Yet this is sensitive territory for certain clients, so be respectful of their wishes for anonymity. If they want to assist you, they will be open to creative ways in which they can sing praises for your firm.

Accentuate the positive. When you ask for feedback, you must be open-minded and non-defensive. This is easier said than done. As exhibited within the other industries, companies will often first thank the client/customer for the positive elements of the review prior to addressing the negative. This helps keep things in perspective for all involved. It also ensures that your internal project team will remain enthusiastic and committed to the success of the client relationship and project.

Not all clients will be customers for life, but an amplified response to feedback will go a long way towards solidifying relationships between service providers and clients—ensuring a mutual fit and a willingness to spread the good word about your company! ■