

It may sound “funny” to suggest that a “gripe site” is offering “reputation management services.” The implication is that PissedConsumer.com “creates” a problem by publishing anonymous complaints, and then offers companies “help” with “solving” their problem – at their expense and our profit.

We recognize how it sounds, and that is one reason – there are others, which we will address somewhat below – that we do not publicize this aspect of our business. But this view is a distortion of what is really going on.

It is absolutely true that our website specializes in publication of consumer complaints – a socially useful enterprise – and that we make a profit from advertisers who want their messages to be targeted to those who read these complaints. There is nothing unethical about that, either. What brings these two together, in large part, is SEO. Below, we will go into some more detail about the topic of SEO including lessons we learned about the ethics of that piece of the puzzle, at considerable cost to PissedConsumer.com.

The question of anonymity is a complicated part of this picture. There is an important social value in allowing people to complain anonymously. Companies would sue everyone who complained and shut them up just with the threat of having to go to court. There are also dangers involved in anonymity, i.e., a lack of accountability. But Congress has made its decision about whether or not ISP’s like PissedConsumer.com should bear the cost of that problem, and the answer is no.

Even then, if someone has a legitimate problem with a comment on PissedConsumer.com, we have – unlike many other gripe sites – a consistent procedure that subjects of criticisms can follow. This starts with an absolute, free right for a company to respond online to complaints. We will also remove a complaint if it does not follow our guidelines or at the request of the person who posted it. And we will of course comply with all requirements of the law, such as answering subpoenas, etc., as appropriate.

Contrary to the impression we mentioned above – that we “cause problems” for companies and then charge them to “fix” those problems – many companies contact us and request our help in managing their online reputation, first in connection with our website and often, as the conversation progresses, beyond that. One reason people want to have this conversation with us is, in addition to the fact that we control our own site, we also know as much about online reputation management as just about anyone, and especially in the area of consumer complaints.

PissedConsumer is a constant target of lawsuits. While PissedConsumer is prepared to take on litigation, the last thing we want is for our clients to incur discovery and deposition costs every time someone files a baseless claim. When a company contacts us with a request about participation in the Business Solutions program, we first try to get them to sign an NDA to make sure future client is not disturbed if someone sues us – the NDA includes a number of terms that protect both us and our existing and past clients from lawsuits, including a requirement that engagement in the program itself be kept confidential.

Requiring an NDA also puts a process in place that helps us confirm that the people we are dealing with do indeed represent a particular company, and not their competitors or third party SEO optimizers. Also, we are not the only ones in this business. Our pricing and techniques are proprietary to us, and just as we are generally not aware of what our competitors charge, we are not interested in having them know what we offer and for how much.

After the initial NDA document is signed we usually go through a series of phone calls or in-person conversations where we try to better understand the company, their business model and analyze the

potential problems that consumers may face in each particular case and which can lead them to lodge complaints on PissedConsumer.com. During these conversations we ask potential clients about their thoughts on PissedConsumer.com and how they think Opinion Corp. can help them. Very often at this stage we make remarks and suggestions that are not even directly related to our core Business Solutions program, but rather changes that could be implemented on customer's end to improve their Customer Service processes – not because we claim to know their business better than they do, but because we often know their unhappy customers better than they do.

We are very pleased to see clients subscribe to our custom Business Solutions program only after they have worked for a while with consumers using the free commenting functionality on PissedConsumer.com. The company's efforts in this vein are an important consideration in our decision of whether to take on a Business Solutions client. We do not accept everyone who wants this service solely because they will pay for it. We do not accept clients who simply want to remove reviews from the site. This does not resolve the underlying consumer concern, and we say this not out of idealism, but rather because if we merely took down complaints for money, it would be discovered quickly and undermine our credibility. It would also be only a temporary measure if there is an ongoing consumer problem, much less if those who posted comments return to post them again or comment about deletions. There is no scenario where it would "work" for us to make an agreement to remove comments "forever."

Some people are concerned that complaints are not really from consumers, but are from competitors pretending to be consumers. We have advised prospective clients to seek legal relief to resolve internet reputation problems when they have indicated to us that they have reason to believe that all or many of the posts are coming from competitors.

We also look at the business model and customer service function of our prospective clients to make sure we understand such business model and that this business model is compatible with PissedConsumer's main goal of being a credible resource for consumers who have concerns. This includes analysis of the trends of the reviews on PissedConsumer and other review sites.

In many cases our program works as a great communication tool. It facilitates a dialog between consumers and companies. Consumers get to talk to the company and company's management gets to listen to complaints that, prior to the existence of open forums like PissedConsumer, were typically disregarded, lost or went unnoticed by the company. When a post shows up on PissedConsumer, for some companies that were previously indifferent to complaints, wheels jump into motion and the company suddenly learns to respond quickly and efficiently.

Anyone who is familiar with our site will see that we never endorse or pass on either complaints or companies. We don't state that a company is good or bad, and we don't state that a company that participates in our program gets a "gold star of approval." We let the internet and public decide on the sincerity of the Customer Support and the Company. We simply open up additional communication channels between a company and its customers. It is true that as part of the program we will offer modifications in the visual manner in which complaints are presented to the casual Internet user, but – again – content is never deleted, edited or changed in substance by us for any price.

We would like to address the suggestion that there are "unethical" aspects of our SEO practice. This information is available on the Internet, including on our site, but few people take the trouble to read it. It is an important part of our story, because we learned some hard and valuable lessons about SEO in the years since we first started our business.

Yes: in 2008 Google banned PissedConsumer.com from its index for what it deemed “unethical” SEO practices – many of which are routinely used by outside SEO consultants to get their messages in front of PissedConsumer in Google rankings. Such consultants are often merely paid propagandists working for companies that do not want criticism of them to be found on the Internet, and are no more inherently believable or ethical than the material on our site.

But PissedConsumer was completely out of the Google index for 9-12 months. It was painful. It was very painful. There are SEO companies that would love to ban us from Google, and we are confident that Google receives regular communications from reputation management companies with tips and requests to bring down PissedConsumer.com.

Notwithstanding its past actions, Google has not responded to these requests because our SEO is “clean.” Having “served our time” in the black hole that Google placed us in 2008-2009, how foolish would we be to expose ourselves again to the same threat? At the end of the day, what the parties complained about in the Ascentive / Classic case, and what most companies complain about in terms of our SEO, is their subjective view that PissedConsumer.com pages are not legitimately “relevant,” in the SEO sense, and should not be ranked high when their company’s name is used as a search term. But of course nothing is more “relevant” to a search for Company X than a page dedicated to content created by many people about the very topic of Company X. There is nothing “black hat” about relevance that happens to be criticism.

Not only does Google get emails about PissedConsumer.com. We receive email, too. This email was forwarded to us by a PissedConsumer Business Solutions client, which we have called “XXXX” here:

Hi <XXXX>,

I did my research after you left last night regarding your products. I ran across one website [PissedConsumer.com], that, although the name of the website was not something I'd ordinarily think was a good site, the comments from consumers were interesting. Additionally, I checked the site for a company that we've recently a bad experience with, and the site also contained many comments regarding this company. I'm confident that this is a legitimate website. I also visited other websites to base our decision on and this morning I visited with Harold regarding my thoughts.

I can tell you that I was impressed with the way <XXXXXX> has handled the comments from one particular site, each time responding back and trying their best to satisfy the customer, while the company we had the bad experience with had none.

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Please let me know what we need to do next. I will be using my Visa card for this purchase.

We enjoyed visiting with you last night and look forward to doing business with you.

Thank you.

Another email came directly from a consumer that posted a comment on our site:

Thank you to PissedConsumer.com for helping me get the attention of <XXXXX>. I am very glad to report that in fact, they demonstrated integrity and customer service by re-evaluating their original decision and completely replacing my kitchen floor. I was extremely impressed with their level of customer service as well as their attention to detail as they did the work. Thank You again for your assistance in helping me resolve this issue.”

Finally, please “take away” the following key points about our policies:

1) We don't delete reviews – for Business Solutions clients or anyone – unless a request for deletion comes from the original author. We require the person making the request to supply us with a hard-copy, notarized to demonstrate the authenticity of the sender's identity claim, in which the writer states that the information posted was false at the time it was posted. Again, any business relationship we may have with the subject of a letter has no effect on the application of this rule.

2) We do allow original authors to add information to posted reviews if they posted them while logged in to the site or created an account with us while making a post.

There is more information available at: <http://www.pissedconsumer.com/publications/faq-2.html>.