

Publications

Reporting Harmful Non-Defamatory Google Reviews

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It is generally difficult to convince a website to remove defamatory third-party content without a court order.

If person A goes to a website and says person B's statements about him or her are false, how does that website know whether person A is telling the truth? And, even so, how would the website know if they are really damaging person A?

Free speech is an important right, well-steeped in the history and jurisprudence of the United States. Coupled with that is the valid concern that capricious removal of online content will have the effect of chilling citizen speech.

As such, websites are ordinarily reluctant to delete false content without a mandate declaring that the content is illegal from the court (and even then the order is against the poster, not the website).

However, outside of false statements, certain online speech can still violate a website's policies. In other words, there are instances in which a website might entertain certain other removal requests.

For example, most sophisticated websites prohibit harassment in their terms or rules. Of course, where a website draws the line between harassment deserving of content deletion and alleged harassment that it will choose to ignore (perhaps simple name calling) is arbitrary.

But if the harassment is so obviously bad or, perhaps the poster is misusing the website (e.g. not posting an actual customer review but personally attacking someone), it might be possible for the subject of the harmful words to get the website to remove the offending content.

This can include Google reviews.

Google removal requests, reviews

Each day, Google receives countless removal requests – many legitimate and probably many, many more that are without merit. These requests include potential instances of intellectual property

infringement and court-ordered defamation, among others.

For the reasons stated above, and due to the sheer volume of requests people send Google, in our experience Google will only take action when justified.

As Google hosts the most powerful and popular search engine in the world, most of the speech-related requests involve content pertaining to items from third-party websites appearing in search results

However, people can harm businesses directly on Google by publishing false reviews to their Google business pages. This can be problematic for many businesses, given that Google generally prominently displays its reviews in search results.

Flagging Google reviews

In general, reporting an alleged policy violation involves flagging (clicking the flag-like icon) next to the review in question, and then selecting the type of violation.

As shown on Google's "[Report a policy violation page](#)" (which also provides its comment posting policy), this list consists of: 1) posts containing "hateful, violent, or inappropriate content"; 2) posts containing "advertising or spam"; 3) posts that are "off-topic"; and 4) posts that contain "conflicts of interest."

Google has a [separate page](#) on which it provides more details about the different types of reviews it removes. For example, it explains constitutes an off-topic review or a conflict of interest.

Oftentimes, disgruntled ex-business partners, spouses or employees—just to name a few—might make personal attacks on business owners that are unrelated to a customer experience. This could likely qualify as both "off-topic" and a "conflict of interest."

But no matter what type of violation a business might report to Google, the review in question must very clearly (to an objective Google representative) violate a Google policy. In other words, if a business does not have a convincing argument that a review, on its face, violates one of its policies, the business is probably out of luck.

Some businesses have a tendency to overreact to the slightest negative review. But if it is just a negative customer opinion, the business can try to turn that negative into a positive – both in terms of making amends with that customer and making any necessary improvements to the company.

But in short, if a Google review appears to violate one of Google's policies, it might be worth flagging that review on Google for potential removal.

For more information, contact Colleen Devanney at 855.542.9192 or cmdevanney@vorys.com. Read more about the practice at <http://www.defamationremovalattorneys.com/>. Also read our additional [post from 2015](#) on removing defamatory Google reviews.