

Brian Manternach, Associate Editor

The Yelp Effect: Harnessing the Power of Online Reviews to Grow Your Voice Studio

Melissa Treinkman



Melissa Treinkman

WHEN I FIRST EXPRESSED INTEREST in voice lessons as a pre-teen in the early 1990s, my mother pulled out our Yellow Pages directory, scanned the area codes of businesses listed under “Singing Lessons,” and chose the first teacher who shared our zip code. For a busy mom who had no way to differentiate among teachers, location became her primary search criterion and the closest teacher would have to do.

In today’s digital age, hard copy of the Yellow Pages has long been obsolete and the Internet has overwhelmingly become the tool most people use to find local businesses, including voice lessons. Many voice teachers now have a web presence and realize that without one, their business is at a serious disadvantage in being visible to and attracting clientele. Besides having a website, many independent voice teachers have a presence on social media and have found it to be a useful way to build their reputation and client base. One tool that voice teachers may not have considered adding to their advertising arsenal is participation in an online review site, such as Yelp. There are compelling reasons to utilize the Yelp platform and voice teachers should consider the pros and cons, which will be detailed in this article. Online reviews have become an enormous part of the online experience and have dramatically influenced consumer choice. This democratization of the online space has given everyone a voice, and the rise of the review-based giant, Yelp, has changed how small businesses operate.

As a millennial who avidly has been using Yelp to find restaurants and businesses for a number of years, I found it felt natural for me to put my voice lesson business on Yelp in 2011 as a way to build my clientele after I moved to Los Angeles. Today, the majority of my current students found me on Yelp and I receive several new student inquiries per week directly from Yelp, which boasts an average of 70 million unique visitors via mobile web and 75 million unique visitors via desktop monthly.¹ I do not pay Yelp any money for advertising, and, in fact, since my presence on the review site has grown, I have discontinued all other advertising efforts, which I found over time to be vastly less fruitful when compared to Yelp. Yelp states that the average annual incremental revenue growth for a business, as a result of claiming a free account on Yelp, is \$8000.²

Journal of Singing, November/December 2018
Volume 75, No. 2, pp. 191–196
Copyright © 2018
National Association of Teachers of Singing

While there are certain precautions voice teachers should take regarding the protection of their reputation, personal safety, and finances when participating in any social media platform, I argue that the benefits of Yelp exponentially outweigh the risks. I have not been compensated by Yelp in any way for these comments; I am simply reporting my personal experience. I offer this article as a reference for both other members of NATS who are working to build their studios from the ground up, and for more established teachers who might be interested in harnessing the power of Yelp to boost their studio rosters.

THE POWER OF ONLINE REVIEWS

Could online reviews from strangers carry the same, or perhaps even more weight, than personal recommendations from friends and family? In a 2017 survey of 1,031 US-based consumers, BrightLocal found that 85% of consumers trust online reviews as much as a personal recommendation. Furthermore, the survey reveals that 73% of consumers say that positive reviews increase their trust in a business.³ The takeaway for voice teachers is that, in today's world, a business can have the most beautiful, professional website, but consumers will often still want to read reviews to verify and gain trust that the business is delivering a quality service or product to actual customers. There is also evidence that positive online reviews can increase sales. According to a Harvard Business School study, a 5% to 9% revenue increase can be expected by restaurants that raise their Yelp rating by one star.⁴

THE TYPICAL "YELPER"

Before creating a voice studio, it behooves teachers to consider carefully what types of clients they wish to work with. For example, some teachers prefer to work with certain age groups. Other teachers may feel most comfortable working with singers who share their gender or voice type. Genre of musical style and the prospective student's level of expertise are also significant criteria to consider as a teacher builds a studio and reputation. Teachers also need to decide what kinds of hours they are willing to teach. Flexibility of hours, to accommodate working professionals and students, who often request evening or weekend lessons, is compulsory when teach-

ing that cohort. And, of course, while teachers may *prefer* a certain type of clientele, various factors may prevent them from exclusively serving their preferred population.

I started out teaching at a local music school where I had no control over the selection of my students and my hourly salary was approximately one third of the lesson price paid by the student. As a result, when I decided to create my own business and began teaching independently, I was so elated to be my own boss and eager to get my business off the ground, that I was willing to take anyone who wanted to learn. According to the demographics provided on the Yelp website, 35.1% of users are between the ages of 18–34 and 37.3% are between the ages of 35–54; 59% of users are college educated, with an additional 18.1% holding a graduate degree; 49.6% of Yelp users have an annual income of over \$100,000.⁵ My personal experience is in line with these statistics.

Although I have had a couple of professional singers find me on Yelp, the vast majority of inquiries come from avocational students looking to improve their voices for recreational purposes. I have received countless emails that begin with the comment, "I am a complete beginner but I have always wanted to learn to sing." Most are young professionals, parents looking for lessons for their children, or in the case of my clientele in Los Angeles, actors. So for elite teachers, Yelp might not be the best way to attract the highest caliber students with advanced training. Beginning teachers, however, are usually eager to hone their craft on any willing (and paying) subjects. Therefore, Yelp can provide a seemingly never-ending source of beginning students that may help grow a new business.

An ability to teach all styles of music, or the willingness to learn, is crucial. Most of the students I receive from Yelp want to learn CCM styles. When I first started teaching voice in Los Angeles, I quickly realized that my extensive classical training was insufficient to meet the needs of my new students and I needed to learn how to teach belting. I took some lessons from music theater and pop teachers and purchased a couple of commercial singing programs geared toward popular singing. I also learned to read chord charts, in order to be able to accompany my students. I bought a digital piano, rather than an acoustic piano, to aid in the very frequent transpositions that need to be made for

beginning singers who have their heart set on singing a particular pop song.

LISTING A SMALL BUSINESS ON YELP

It is completely free to add your business to Yelp, although the majority of Yelp's revenue stems from business owners paying for advertising to increase their exposure on the platform.⁶ There are two ways that businesses appear on Yelp. A customer can add a business to Yelp by writing the first review, or a business owner can add her own business to the website in the hopes that customers will add reviews. If a customer adds a business to Yelp, the business owner may "claim" the business, as Yelp calls it, and have access to certain features limited to owners, such as the ability to respond to reviews. In order to write reviews as a consumer or respond to them as the owner, it is necessary to register and create a profile on Yelp. It is very simple and only takes a few minutes. However, anyone can read the reviews posted on Yelp, even if they don't have an account.

Once claimed, business owners can add contact information, business hours, accepted payment methods, pictures, and parking options. They can also include a link to their business website. In most cases, I have found that Yelp users contact me through my personal website, rather than directly through Yelp. One feature that independent voice teachers may find attractive is the fact that Yelp allows business owners to add a general location if they prefer not to share an exact address. Because I teach from my home, I chose not to put my exact address on Yelp, preferring to disclose that information once a student has inquired about lessons. Instead of an exact address, Yelp allows the business owner to drag a map pin to the approximate business location. The map pin for my business is on my street and close to my house but does not display my house number. This can be helpful in reducing spam and unwanted drop-in visitors looking to get in-person information about voice lessons. While this might be appropriate at a music school that has a storefront and a receptionist, it is certainly an unwelcome invasion to sole proprietors operating a business from home.

When a Yelp user searches for voice lessons on Yelp, the results are sorted based on location, star-rating, and also the number of reviews. This type of standard

search-ranking algorithm is configured to return the most topical results first. Google, the mother of search, uses a similar algorithm that displays the most popular and relevant web pages at the top of the search results. Just like with Google search results, a few companies that pay for advertising appear above the organic search results but are branded with a yellow tab that reads, "Ad." So essentially, as far as organic search results are concerned, the highest rated teachers or music studios in an exact geographic area are shown at the top.

In a city like Los Angeles, where people prefer not to travel long distances in horrendous traffic, most avocational students will prefer to choose among teachers in their exact neighborhoods. While some students travel long distances to work with me, oftentimes I end up teaching my neighbors or even people who live on my block. I am also one of the few independent teachers in my area with a presence on Yelp. This sets me apart from music schools, which usually have multiple teachers. Many students do not want a corporate music school experience, for various reasons, and seek out independent instructors who work for themselves. Because I have the highest star rating in my neighborhood, many Yelp users will choose to call me first because they assume I am the "best." Whether or not online reviews can be a reliable determinant of quality in voice instruction, of course, is a topic too large for discussion in this article. Nonetheless, it is hard to deny the power of online reviews and their impact on small businesses.

STAYING SAFE

When I first started accepting students through Yelp, friends and family asked me if I thought it was safe to allow strangers into my home. In the six years that I have used Yelp for my business, I have never been in a situation that caused me to feel a concern over my safety. However, I do recommend that teachers conduct a short phone interview before scheduling the first lesson. You can tell a lot about a person and whether or not their intentions are honest from a phone conversation.

Staying safe on Yelp, or the Internet in general, is not just about concern over bodily harm. Issues related to identity theft and personal finances are also at play. It is always a good rule of thumb to follow your gut if someone seems suspicious. In one situation, I quickly

realized that the out-of-state “parent” with atrocious grammar who wanted to purchase a large group of lessons via check was, in actuality, part of a banking scam. To protect oneself on all fronts, it is a good idea to routinely Google prospective students in advance of their first lesson as a way to make sure they are who they say they are. Checking someone’s personal Facebook page is also advisable, much in the same way that many employers vet job seekers. In most cases, I find my prospective students are interesting, upstanding members of the community and any worries I may have had are quelled.

THE DISGRUNTLED CLIENT: BAD REVIEWS

In previous eras, consumers did not have a way to voice their dissatisfaction to the world with the click of a button. Yelp, and the Internet in general, has given consumers that platform and small businesses have taken note. Yelp has been involved in extensive litigation from small businesses who feel that their business was hurt by Yelp.⁷ Most businesses on Yelp, including mine, have at least one negative review and, in most cases, this does not drastically affect the overall star rating of the business, especially if it has more than a couple of reviews. Although receiving a negative review can be hurtful, especially when you are the sole proprietor of your business, it is a small price to pay when one considers the many advantages businesses enjoy as a result of their presence on Yelp. Personally, as a consumer, I think that having at least one negative review legitimizes the business and can actually add credence to the rest of the positive reviews. In fact, studies have shown that a small amount of “negative information can sometimes bolster, or intensify, the initial favorable impressions arising from positive information.”⁸ Therefore, one or two negative reviews among a swarm of positive reviews can be, counterintuitively, a blessing, rather than a blight, for a business.

Business owners have the opportunity to respond both privately and publicly to reviews, both positive and negative. Yelp advises business owners to respond courteously, apologize for any misunderstandings, and explain the steps the business has taken to rectify the situation. The following is an excerpt from Yelp’s guidelines in responding to negative reviews:

Before responding to a negative review, take a deep breath and think very carefully about what you are going to write. Or even better, don’t think too much: just keep it simple by thanking your customer for the patronage and feedback.

Negative reviews can feel like a punch in the gut. We care deeply about our business too, and it hurts when someone says bad things about our business. For you founders and sole proprietors out there, a negative review can even feel like a personal attack.

The good news is that by contacting your reviewer and establishing a genuine human relationship, you have a chance to help the situation and maybe even change this customer’s perspective for the better. We’ve heard lots of success stories from business owners who were polite to their reviewers and were accordingly given a second chance.

But please be very careful here: if your reviewer perceives that you are being rude, condescending or disingenuous in any way, there’s a chance he or she could get angry and make the situation even worse. Keep in mind that this is a vocal customer who could well copy and paste your message all over the Web.

So just keep your message simple: thank you for the business and the feedback. If you can be specific about the customer’s experience and any changes you may have made as a result, this could go very far in earning trust.⁹

When potential clients read a thoughtful, well written, and polite public response from a business owner, it increases their confidence in the integrity of the business. The negative review I received helped me hone my studio policy to prevent misunderstandings in the future. Negative feedback can sometimes be a great learning experience, whether you are a singer or teacher. That being said, some customers thrive on complaining and there is nothing you can do to make them happy. Voice students are definitely no exception! There is a certain Zen in being able to recognize that as a teacher, or for that matter, as a person, you can’t please everyone.

BEWARE THE ALGORITHM

The issue of fake reviews is one that Yelp has battled against since its inception. Its review filter algorithm seeks to sort out untrustworthy reviews. There are many different ways Yelp analyzes the reliability and veracity of reviews and its exact algorithm is unknown to the general public.¹⁰ The algorithm shows a prefer-

ence for “established” users and Yelp explains that, “We purposely do not elaborate about all the variables that go into defining an ‘established’ user, because it’s a Catch-22: the more descriptive we are about what makes an established user, the less effective our filter is at fighting shills and malicious content.”¹¹ Because it is against Yelp’s guidelines for owners to solicit reviews from customers, technically a business cannot ask a customer to write a review. Anecdotal evidence suggests this is a difficult aspect for Yelp to control but it is clear that the company takes direct steps to filter out reviews that it suspects are unreliable for some reason. Some types of reviews that could possibly trigger a red flag to the Yelp algorithm include: a review written by a Yelp user who has written no other reviews; a reviewer without a profile picture or whom Yelp suspects is using a pseudonym; multiple users writing reviews from the same IPO address; or a reviewer from a different city. Yelp admits that sometimes perfectly legitimate reviews are filtered and a review that appears on the site one day may be filtered the next. When a review is filtered out, it does not appear among the other “Recommended Reviews” on the business page and its star-rating is not averaged into the overall star-rating of the business. Visitors to the site can choose to view reviews that Yelp has deemed “Not Recommended” based on its review filtering algorithm. However, it is rather difficult to find these reviews, as Yelp hides them in a separate link at the very bottom of their webpage.

Adding a Yelp button to your website or posting a flyer in your studio that says “Guess what? I’m on Yelp!” are a couple ways to encourage your students to write reviews without directly asking for them. Once you start to teach users of Yelp, these “Yelpers” will often write reviews as a matter of standard practice, thereby increasing your visibility on the site. In the meantime, some teachers may find the various levels of paid advertising to be worth the expense, as the number of reviews of their business grows. Yelp reported revenue of \$771.6 million in paid advertising by business owners in 2017.¹² Clearly many businesses find that advertising directly with Yelp is worthwhile!

IS YELP IN YOUR TOWN?

Another important consideration, of course, is whether or not Yelp is relevant in your geographic location. Large

cities tend to have an active Yelp presence, but there are many smaller towns where it is not a major player. It still may be useful to add your business to Yelp, even if you don’t expect to receive many reviews, for SEO (Search Engine Optimization) purposes. Because Yelp is one of the most popular websites for local businesses, it is frequently a top search result when someone searches for business services. My presence on Yelp helps my name show up at the top of search results when someone performs a simple Google search for “Voice Lessons” in my zip code. The more places your business appears online, the more relevant your business is, according to the Google search algorithm. For those independent voice teachers in large cities, Yelp may boost their online presence and visibility to prospective students in competitive markets with a plethora of teachers.

The exposure that Yelp has provided for my business is undeniable. I am quite sure that if I had been starting my teaching career in decades past, I would have needed to work much harder to promote myself to ensure that potential clients could find me. The gift of “being found” is a huge one for voice instructors. Of course, the excellent teaching and professionalism that must transpire once the student has found a teacher is of paramount importance in sustaining a voice teaching business, just as it was in the days of Yellow Pages. In my estimation and experience, Yelp is strikingly more effective than an ad in the Yellow Pages because the sheer power of the internet takes word-of-mouth recommendations to an astounding new level. If you believe in your product and aren’t afraid of endorsement or criticism from a wider audience, Yelp can be a vital key to getting the word out. Voice teachers who take this leap and experience the “Yelp Effect” may find themselves with a new, but welcome, problem: a waitlist.

NOTES

1. “An Introduction to Yelp Metrics as of March 1, 2018”; <https://www.yelp.com/factsheet> (accessed April 1, 2018).
2. “Yelp for Business Owners”; <http://www.biz.yelp.com> (accessed June 12, 2017).
3. “Local Consumer Review Survey, 2017”; <https://www.brightlocal.com/learn/local-consumer-review-survey/> (accessed June 20, 2017).
4. Michael Luca, “Reviews, Reputation, and Revenue: The Case of Yelp.com,” *Harvard Business School Working Paper*, No. 12-016 (September 2011).

5. "An Introduction to Yelp Metrics as of March 1, 2018."
6. "Q1 2018 Yelp Shareholder Letter"; <http://www.yelp-ir.com/static-files/4c4c615f-5cbb-494c-8a84-9859a42766e5> (accessed May 15, 2018).
7. Kevin Smith, "How businesses are seeking revenge against negative Yelp reviews with lawsuits," *San Gabriel Valley Tribune* (posted 7/28/16); <http://www.dailynews.com/business/20160728/how-businesses-are-seeking-revenge-against-negative-yelp-reviews-with-lawsuits> (accessed June 27, 2017).
8. Danit Ein-Gar, Baba Shiv, and Zakary L. Tormala, "When Blemishing Leads to Blossoming: The Positive Effect of Negative Information," *Journal of Consumer Research, Inc.* 38 (February 2012): 846.
9. "Yelp for Business Owners: Responding to Reviews"; https://biz.yelp.com/support/responding_to_reviews (accessed June 28, 2017).
10. Brian Patterson, "Writing a Yelp review that won't get filtered" (9/26/16); <http://marketingland.com/writing-yelp-review-wont-get-filtered-192704> (accessed June 28, 2017).
11. "Yelp's Recommendation Software Explained"; <https://www.yelpblog.com/2010/03/yelp-review-filter-explained> (accessed June 29, 2017).
12. "Yelp Reports Fourth Quarter and Full Year 2017 Financial Results"; [http://www.yelp-ir.com/news-releases/news-](http://www.yelp-ir.com/news-releases/news-release-details/yelp-reports-fourth-quarter-and-full-year-2017-financial-results)

[release-details/yelp-reports-fourth-quarter-and-full-year-2017-financial-results](http://www.yelp-ir.com/news-releases/news-release-details/yelp-reports-fourth-quarter-and-full-year-2017-financial-results) (accessed February 2, 2018).

Melissa Treinkman, mezzo, is an active performer and teacher in the Los Angeles area. Since 2011, Melissa has been a regular member of the LA Opera Chorus. In 2013, she made her solo mainstage debut with the company as the Vendor in *Carmen*, a role she reprised in the 2017/2018 season. In 2015, she was seen on the LA Opera mainstage as a Featured Ensemble singer in *The Ghosts of Versailles*, which won two Grammy awards for Best Opera Recording and Best Engineered Album, Classical. Melissa has also been frequent performer with LA Opera's Education & Community Engagement program and has been featured in recitals throughout Los Angeles. Also with that department, she performed as the mezzo soloist in multiple outreach tours of "Verdi Opera Tales" and "Figaro Opera Tales." In 2017, Melissa sang the role of Siren in Heidi Duckler Dance Theater's premiere of *On the Waterfront*, a newly commissioned dance opera by Juhi Bansal. She has also been an apprentice artist with the Utah Opera, Sarasota Opera, Opera North, Cedar Rapids Opera Theater, and Chicago Opera Theater.

Melissa holds a Bachelor of Music from Northwestern University and a Master of Music from DePaul University. She is currently pursuing her DMA at the University of Southern California, where she holds the position of Head Teaching Assistant in Vocal Arts. Melissa is also proud to share her passion for voice pedagogy as the President of SNATS at USC. She maintains a vibrant private voice studio in Venice, California and has been on the voice faculty of the Idyllwild Arts Summer Program since 2011. For more info, visit: www.VoiceByMelissa.com.



JOIN OUR AWARD-WINNING OPERA & MUSIC THEATER PROGRAM

Now offering a Master of Music in Voice Performance
Professional summer internships with Utah Festival Opera & Musical Theatre

Generous Scholarships & Assistantships available
Nationally recognized guest artists such as Kelly O'Hara

G A I N E
COLLEGE
of the **ARTS**
UtahStateUniversity™

Contact Errik Hood for audition information at errik.hood@usu.edu
MUSIC.USU.EDU/STUDENTS/ADMISSIONS-AUDITIONS

Cindy Dewey
Music Department Head & Voice Area Faculty

Errik Hood
Voice & Opera Program Coordinator

Sara Chiesa
Vocal Coach, Music Director