Social Web sites face transparency questions

March 22 2009, By RACHEL METZ , AP Technology Writer

(AP) -- Yelp.com prides itself on being a site where people can write reviews about pretty much anything and connect with similarly critical peers. Yet as the site grows, some of the businesses scrutinized on Yelp are turning the tables and griping about the company itself.

The complaints highlight an irony for Web sites that stimulate online communities and let users speak their minds. As the sites make the world more transparent, giving people the power to discuss everything from a great pizza to a bad date, the sites' own transparency is often questionable, as consumers and businesses struggle to understand how they operate.

This tug of war has become increasingly public with the explosive popularity of social Web sites like Facebook, Twitter and MySpace, as well as niche sites like Yelp, which has more than 5 million reviews on establishments in dozens of cities.

Properly balancing the interests of various constituencies - and retaining their loyalty, perhaps through improved channels of communications - will prove key to whether the sites can grow into vibrant, moneymaking operations for years to come.

Many sites have expanded so fast that explanations about what they are doing often come late - after their users have had plenty of time to air complaints. Facebook has felt such growing pains, and now Yelp is, too.

One big gripe from businesses that get reviewed on Yelp is that they

don't quite get how it works.

For instance, some wonder why users' reviews can seemingly mysteriously disappear from Yelp's pages about a business.

This irks Leslie Tagorda, owner of a San Francisco-based [Web design](#) company, Flair-Designs. She has noticed reviews vanish from the Flair-Designs page on Yelp over the past two years. This worries her because the more reviews she has, the more calls she gets from potential clients, she said.

When she first noticed reviews disappearing, Tagorda contacted clients who had written the comments, to see whether they had deleted them. They said they had not.

She e-mailed Yelp and was directed to the business owners' section of the site. Not satisfied, she aired her issues by writing a review of Yelp itself on Yelp's business page, giving the site two out of a possible five stars.

She wrote that although she likes using Yelp as a consumer, as a business owner "Yelp just about `sucks it.'"

At last she got a more personal message from Yelp's chief executive and co-founder, Jeremy Stoppelman. He explained that consumer reviews may be removed by an automated program that is designed to filter out reviews the site considers untrustworthy, such as sniping that a pizzeria owner might write about a competitor.

Tagorda was satisfied with Stoppelman's response but still wanted people to see what she felt were legitimate reviews that Yelp had hidden. So Tagorda put up a post on Yelp about her own business, indicating the names of users whose Flair-Designs reviews have disappeared. If you

search for those users, you might be able to find their reviews of Flair-Designs under their personal profiles.

So far, her post about Yelp has stayed up, and she recently added a star to that review, updating it to say she's "becoming a little happier with Yelp as a business owner." Still, the whole episode has her feeling murky about the site.

"I think they should be clearer about how reviews are displayed on people's profiles and what happens with bad reviews," she said.

Stoppelman defended the quiet way Yelp takes some reviews down, saying that if the company offered a more detailed explanation of the process, people might be able to get around it. (Online retailer Amazon.com Inc. also uses an automated program to filter user reviews, though Yelp's main competitor in the business-review market, Citysearch, does not.)

Stoppelman acknowledges that the fluctuation of the site's reviews "flusters and surprises a lot of business owners." Some explanations are in the site's "frequently asked questions," but not everyone reads those.

"We need to figure out how we make this bonk-you-over-the-head obvious so that everybody understands, `Look, this is going to happen,'" he said.

However, Stoppelman believes there will always be tension between Yelp and business owners because consumers are creating the content, which is inherently unpredictable.

Recent news reports have cited other disagreements over Yelp, including allegations from businesses that Yelp offered to obscure negative reviews or move up positive ones in exchange for advertising dollars.

Yelp denies it and blames a misunderstanding.

To try to smooth over such rough spots, Yelp is investing more resources in bringing business owners into the fold after spending its initial years building up its reviewing community. The company recently beefed up the "About Us" section of its Web site, exchanging a straightforward biography of the company for a list of 10 things visitors should know about Yelp. This section now links to Stoppelman's blog and to a new "Myths About Yelp" page. Yelp also hopes to hire a local business outreach manager.

Yelp is not the only social site grappling with transparency.

Facebook tackled it most recently after thousands of its more than 175 million users protested a quietly made policy change that appeared to let Facebook gain more control of photos, messages and other information that people share on the site.

Facebook Chief Executive Mark Zuckerberg responded by assuring users that they, not Facebook, own their content. The site also decided to let users play a "meaningful role" in determining shifts in Facebook's policies.

LiveJournal Inc., a pioneer in blogging, also invited input from users before finalizing major policy changes last year. And LiveJournal - which is owned by Russia-based media company SUP and has 2.2 million active user accounts - created an eight-person board to advise the site about its operations. The board includes two LiveJournal users elected by its community.

Transparency is an important question for social Web sites as they plot ways to grow and make money. How much of their copious amounts of user information should they make available to advertisers who want to

reach certain types of customers? Already, for example, Facebook and News Corp.'s MySpace let advertisers target users by characteristics like gender, location or interests. The challenge will be how to please advertisers without creeping users out.

Of course, you can't please everybody all the time. Lee Rainie, director of the Pew Internet & American Life Project, thinks social media sites are in a trial and error phase, hoping to figure out what their various stakeholders will tolerate.

"Right now, it's much more of a free for all," he said, "because the rules aren't clear."

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