

Law firms' views of customer review sites

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Access Panel - Executive summary

To capture solicitors' views on and their use of review and price comparison websites for legal services, we devised a questionnaire. The Access Group circulated a link to this online questionnaire to their panel members; 264 respondents took part in the survey; 198 completed the questionnaire in full and 66 partially completed it.

These data show that 44% of firms direct clients to submit a review on a review website, 56% do not. The number of partners in a firm and, in many cases, the area of law the firm operates in has no bearing on this. The websites that firms most commonly refer clients to are Google Reviews, ReviewSolicitors and Trustpilot. A quarter of respondents that direct their clients to submit a review on a review website use paid-for subscriptions, mainly using ReviewSolicitors and Trustpilot. Those using free review websites tend to use Google Reviews.

Reasons for not directing clients to leave reviews on review websites centred around:

- not needing to as they had alternative feedback systems in place
- concerns about fake or negative reviews
- client confidentiality curbing their ability to respond to feedback.

Comments mentioned the lack of oversight allowing disgruntled former clients and non-clients to post untrue reviews. Respondents also felt that firms with large marketing budgets can pay to appear in searches and have negative reviews removed, leading to an unlevel playing field.

Two-thirds of respondents that use review websites do so to attract new clients and more than half use them to reassure clients/demonstrate provision. More than half also identify good performance via review sites although this is more prevalent among those with paid-for subscriptions. Just over half of respondents receive automated messages advising them of a new review and the majority of respondents respond to reviews within one working day. Three quarters of respondents are satisfied with the review website that they mainly use – satisfaction being higher among respondents with paid-for subscriptions than those using free services.

When asked whether their organisation routinely monitors online platforms and discussion forums for reviews and feedback about their organisation, just under half do. Google Reviews is the most common site looked at, with 88% of people checking for reviews here. Just over half

look at Facebook and around a third check ReviewSolicitors or Trustpilot. The main reasons cited for doing this is to identify areas for improvement and identify good performance.

Thirty-six firms advised of changes they had made because of client feedback. A third of these have improved communication and/or client service and other changes include improvements to their reception area, staff training and encouraging reviews as they like the positive feedback.

A little more than half of respondents have concerns about managing online reviews and feedback; the number of partners at a firm does not impact on this. Reasons for these concerns reflect the reasons for not using review websites:

- managing negative/unfair/untrue feedback
- reviews from non-clients
- balancing with regulatory requirements.

Respondents that direct clients to review sites are significantly more concerned about receiving negative reviews from clients that did not get the result they wanted than respondents that do not direct their clients to leave reviews. Respondents not directing clients to review sites are more concerned about having insufficient time to monitor reviews than those that direct clients to review sites.

Just one firm currently engages a price comparison site to provide quotations to prospective clients; they reported no benefit and were very dissatisfied with the website used. Respondents explained that they do not feel price comparison sites can be used to effectively portray legal services as price is not the only important variable and each case is different making comparison difficult. They raised concerns that firms might use inexperienced staff to complete work to keep fees low which could result in poor service; 'race to the bottom' was mentioned frequently. Respondents feel it is not often possible to offer an accurate price at the outset having not meet with the client as there are many unknowns.

This survey suggests that solicitors do not view price comparison sites is a viable tool for the legal market. Some firms have benefited from review websites capturing new enquiries and adapting their offer based on client feedback. However, concerns remain about dealing with unfair reviews and the possibility of manipulating reviews and rankings with subscriptions. One respondent who is using a free subscription to Google Reviews has benefited from this by cancelling negative comments posted by non-clients and opponents in litigation. However, others have had difficulty removing reviews. Speaking to review website providers to understand how solicitors can deal with inaccurate reviews and making this information more widely available, might allay concerns in this area.

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Overview

The Access Group provide software and case management support to 3,500 firms through their Access Legal package. As part of the Quality Indicators Pilot, to capture views on review and price comparison websites, we developed an on-line questionnaire, the link to which was issued by the Access Group to members of their panel. The link was issued 21 September 2021 and the survey remained open until the end of October 2021.

Sample

A total of 264 responses were received: 198 complete and 66 partial. The 264 responses came from firms offering the following services:

- Wills, Trust and Probate (67%)
- Conveyancing (66%)
- Family (56%)
- Commercial property (55%)
- Employment (48%)
- Company and commercial (40%)
- Personal injury (35%)
- Immigration (12%)
- Money and tax (9%)
- Other (32%).

Eighty-five 'other' responses were cited, some stating multiple areas of law not pre-coded on the questionnaire, generating 99 'other' areas of law. Of these, 23% cited 'civil litigation' and 15% each stated 'criminal' and 'dispute resolution'. Seven per cent stated 'commercial', 6% stated 'care', 5% each stated 'housing' and 'regulatory' and 4% each stated clinical negligence, debt recovery and financial mis-selling. The remaining areas each mentioned by 1% of respondents are compensation, maritime, charity, insolvency, licensing, wills only, various others, all, chancery, and equine.

The sample includes firms from all over the UK and of differing sizes. Sole practitioners made up 11% of the sample, with a further 38% having 2-4 partners, meaning just under half the sample have fewer than five partners. Twenty per cent have 5-10 partners, 18% 11-25 partners, 6% have 26-50 partners leaving 7% with more than 50 partners.

Review websites

Use of review websites

When asked whether their organisation directs clients to submit a review on a review website:



- 44% do (n=232)
- 56% do not.

When comparing the likelihood of firms with fewer than five partners and those with five or more partners referring clients to review websites, the difference is not significant at the 95% confidence interval: ie the number of partners in a firm is unlikely to have a bearing on the likelihood of a firm referring clients to review websites to leave a review. However, sample sizes by number of partners in a firm are small so this might not be reliable.

The areas of law a firm operates in also makes little difference to whether clients are directed to leave a review on a review website. Just over half of firms operating in employment (51% n=116), family (52% n=133) and personal injury (52% n=84) direct clients to submit a review on a review website. The figure is around 45% for all other areas of law except for immigration where 36% of firms (n=28) direct clients to leave reviews. Sample sizes by area of law are low and therefore less likely to be reliable, but firms dealing with personal injury, family and employment law are significantly more likely (at the 95% confidence interval) to ask clients to leave a review on a review website than firms dealing with immigration. Differences between other areas of law are not significant.

Reasons given for not directing clients to leave reviews on review websites are as follows (n=130):

- 49% have alternative systems in place
- 45% are concerned about fake reviews (for example left by the party on other side)
- 39% are concerned reviews will be based on outcome rather than quality
- 38% are concerned about client confidentiality
- 19% are concerned about time taken/lack of resource to respond to reviews
- 14% don't think customer reviews are appropriate for legal services
- 13% had not thought about it/weren't aware
- 11% are concerned about negative reviews.

Twenty-eight 'other' reasons were given for not directing clients to leave reviews on review websites. Most were single comments, but five comments mentioned not having had time to implement anything and a further four comments stated that client recommendations are sufficient for their business. Single comments fall into three areas: further explanation of concerns about negative reviews, issues with the mechanics of review sites, and that reviews are not appropriate for legal services. Solicitors mentioned historic issues of difficulty removing negative and fake reviews, including: how one negative review can cause 'serious damage to an otherwise good reputation', having been trolled in

the past along with having no right to reply, and concerns over reviews being left by third parties rather than clients.

Costs of using review sites being too high for sole practitioners (costs are the same irrespective of firm size) and the ability to pay to increase a firm's visibility were seen to make the playing field unlevel. One firm has made a deliberate decision not to have a website. Some solicitors mentioned clients place value in other areas and that such websites are inappropriate for legal services themselves having "considerable reservations about customer reviews for legal services". One felt this will encourage 'yes men', not quality of appropriate advice in sensitive areas, and another felt it would generate unsolicited requests that they could not serve.

Respondents were asked which review website they direct clients to most frequently. Three websites stand out (n=102):

- Google review (49%)
- ReviewSolicitors (25%)
- Trustpilot (19%).

Facebook is used by 3% of respondents, and 1% each use Reviews.io and Feefo. One firm puts emails they receive on LinkedIn and the other uses Yellow Pages.

When asked whether they are using free or paid-for subscriptions for the review website they most frequently direct clients to:

- 59% use a free review web service (n=102)
- 24% use a paid-for subscription
- 17% aren't sure.

Of the 24 respondents using paid-for subscriptions, 13 are using ReviewSolicitors, eight are using Trustpilot and one each use Google reviews, Reviews.io and Feefo. Among the 60 respondents using free services, 42 (70%) are using Google reviews, seven each use Trustpilot and ReviewSolicitors, one uses Facebook and three use other websites (Yell/LinkedIn).

Benefits of review websites

Respondents were shown a list of possible benefits and were asked to select which they had experienced from using the review website they most frequently direct clients to (n=98):

- Attracting new clients (66%)
- Reassuring clients/demonstrating provision (56%)
- Identification of good performance (53%)
- Identifying areas for improvement (39%)
- Supporting staff performance reviews (20%)



- Identifying training needs (15%)
- Attracting high quality staff (11%)
- I'm not aware of any benefits (9%)
- Other (3%).

'Other' comments included 'don't know', 'improved SEO' and the ability to cancel negative reviews posted by non-clients and opponents in litigation. This latter respondent uses a free subscription to Google Reviews.

Looking at the benefits gained from pointing clients at a specific review website and comparing this with whether they are using a paid-for or free subscription reflects the top two bullets above – solicitors are using these sites to attract new clients and demonstrate provision. While sample sizes are low, these data show that solicitors with paid-for subscriptions are significantly more likely than those using free services to also identify good performance and identify areas for improvement (95% confidence interval) from these sites.

Attracting new clients and demonstrating provision also feature highly as benefits gained from directing clients to the top three cited review websites – Google, Trustpilot and ReviewSolicitors. However, when comparing benefits cited from each main review site solicitors are directing clients to, the only significant difference is seen between Google (40% n=47) and ReviewSolicitors (72% n=25) for identifying good performance. Other than this, these data show that the main review site clients are directed to does not impact on the benefits gained.

Responding to reviews

When asked how frequently respondents check for reviews on the review website they direct clients to most frequently (n=97):

- 51% receive automated messages
- 16% check daily
- 13% at least weekly
- 2% fortnightly
- 12% less often
- 6% don't check.

Respondents' promptness of responding to reviews on this website (n=91) is as follows:

- 56% within one working day
- 15% within two working days
- 10% within a week
- 1% within two weeks
- 4% longer than two weeks
- 13% don't respond to reviews.



Respondents receiving automated messages when a review is received are significantly more likely than those not receiving automated messages to respond within one working day (at 95% confidence interval). Seventy-one per cent of respondents that typically respond to reviews within one working day (n=51) receive automated messages.

Satisfaction with review websites

When asked overall, how satisfied are you with the review website that you mainly use, responses are as follows (n=97):

- 29% very satisfied
- 46% satisfied
- 22% neither
- 3% dissatisfied.

Looking at these data by the review website respondents' direct clients towards most frequently shows that only Trustpilot and Google reviews receive scores for 'dissatisfied', each having just one dissatisfied respondent. One respondent citing 'other' when asked which review website they use points clients at both Trustpilot and Google and is dissatisfied with the review website they use. Sample sizes are low for each review site so data might not be reliable. Of the 46 respondents directing their clients to Google reviews, 70% are satisfied (very satisfied/satisfied); satisfaction with Trustpilot is 78% (n=18) and 84% for ReviewSolicitors (n=25). Each of the three Facebook users are very satisfied with the website as are each of the single users of Review.io and Feefo.

Cross tabulating satisfaction scores with whether a subscription is paid for using the review website shows that all respondents (n=23) using paid-for subscriptions are satisfied (very satisfied/satisfied) with the website they are using. Two-thirds of respondents using free review websites (n=56) are satisfied (very satisfied/satisfied) with the review website they are using, with three respondents being dissatisfied. The difference in satisfaction scores between those using a paid-for subscription and those using free services is significant at the 95% confidence interval.

Monitoring for and use of client feedback on other review websites

In addition to any review website that solicitors might direct clients towards to leave reviews, respondents were asked whether their organisation routinely monitors for reviews and feedback about their organisation on review websites or other online platforms, such as discussion forums. Just under half of respondents do (n=222):

- 47% yes



- 53% no.

Respondents were shown a list and asked to indicate which platforms they monitor (multiple response n=104):

- Google reviews (88%)
- Facebook reviews (53%)
- ReviewSolicitors (39%)
- Trustpilot (32%)
- Solicitor.info (7%)
- The Good Solicitor Guide (3%)
- Three Best Rated (3%)
- Reviews.io (2%)
- Feefo (2%)
- Vouched for (1%).

'Other' mentioned by nine respondents include Glassdoor, Yahoo, Yell.com and soliciting feedback directly with a Microsoft forms survey or from their own website. One firm stated they have a Google alert on their firm's name.

Respondents were asked what they use client feedback for (multiple response, n=104):

- 86% to identify areas for improvement
- 84% to identify good performance
- 56% to attract new clients
- 44% to identify training needs
- 42% to reassure clients/demonstrate provision
- 20% to reward good performance
- 12% to attract high quality staff.

When asked to advise of something that client reviews or feedback have prompted them to change, 36 respondents provided an open-ended comment. Some made multiple points in their comments generating 40 responses overall:

- 20% have improved communication
- 15% now encourage reviews (as they like receiving positive feedback)
- 15% have not yet made any changes
- 13% have improved client service
- 13% publicise reviews internally and notify staff of feedback
- 10% have provided staff reminders or training
- 5% have improved their reception provision.

Changes mentioned relating to communication and client service included: amending the frequency of client updates, providing greater clarity in certain areas, learning how to better manage client

expectations and combining information so that fewer letters are required.

Concerns managing online review feedback

Respondents were asked whether their organisation has concerns about managing online reviews and feedback from clients (n=215):

- 55% yes
- 45% no.

In firms with fewer than five partners, 56% have concerns about managing online reviews. This figure is 44% for firms with five or more partners but the difference is not significant at the 95% confidence interval. Based on these data, the size of the firm does not impact concerns managing on-line reviews and feedback.

Respondents with concerns about managing on-line reviews and feedback were shown a list of issues and were asked to rank those that concerned them in order of importance. The resulting rankings are as follows:

1. Managing feedback that you believe is unfair or untrue.
2. People leaving negative reviews because despite your best efforts, they did not get the outcome they wanted.
3. People who are not your clients leaving reviews about your organisation.
4. Balancing client reviews with regulatory requirements such as client confidentiality.
5. Possible reputational damage if a review is left unanswered.
6. Not having enough time to monitor for new reviews or to respond to them.
7. The costs of subscribing to a review website.
8. Duplication with existing client feedback mechanisms.

The chart below shows the proportion of all respondents that are concerned with the issues listed. More than a third have concerns with managing unfair, untrue or non-client feedback as well as negative reviews based on outcome rather than service/amount of work involved. Just under a third have concerns about balancing client reviews with regulatory requirements such as client confidentiality.

Concerns with management of client reviews/feedback (n=264)

Duplication with existing methods	23%
Subscription costs	25%
Insufficient time to monitor	26%
Reputational damage if unanswered	28%



Balance with regulatory requirements	32%
Negative due to outcome	35%
Non-client reviews	36%
Managing unfair/untrue feedback	38%

By totalling the number of times an issue is ranked (in any position from 1 to 8), and cross tabulating this with whether the firm directs clients to leave reviews on review websites, shows two areas of significant difference. Among firms that direct clients to leave reviews on review websites (n=205), concerns about receiving negative reviews because, despite their best efforts the client did not get the outcome they wanted, accounts for 28% of responses. This figure is 14% among firms that do not direct clients to review websites (n=467) and the difference is significant at the 95% confidence interval. Having insufficient time to monitor responses accounts for 12% of concerns among those who do not direct clients to review websites and 7% among those that do. Again, this difference is significant at the 95% confidence interval.

Respondents were invited to add any further concerns they have. Fifteen respondents left comments, three of which did not feel review websites are appropriate for the legal market. three felt the lack of regulation of review sites could negatively impact business and two felt review websites could lead to a reduction in service. Other single comments felt there are too many review sites to monitor, they increase overheads and add pressure. Comments included:

'It feels like the 'latest thing' and lacks depth/insight. I don't think it is as easy for a client to assess the performance of their solicitor as it is for a customer to review their holiday on Trip Adviser or the performance of their Uber Driver or mechanic: much of what we do is not known or understood by clients and poor solicitors can impress by behaviours other solicitors or the SRA would frown upon, whereas good solicitors might fail to impress because they may lack charm and yet be tremendous lawyers doing a first class job. It really is a difficult area for a lay person to assess and handy bitesize approach of reviews seems inappropriate.'

'The more we seek to commoditise legal services such that they are capable of very simple review the more we generate commodity-based behaviour and dumb down the service and encourage poor service and advice.'

'Asking regulated firms to engage with an unregulated online review market will create barriers to managing reviews successfully in that firms will never be able to give their side of the story (if a negative review is left) because of confidentiality. Law is such a complex area and full of misunderstanding and unsubstantiated opinions from the public, the truth is easily lost in the virtual environment. There must be an option for law firms to be able to pause or temporarily hide reviews from the public



whilst an issue is resolved behind the scenes, otherwise we will be sitting ducks for the 'keyboard' warriors out there. From experience we had an average review left in Google from someone who has never been a client and has a history of being a 'virtual tour guide' in their profile. They just left a star rating. These are people that leave hundreds of reviews without comment. When we challenged Google, they refused to remove it saying it was a legitimate review when clearly it wasn't. We had no recourse to challenge.'

'History of review sites 'blackmailing' firms into paying a subscription as the only way to redress inaccurate or unfair negative reviews.'

Price comparison websites

Respondents were asked whether their organisation currently engages with a price comparison website or similar on-line platform to provide quotations to prospective clients (n=210). One 5-10 partner firm does this using Local Surveyors Direct for conveyancing. They have not seen any benefit - 'the cheapest quote is what clients seek.' They are very dissatisfied with the price comparison site.

- 0.5% yes engage a price comparison website
- 99.5% no.

Respondents not using price comparison sites to provide quotations for potential clients were shown a list of possible reasons for not doing so and were asked to select which applied to them (n=209):

- 68% I don't believe I can communicate the quality of our service through a price comparison site.
- 48% I don't think they are appropriate for legal services.
- 46% I don't think we can provide accurate quotes based on the information provided.
- 34% I think consumers will choose the cheapest option.
- 19% I think I would be put under pressure to reduce my prices.
- 16% I've never thought about it/wasn't aware.
- 10% I don't think customer use them.

Thirty-seven 'other' comments were provided as to why firms are not providing quotations. These centred around each client requirement being different and current price comparison sites not providing all the necessary information or being able to capture sufficient information. Six stated that their work is bespoke and therefore fixed prices are not offered, one further respondent mentioned they offered estimates not quotations and one stated it is impossible to provide meaningful estimates without taking instruction. Four stated that legal services providers are not all the same and the price comparison sites do not allow for nuances, and three further comments stated that matters are too complex and therefore not suitable for such sites. Three respondents stated this was not appropriate for chambers or corporate clients. A

further four respondents mentioned that the competition does not always include everything which makes them look more expensive in comparison. This they felt was contributing to a price centric market resulting in a race to the bottom.

Related links

- [Findings - Attitudes to comparison websites for legal services](https://guidance.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/law-firm-access-panel/)
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