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Zany Celeb Quote Restaurateur Created Unique Yelp Strategy After Writing 1K+ Responses

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Winnie's

Staff call him the “Yelp Whisperer”

Turns out, the restaurateur who responded to Winnie’s Lobby Bar’s Yelp reviews entirely with celebrity quotes is a seasoned Yelp responder. In fact, Stephen Maly — who does special operations for In Good Company and also works as a New York firefighter — has responded to more than 1,000 Yelp reviews for the hospitality group’s bars and restaurants, including Parker and Quinn, Park Avenue Tavern, and Trademark. “They call me the ‘Yelp Whisperer,’” Maly says.

Most of his responses are pretty standard fare, unlike the special celebrity quote ones he finds for Winnie’s. He decided to take a different tactic with the lobby bar at the Refinery Hotel because it attracts an older, more sophisticated, and more particular clientele than the hospitality group’s other businesses, he says. The customers there tend to ask more questions about the drinks, or the hotel itself, Maly says. “They just have a thirst for knowledge,” he says. “They’re very inquisitive.” Maly grew up hearing inspirational quotes from his mother, who was an English teacher and poetry junkie, and since she passed away, he and his father sometimes exchange them. He loves a good quote, and he thought Winnie’s customers might be the type of people who would appreciate them, too.

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Many of the 26 Yelpers that he responded to have privately messaged him afterward to continue the conversation, he says. Some of them even send quotes of their own, leading

to a short back and forth exchange of favorite quotes. It makes Winnie's Yelp review page Maly's favorite one to check.

Maly sometimes spends a good 45 minutes seeking out a quote related to something that a Yelper says, and it's partly because In Good Company takes its Yelp reviews seriously, he says. **Servers and bartenders receive bonuses based on a system that takes restaurant and bar Yelp reviews into account.** If staff notice customers writing a Yelp review on their phones, they notify a manager. Maly even receives notifications when a new review goes up — all strategies that have helped them fix an issue while the customer's still there, he says. "It's been a great tool for us," Maly says. "Any owner-operator who says they hate Yelp is probably someone who's not doing the best they can to provide the proper hospitality." All but one of the company's bars has at least four stars.

That's not to say he doesn't understand the frustration of Yelp. Like many restaurateurs, he wishes people who have issues with the restaurant would just make it known to a manager immediately instead of waiting until they leave to write about it. But he's come to enjoy the time and effort he puts into Yelp, and he gets why people do it. "You have to understand," he says, "a lot of the negative Yelpers are just trying to get their voice heard."