GUIDE TO ONLINE REVIEW & REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

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Franchise Edition

LOCALCLARITY UNIVERSITY //
PLAYBOOK FOR REVIEW & REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

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SPECIAL ISSUES RELATED TO FRANCHISE REVIEW MONITORING & RESPONSES

Franchise businesses face unique challenges in maintaining a high level of customer satisfaction across franchise locations. With many locations to account for, franchisors must set high standards and provide clear guidelines for franchisees. Online review and reputation management can be an especially difficult endeavor for many franchise businesses.

However, with effective monitoring tools, franchises can easily track operations at each location, gain customer insights, understand what needs improvement, identify star performers and laggards, and improve each location's search performance. Franchise businesses should consider the following elements of a sound online review and reputation management strategy:

ANALYZE YOUR ONLINE BRAND REPUTATION

The first step in a strategic reputation management effort is to identify the current strengths and weaknesses of your brands, as expressed by the highly engaged customer base sharing ratings and reviews. What are customers saying about your business? How is your business ranked across platforms? Performing an initial audit can be difficult without having the right expertise and systems in place. One helpful way to overcome this challenge is by taking advantage of the many introductory offers made by reputation management companies. LocalClarity, for example, offers a free trial that includes a detailed review of your entire review history (going back up to 10 years), regional reports, sentiment analysis, local search exposure, and any spikes in activity over the last 24 months.

Understanding your online presence can be overwhelming, so it's important to take a methodical approach. Start with Google Local Reviews first. It's already one of the top review platforms for every industry, and the incredible growth of the Google Local Guides Program (from 5 million to 50 million members worldwide in just 12 months) assures that it will continue to gain ground on other programs. It is also the one program that also has a material impact on the exposure that every franchise location can achieve in search results. Every franchise should realize that a limited quantity of reviews or poor reviews scores will absolutely reduce inclusion in Google Map and local search results.

Once an analysis of Google is complete, you can look for variances between customer feedback on Google and Facebook to try to uncover difference in customer sentiment by platform usage.

CONDUCT A COMPETITION SENTIMENT AUDIT

Understanding your online brand reputation isn't just confined to what your customers are saying about your business. Reputation is contextual, and it matters what customers think about competitors in your market. If your reviews are average but competitors' reviews are still outperforming, then your business has some work to do.

Franchises with a small set of key competitors can do a competitor review ratio by identifying the ratio of 5-Star vs 1-Star reviews that contain the competitor name. Anything less than 400% (after all, these are your customers) might be a danger sign that your customers will be defecting. After all, competition is ultimately about consumer choices.

CONSIDER THE OUTLIERS IN ONLINE REVIEWS

Analyzing your brand's online reputation and customer reviews can tell you a lot about your business. But, in order to learn something useful from online reviews, companies need to know what to look for.

One way to examine online reviews is by considering the outliers. The outliers can include especially positive or negative reviews. If one franchise is consistently receiving negative reviews, it's clear that something is going wrong at that location. Perhaps, one employee is delivering poor customer service. On the other hand, very positive reviews for a franchise show

that they're doing something right. Companies should learn from individual locations that are outperforming. These lessons can be shared across the franchise business to improve performance.

BREAK DOWN REVIEWS BY SUBJECT

Online reviews for franchise locations often exhibit certain patterns. For example, reviews for a popular location might consistently mention superior customer service or a high-quality product. Customers may notice the same qualities that make a business successful.

Negative online reviews can also exhibit similar themes. To get a better sense of how customers view your business, break down the reviews by subject. Poor customer service, high price, slow service or low-quality product—these are all comments that often appear in negative customer reviews.

Determine which types are repeated most often across review sites. This will help you get a better sense of areas that require improvement. Visualizing and publishing this data will allow franchises to optimize their business process. When breaking down reviews by subject, consider both the positive and negative reviews.

MONITORING IS ESSENTIAL

An effective franchise review management strategy cannot function properly without regular monitoring. Monitoring and insights are key to understanding how consumers view your business, and clear data is the only way to legitimately measure success.

In the "Comprehensive Guide to Customer Reviews and Online Reputation Management," we explain how you can employ metrics to better understand how customers view and engage with your business. These metrics include rating volume change, star rating change, words per review and Google Maps search inclusion.

MONTHLY ONLINE BRAND REPUTATION AUDIT

Analyzing online brand reputation on an ongoing basis is even more important for franchisors. Managing reviews across franchises can be challenging, and maintaining a uniform level of customer satisfaction requires diligent work and careful attention.

It's a good idea to conduct a monthly online brand reputation analysis. This analysis should be similar to the one conducted at the outset of the process. Monthly analysis of review response performance creates a standard basis for measurement and reporting. Since this task can be a challenge, franchises should consider how a reputation management company like LocalClarity can optimize their reputation management processes.

HOW TO REPLY TO ONLINE REVIEWS

Responding to online customer reviews is an essential part of online reputation management. Both positive and negative reviews require a response from your business. Professional and well-crafted responses to customer reviews can enhance a franchise's relationship with customers and lead to increased sales.

In particular, our guide to online review and reputation management focuses on best practices and strategies in responding to reviews. We offer tips to respond to both positive and negatives reviews and provide relevant examples. The guide also discusses special circumstances such as dealing with fake reviews that can be valuable to franchise owners.

USE FRANCHISEE COMPETITION AS MOTIVATION

Franchises are uniquely positioned to use internal competition to their advantage. Unlike a company with a single location, a franchise business can motivate individual franchise locations by measuring and publicizing performance results.

Using this peer pressure, franchisors can incentivize individual franchise locations to improve customer service and overall results. Business owners can even consider rewarding or recognizing franchises that outperform other locations.

Of course, this motivational tool is based on effective monitoring of customer reviews. We'll talk more about effective strategies for reporting and insights throughout this guide.

DEVELOP A STRATEGY FOR REVIEW ANALYSIS

The goal for any franchise should be to 1) monitor customer feedback and insights, and 2) maximize the number of positive reviews left by customers to drive new and repeat customers. Specific to franchise businesses, teams may need to approach these goals as separate step or processes.

The parent organization needs confirmation that individual franchisees are living up to brand policies and customer satisfaction requirements. So the act of monitoring and gaining marketing research can be an "end goal" at the corporate level. Franchises need to decide which department spearheads the monitoring effort. It could be Marketing, Franchisee Management, Social Media, etc.

Responsibility for review responses might be at the corporate level or at the franchisee level. Ideally, it is a combination of corporate language with a local flare to make certain that each customer is treated personally. In any case. its imperative that the entire organization gains an appreciation for the power insights contained within the data.

DEVELOP A STRATEGY FOR REVIEW GENERATION

Unfortunately, customers are often more motivated to leave online reviews following negative experiences with a business. That's why it's so important to take control of your online reputation and engage customers about leaving feedback.

Companies should develop a coherent and structured program for soliciting online customer reviews. In other words, asking for customer reviews should become part of the standard operating procedure. Consider the following steps when developing an effective communications strategy across franchises:

- Select a channel (e.g., email, phone, in-person) to ask customers for online reviews.
- Decide which review platforms (e.g., Google, Yelp, Facebook) you'd like to prioritize when asking for reviews.
- Craft a message that helps guide the customer through the review process and makes it as easy as possible to leave valuable feedback.
- Choose when you'll send out the review request and how often you'll remind the customer to write a review.

When crafting a message for customers, it's critical that you give them the tools to make the process easy as possible. A direct link to your Google My Business page can be an effective shortcut that can be used whenever you contact customers for reviews. The link takes customers directly to your page and prompts them to leave a review. To simplify the process, LocalClarity has developed a Google Review Link Generator-tool that easily creates review links for any business location.

https://www.localclarity.com/resources/google-review-link/

SUMMARY

When it comes to engaging customers about online reviews, franchises can't forget the need for staff development and training. Talking to customers about feedback can be tricky at times, and it's essential that your entire team is up to speed with the standard operating procedures of your business.

Later in this guide, we'll discuss in depth the best practices for asking customers to leave online reviews.

DO	DON'T
Respond Quickly - strive for under 24 hours	Ignore the comments of your engaged customers
*****	*****
Keep your responses brief and to the point	Responod with a lengthy set of excuses
*****	*****
Take ownership of whatever the complaint is about	Deny that your company did anything wrong
*****	*****
If additional follow-up is needed, take it private	Contine the argument in a public space for all to see
*****	*****
Apologize. Even if you believe you have no fault	Write a defensive response or blame the reviewer
*****	*****
Offer to fix the problem in a reasonable timeframe	Threaten to sue or retaliate in any way
*****	*****
Follow up on any promises expressed	Manufacturer fake positive reviews
*****	*****
Ask for an update, edit or removal of review after resolution	Work hard to resolve the situation without trying to resolve the review

WHY SHOULD YOU CARE ABOUT ONLINE REVIEWS?

In today's digital age, it's no secret that a company's reputation is increasingly tied to its online presence. Every business, especially ones that operate locally, must cultivate a web presence that reinforces their brand.

Now more than ever, customers have the power to share their experience with a business online through websites like Google, Yelp and Facebook. These online tools are critical to expanding growth, but they also come with significant risks. In fact, customer reviews can make or break a company's reputation and success.

There are many reasons why a customer or client might leave an online review about a business. Typically, if a company doesn't actively engage customers for feedback, its online reviews will be motivated by very positive experiences or especially negative ones. One recent study found that 1 in 3 customers will post a negative online review following a bad experience with a business (Sprout). Often, these customers seek to publicly document their negative experience and warn prospective customers about a business's product or service.

Negative online reviews can become a major problem for a business when prospective customers use these reviews to determine whether or not to visit a business. According to Dimensional Research, 90% of surveyed customers reported that they read online reviews to determine the quality of a local business. While positive reviews can increase a business's popularity and growth, negative ones can harm its reputation and sales.

But that's not all. Online reviews of a business also increasingly influence its position in online search results. More reviews can help a company appear higher in search results on Google and Google Maps and ultimately make customers more likely to trust that business. Positive review scores lead to higher visibility in search results and more recommended customers at your door.

That's why it's so surprising that many companies don't engage with customers by responding to online reviews. This is a huge missed opportunity. Online reviews provide an opportunity to learn from customers about your business, reinforce your brand and build long-term relationships with customers. 52% of customers expect a response to their review in seven days or less (ReviewTrackers). Customers don't just appreciate a response to their reviews; they expect one.

This playbook covers exactly what companies needs to know about online customer reviews. It details everything from managing online reviews to responding and asking for them. By following these proven strategies, businesses can more effectively and professionally manage their online reputation. And most importantly, they can maximize the positive reviews that will keep customers coming through their doors.

WHY DO PEOPLE LEAVE ONLINE REVIEWS?

Before presenting recommendations on how to build and improve a company's reputation with customer reviews, it makes sense to first review why people tend to share their opinions in the first place.

J.M. Rensink, a researcher at the University of Twente, references research that identifies 7 motivations for engaging in positive and negative word of mouth in his paper on *What motivated people to write online reviews and which role does personality play*, .

When thinking about how and when to respond to any review ratings and comments, you should first assign the review to the underlying motivation and craft a response that accentuates the positive and addresses the negative - to both the writer and future potential customer who reads the review empathetically.

Product Involvement
A customer feels so strongly about the product that a pressure builds up in wanting to do something about it; recommending the product to others reduces the tension caused by the consumption experience.

Vengeance
To retaliate against the company associated with a negative consumption experience. This may include seeking compensation for the negative experience.

Anxiety Reduction
Easing anger, anxiety, and frustration

Self Enhancement
The product serves as a means through which the speaker can gratify certain emotional need. To gain attention, show connoisseurship, suggest status, give the impression of possessing inside information and assert superiority.

Altruism
The need to give something to the receiver, a genuine desire to help someone make a better decision.

Helping the Company
Result of a consumer's satisfaction with a product or service and a desire to help the company.

Advice Seeking
Obtaining advice on how to resolve problems

MANAGING ONLINE REVIEWS

MANAGING ONLINE REVIEWS

IDENTIFY ALL PLATFORMS

In order to successfully manage online reviews, a company must access the websites where customers leave reviews. The most popular review sites include Google, Yelp, Facebook, Trip Advisor and Twitter. By creating business pages on these sites, businesses can effectively track and respond to customer reviews.

In addition to the review sites mentioned above, many customers visit industry-specific websites to leave feedback about a product or service. Businesses should be aware of the review sites that pertain to their industry. For example, many patients will visit the website Healthgrades to leave reviews about doctors. Even popular sites like Yelp and TripAdvisor are more useful for some industries over others.

CLAIMING YOUR BUSINESS PAGE

The first step for any business, whether it has a single location or thousands, is to claim its business page. Many sites won't let businesses reply to customer reviews unless they claim or create a business page. Claiming your page is easy and provides access to several useful tools. It's also typically free.

To claim your business page, visit a review site and look for a link to create or claim your business page. For example, on Google, simply search for your business and click the link that reads "Claim this business." You'll then need to verify that the business is yours. If your business isn't already listed, you can easily create a new page.

Once you've created a business page, your company has access to tools that allow you to track reviews, communicate with customers and publicize information about your business. A company page is necessary for your business to appear in search results.

TRACKING ONLINE REVIEWS

There are several ways to keep track of online customer reviews. Many websites (e.g. Yelp, TripAdvisor, Facebook) allow you to set notifications when a customer posts a review. Google, for example, allows users to set "Google Alerts" that notify you when someone mentions your business name. Twitter allows users to easily search the platform for keywords.

Businesses can also hire a reputation management company to monitor, track and respond to online customer reviews. Since Google does not allow companies with more than ten locations to set notifications, these sophisticated tools can be especially helpful in monitoring online reviews and simplifying the process.

Time is of the essence in responding to online customer reviews, so it's important to have an up-to-date view of online review sites. Accurate and comprehensive monitoring of online reviews is needed to respond effectively and in a timely manner.

DECIDING WHO RESPONDS TO REVIEWS

It's a good idea to designate a specific individual or team to respond to online customer reviews. For small businesses, it makes sense to appoint one individual, while large companies might decide to give this responsibility to a team at company HQ or to managers at individual retail locations. The point person should be highly professional and possess strong customer service skills. Designating a team member to handle online reviews ensures that all responses maintain a consistent company voice.

Consider the following qualities when deciding which individual or team responds to customer reviews:

- Strong customer service skills
- Highly professional attitude
- Good knowledge of company culture and policies
- Authority to resolve customer issues
- Great writing style

DON'T TAKE IT PERSONAL - IT'S BUSINESS

When a business owner receives negative feedback, it's hard not to take it personally. A negative review is criticism of what a business owner cares about most: their company. While negative reviews may generate an impassioned response, responding to reviews requires a high level of professionalism and politeness.

That's why it's never a good idea to respond to a customer review without taking some time to think about your response. Never respond hastily or in a fit of passion. Take a deep breath and consider the most professional way to respond to that customer. Your company's professional response will only strengthen your online business reputation.

In order to respond to online reviews in an appropriate manner, it's necessary to separate oneself from the emotions that negative reviews can create. Consider the mechanism that one store owner uses to maintain her composure and professionalism when responding to negative online reviews:

Case Study

I know a store owner that pours her heart and soul into every aspect of her business. She resigned her position as a pediatrician to pursue her passion of making gourmet chocolate.

She spends time on nights and weekends thinking about ways to craft the most delicious and inventive chocolate creations. While the vast majority of the initial feedback was strongly positive, on a few rare occasions a customer complained about some trivial issue, like the corner of a gift box was crushed in shipping. She tried to not take it personal, but she couldn't. Any complaint directed at the company was like someone insulting her children. She became defensive and angry, two of the exact traits that should never be shared in a review response.

Her solution was ingenious. She created a fictitious manager she named Sam. If a complaint or poor review was received, she wouldn't reply. She would have Sam, the professional but friendly manager, respond to this customer. She was then able to compose the right response to advance the exceptional reputation of her store without getting upset.

This approach was soon validated when a number of people who visited the retail store asked to speak to the manager who took care of their problems and treated them so well. Additionally, when she sent out an annual customer survey, numerous respondents called out the wonderful service received by Sam.

RESPONDING TO POSITIVE REVIEWS

Of course, businesses always prefer to receive positive reviews from customers. There's nothing better than a five-star review to boost your brand. However, while companies appreciate positive reviews, many neglect to respond to them.

WHY RESPOND TO POSITIVE REVIEWS?

Responding to positive reviews is just as important as responding to negative ones. It maximizes the benefit of positive feedback and reinforces your company's relationship with the customer. Your responses can make a good impression on potential customers and lead to further sales or return visits.

But the benefits don't end there. Responding to positive reviews can even encourage more positive reviews. When customers see that your company responds to reviews and appreciates feedback, they'll be more likely to write a positive review. More positive reviews improve your search rankings and click-through rate, increasing traffic to your website and stores.

If your competitors are responding to online reviews, then your business needs to be actively engaging online. Businesses that don't respond to online reviews may be viewed as uncaring and unresponsive. Ultimately, this is about your company's bottom line. If companies in your industry aren't engaging with customers online, then this is your chance to get ahead.

Here's why it's a great idea to respond to positive reviews:

It's polite.
Think of a five-star review as a compliment. It's polite to thank customers for their positive response and any valuable feedback that they provide.

It reinforces your brand
Use this opportunity to highlight the values that your company stands for. Your response demonstrates a commitment to superior customer service.

Potential customers are watching
Consider a wider audience. Potential customers will notice your response to a positive review, so feel free to add some subtle marketing.

HOW TO RESPOND TO POSITIVE REVIEWS

Responding to positive online reviews can be easier than replying to negative ones, since the customer is already on your side. Still, doing so requires careful attention in order to communicate effectively.

A company's response to a positive review should be simple. Typically, about 2-4 sentences are enough to sufficiently respond to the reviewer. If you'd like to speak with a customer in more detail, take the conversation offline. The publicly visible company response should be friendly, professional and to the point.

The main objective in responding to a positive review should be to express appreciation for the customer's feedback. A five-star review is a great compliment for a company. If a customer mentions details about the experience (e.g. good service, high-quality product), be specific in your response. A company's "thank-you" should be genuine, and it should connect

with the customer.

A response not only provides the opportunity to thank the customer but also to reinforce a company's brand. After expressing appreciation for the review, a good response should highlight the company's product or service and the value that it provides customers. For example, if a review highlights great customer service, the response might mention that the company "takes pride in delivering high-quality service to meet our customers' needs."

Finally, a good response should invite the customer to take action. It's important to encourage customers to continue engaging with your business. This might be as simple as inviting them back ("we hope to see you again soon") or introducing them to a new product or service. The goal is to support long-term relationships with customers that boost your business.

Tip: When responding to positive reviews, always mention your business name or other keywords associated with your company. Doing so will help positive reviews appear in your company's search results.

Consider the following three steps when responding to positive online reviews:

1. Thank the reviewer. Show your appreciation for the customer's feedback and be specific about what you're thankful for in the response.
2. Highlight your company's value: Use this opportunity to draw attention to the high-quality product or service that your company offers.
3. Invite the customer to take action: Encourage the customer to engage further with your company by introducing a new product or inviting them back again.

SHOW YOUR PERSONALITY

Companies should always respond to customers in a professional manner, but that doesn't mean they have to provide generic, robotic responses. It should be clear that there's a real person behind every response. Generic responses just feel fake and forced. A personal response shows the customer that they're appreciated and worth your time.

It's okay to show some flair in your responses and make it conversational. Showing character and emotion can help build real connections between businesses and customers.

"I'm so thrilled you enjoyed our team's exceptional customer service! Maggie, our customer service manager, will certainly appreciate those kind words. We can't wait to see you again soon!"

Review: *Visited [business name] for the first time this week. Everything was amazing. The staff is friendly and helpful. Definitely coming back.*

Response: *Thank you for posting a positive review about your experience at [business name]. Our team takes pride in providing high-quality service, so we're thrilled to hear that we made a great impression on you. We can't wait to welcome you back again soon.*

HOW TO CUSTOMIZE YOUR RESPONSE

The key to effectively managing online reviews is to customize responses appropriately for a variety of situations. It's a good idea to craft a set of basic responses that can be easily customized with specific details. LocalClarity, for example, offers a library of reviews that are ready to be customized to each company's unique needs and industries. This helps to streamline the process and makes responding to online reviews much faster.

Here's an example of a basic response to a positive review that can be customized to include details mentioned by the review:

Thank you for taking a moment to share your experience at [business name]. We are so pleased to hear that you were satisfied with [product/service]. We look forward to welcoming you back again soon.

In this example, the response allows the company to add details and customize the message. Companies should anticipate the reviews that they might receive from customers. Responses may vary for companies in different industries, but they often follow a similar format. By creating a set of customizable responses, a company can more efficiently respond to customers and reach a wider audience.

RESPONDING TO NEGATIVE REVIEWS

When a company receives a negative online review, the most effective way to mitigate its effect is to respond. The worst thing a business can do is ignore negative reviews. In order to protect your online reputation, your company must respond professionally and in a timely manner.

WHY RESPOND TO NEGATIVE REVIEWS

Negative reviews can hurt your company and prevent potential customers from visiting your business. That's why it's so critical to respond appropriately to negative reviews. A professional and well-crafted response can reduce the damage and make things right.

Responding to negative reviews demonstrates a commitment to high-quality customer service. Potential customers might even be impressed that you took the time to address a customer's concerns. Since negative reviews won't go away, it's best to address them and avoid the further harm that they might cause.

Companies that don't respond to negative reviews risk losing customers and market share. According to a recent survey by LocalClarity, 63% of consumers say that seeing a company respond to online reviews makes them believe that the business cares about them. If your business isn't responding to negative online reviews, it's losing out on business to competitors. Here's why it's a good idea to respond to negative reviews:

1. It's your chance to makes things right. Consider this an opportunity to win back a customer.
2. It shows you care about customer feedback. Reviews give you great insight into your customers' experiences. Your response shows that you take the feedback seriously.
3. Potential customers are watching. Consider a wider audience, when responding to both positive and negative reviews.

HOW TO RESPOND TO NEGATIVE REVIEWS

Before you respond to any negative reviews, take a deep breath. It's important to approach negative reviews in a calm and rational manner. No one likes receiving criticism. But whether or not the criticism is true, your business needs to respond in a way that protects your reputation.

-Apologizing to the customer
When responding to a negative customer review, start off by apologizing for the issue. It's important that you sympathize with the customer and acknowledge the challenges that they faced at your business. For example, a response might begin with the following statement: "We sincerely apologize for the issues that you experienced." Taking ownership for an issue shows that you take the customer's concerns seriously.

Sometimes, it can be difficult to apologize for an issue that your company isn't fully responsible for. While there are certainly times when it's appropriate to be politely defensive about an issue, it's never okay to fight with customers or get personal. Even if the criticism is unfounded, your response should always maintain a high level of professionalism and respect.

-Making things right with the customer
After apologizing for an issue, your response should demonstrate why this issue won't happen again in the future. Customers need to know that their issues and concerns are the exception, not the rule, at your business. For example, a response might include the following: "We hold our team to the highest standards and regret that we didn't meet those

expectations." By highlighting company values, the response shows that the issue is not representative of the business.

A good response might also tell the reviewer that you have shared their feedback with your company or team. For example, the response could say the following: "We regret that your experience did not meet your expectations and have shared your feedback with our team." Again, this tactic shows that you take the customer's concerns seriously and are taking action to improve the situation.

-Continuing the conversation offline
The last thing you should do when responding to a negative review is offer to continue the conversation offline. The comments section isn't the most appropriate place to communicate with customers, and some conversations simply aren't meant to be conducted in public. Provide the customer with contact information (phone or email) to connect with a member of your team. A response could end with the following: "We invite you to contact [contact_name] at [contact info] to discuss your experience in more detail."

Every review is different, and each solution won't look same. Still, it's important to directly address the issue that motivated a negative review from a customer. In other words, don't just pay lip service. Discuss the issue with your staff or fix the problem for the customer. Negative reviews can provide valuable feedback to improve your business.

> Tip: When responding to negative reviews, never mention your business name or other keywords associated with your company. Doing so will help keep negative reviews out of company's search results.

Examples

Review: *Very disappointed with my recent experience. We had to wait so long for service. Not worth it.*

Response: *We're so sorry to hear about the long wait time that you experienced. Our goal is to provide fast and efficient service, but sometimes it takes longer than expected. We'd appreciate the opportunity to speak further about your experience. {{contact_name}}, our {{contact_title}}, can be reached at {{contact_info}}.*

HOW TO CUSTOMIZE

A company's response to a negative review can be further strengthened by customized details that pertain to the customer's experience. It's important to sound genuine when apologizing to a customer, and a generic response will not communicate much concern. That's why customizing your response is so critical to crafting an effective message.

The procedure for responding to negative reviews should be similar to how your company responds to positive reviews. It's helpful to craft a set of standard responses that can easily be customized to fit a variety of situations. Review customer feedback and anticipate other concerns to build a set of responses that work for your business or industry.

Here's an example of a basic response to a negative review that can be customized to include details mentioned by the reviewer:

We're so sorry to hear that your experience did not meet our standards. We value our customers' feedback and work hard to ensure that similar issues do not occur in the future. We hope you'll reach out to {{contact_name}}, our {{contact_title}}, at {{contact_info}} to discuss your experience in more detail.
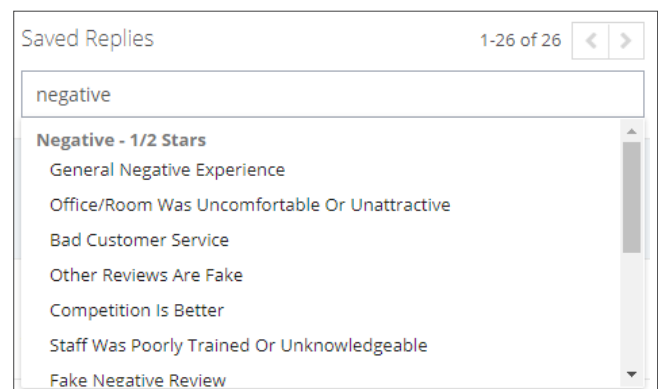
The LocalClarity Saved Replies Tool allows brands to manage default customized responses

LIMIT FINANCIAL COMPENSATION IN A PUBLIC FORUM

One of the answers respondents provide for the survey question "Why do you leave choose to leave negative reviews"? is the desire/expectation for compensation for the poor experience. Some people take the approach that a loud, public attack is an effective way to secure a discount, refund or other benefit.

While there are certainly times when compensation should be one aspect of an apology to the customer, businesses should limit how this is communicated in public forum such as a review response.

A well-intentioned "the customer is always right" approach could backfire if new customers become trained to provide poor reviews in exchanges for a refund.

Invite the customer to return to show them that you value their business and that the poor experience was atypical, or at least that you've fixed the issue. It also helps to offer to speak with them over the phone to learn more about the experience and what you can do to make it right.

DEALING WITH FAKE ONLINE REVIEWS

While most online reviews express genuine customer feedback, it's possible that other reviews may be motivated by malice. Fake reviews are something that businesses must deal with, and companies must find appropriate ways to identify these reviews and respond to them. Criticism is bad enough, and fake reviews are even worse. Fortunately, there are effective strategies to protect your company's reputation and respond in a professional manner.

IDENTIFYING FAKE REVIEWS

In order to respond appropriately to a fake review, you need to be able to identify it. This can be tricky, since you might never know for sure whether a review is fake or genuine. Still, there are useful ways to spot fake reviews posted on your business page.

One way to spot a fake review is to look for the age of the reviewer's account. Was the account created recently? Does it seem to be exclusively for the purpose of creating positive or negative reviews? If the reviewer has no other reviews on the site, this can be a sign that the review is fake. Of course, this is just one factor that you should consider when identifying fake reviews.

Another common indicator of a fake review is the use of "marketing speak." Does the review sound like a natural human reaction or marketing language from a business? Recently, many fake reviews have been posted by non-native speakers, so consider the word choice and structure of the review. Does the review mention a competitor's product or brand? This is another sign that the review might be fake.

Always check for multiple reviews that are the same. If you spot identical or similar reviews posted on your business page or a competitor's page, they're likely coming from the same source.

Reviewers that only post positive comments about a business may also be suspicious. Do a simple Google search of the review to see if it appears on other pages.

For some business owners, it may be tempting to categorize negative feedback as "fake." That's why it's so important to be objective when identifying fake reviews. While some reviews may be fake, others might express genuine feedback about your business. If you can't be objective when identifying fake reviews, consider asking a third party to investigate the review.

RESPONDING TO FAKE REVIEWS

Once you've identified fake reviews, your business needs to take the appropriate steps to respond to them. The process for responding to fake reviews is different than responding to negative reviews and requires additional attention to detail. Striking the right balance is important, and the way your business responds will determine the success of your online reputation management strategy.

Before publicly responding to a fake review, try to get the review removed. Many review sites like Google and Yelp allow business owners to "flag as inappropriate" reviews that violate the site's policies. Users must be signed into their business accounts in order to flag reviews. While reporting fake reviews won't always be successful, it's a good first step

in managing inappropriate content.

If removing a fake review isn't possible, responding to the review is the next best option. Companies should be careful and strategic when responding to fake reviews. It's never appropriate to be accusatory or offensive in your response. Maintaining a professional demeanor is just as important when responding to a fake review.

Adopting a neutral tone can be effective in responding to a fake review. It's okay to tell reviewers that your business has no record of their issues or suggest that they may be confusing you with another company. Regardless of the customer's issue, it's important to emphasize your company's commitment to customer service, so use this opportunity to highlight your high-quality product or service.

Even if you know a review is fake, consider inviting the reviewer to reach out and discuss the issue with a member of your team. Of course, fake reviewers aren't going to give your business a call, but your invitation demonstrates to other customers that you take the reviewer's concerns seriously. It shows that you stand behind your business.

Example

Response: *We appreciate when our customers take time to review us, but it seems we have no record of your recent issue. If we are mistaken, we sincerely apologize about your experience and would love to make this right. Please reach out to {{contact_name}}, our {{contact_title}}, at {{contact_info}} to resolve this issue.*

WHEN IT'S APPROPRIATE TO FIGHT BACK

Generally, the rule of thumb when responding to negative online reviews is to always be polite and apologize for the customer's issue. Still, many companies wonder whether it's ever appropriate to fight back against a negative online review.

Most of the time it makes sense to take ownership of a poor customer experience. The "buck stops with you." But, in some industries, a specific service provider is only part of the full experience. In these situations, it may make sense to deflect the review by focusing on the root cause. Businesses should think carefully about whether this tactic is appropriate.

A real estate agent, for example, may have very little control of the mortgage approval process but still receive a review that states "Heather seemed to be doing a good job but then everything fell apart right before the close and she did nothing to help, 2-Stars."

Here's how the agent could effectively respond to the customer without taking complete ownership of the problem:

"Unfortunately, things can happen in a real estate transaction that are out of [my/our] control. [Financing/Appraisal/Inspection] is a big part of buying a home. We work hard to prepare for contingencies, but ultimately all parties are required to complete a purchase."

If you work in an industry that frequently requires third-party coordination, a series of responses that cover typical situations will help you provide responses that improve the impression of your brand. In other situations, it may be appropriate to spin a negative review to help future customers best understand your product or service.

For example, if a reviewer comments that a restaurant is not kid-friendly, this might be spun as a positive for couples or guests without children. The restaurant might highlight its intimate and quiet setting. While the review might be a negative for families, it can be seen as a positive for other guests.

Tip: In certain platforms, you are not technically responding to the individual customer. Instead, you are adding a statement in the platform that is more of a public notice to everyone reading the reviews. This is especially true for Google, where the original review author is never notified of the company's response. The response is almost exclusively written for the next customer. Facebook and other social media platforms, however, are structured for a two-way conversation that happens to be available to hundreds of millions of listeners.

ASKING FOR CUSTOMER REVIEWS

There's only one proven way to reduce the impact of negative reviews: maximizing your business's positive reviews. More positive reviews that are detailed and informative will improve your online reputation and make the negative reviews less harmful. The bottom line is that you need to engage your customers.

Companies need to ask for feedback because most online reviews are motivated by negative experiences. A recent poll by Street Fight found that 19.1% of respondents were more likely to write a review after a negative experience, while only 16.8% would write a review after a positive one. Since more online reviews come from unhappy customers, it's necessary to actively engage satisfied customers to leave positive comments about your business.

RULES BY PLATFORM

When asking for customer reviews, companies should be aware that some platforms have specific rules governing the practice. For example, Yelp tells businesses that they should never ask for customer reviews. According to the website, asking for customer reviews can create bias in the review process. Yelp publishes the following guidelines regarding solicitation of online reviews:

"Don't ask for reviews and don't offer to pay for them either: Please don't ask your customers to review your business on Yelp. Over time, solicited reviews create bias on your business page — a bias that savvy consumers can smell from a mile away."

Failure to follow these guidelines can have negative consequences for a company's online business reputation. Yelp's software actively "tries to identify and not recommend reviews prompted or encouraged by the business." By asking for customer reviews, businesses can hurt their Yelp score and perhaps lose the confidence of potential customers.

Google also sets rules for soliciting online customer reviews. Although these rules are less strict than Yelp's guidelines, they should be considered when crafting a strategy for soliciting online customer feedback. Google's policies state that businesses should never offer incentives or other discounts for customer reviews. Companies also shouldn't set up review stations at their place of business.

Google's Maps User Contributed Content Policy, which was updated in December 2017, states that businesses can't "offer or accept money in exchange for review." The policy also says that companies can't "solicit reviews from customers in bulk."

While platforms like Google and Yelp discourage review solicitation, other websites like TripAdvisor actively support businesses asking their customers to post online reviews. TripAdvisor even offers tools to more effectively solicit customer reviews. These resources include "Review Express," a tool that allows businesses to create and send emails asking customers or guests to write reviews of their business. The site also offers free reminder flyers and custom reminder cards to encourage guests to leave a review.

There's one rule that applies to all platforms: do not offer incentives for online customer reviews. Incentives can include discounts, rewards, free products or services. The Federal Trade Commission's (FTC) "Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising" states that businesses must disclose if they have materially incentivized customers to leave online reviews. In recent years, the FTC and other law enforcement agencies have taken legal action against offenders.

This doesn't mean that your business can't ask customers for online reviews. It just means that you can't give them anything. Before asking for online customer reviews, consider the platform's policies to ensure proper compliance.

ALL PLATFORMS DESERVE ATTENTION

Since there are so many review sites out there (Google, Yelp, Facebook, Trip Advisor, etc.), it can be difficult to decide where a business should focus its attention. Unfortunately, there's no easy answer to this question. In fact, all platforms deserve your company's attention.

With that said, there are ways to strategically manage your resources and engage customers through these platforms. It's helpful to consider the differences between platforms when crafting an appropriate business strategy.

Since Google dominates online review searches for many industries, it's critical that businesses engage with customers about posting reviews to their Google My Business page.

Requesting and reminding customers to leave online reviews should be fully integrated into your business processes. Many customers are willing to write positive comments about your business. They just need the tools to do it.

To make it easy for customers to leave Google reviews for your business, connect them directly to the site with a link to your Google review form (don't just link your Google page). Whenever you contact customers about feedback through social media or your website, be sure to include this actionable Google review link. Integrating the link into email marketing campaigns can be especially effective, when businesses create a call to action or include the link in their signature.

Follow these steps to create a link to your Google My Business review page:
1. Go to the Google PlaceID Lookup tool.
2. Enter your address or business name in the "Enter a location" field on the map.
3. Select your business name as listed, and your Place ID will appear.
4. Add your Place ID to the end of the following link: https://search.google.com/local/writereview?placeid=

As previously mentioned, Yelp discourages businesses from asking customers to leave online reviews. The website's policy prohibits review solicitation, and its software actively works to identify reviews that are suspicious.

For example, if a profile has insufficient information or minimal review history, it's possible that Yelp will not post their reviews. The site's algorithm favors comments that include photos and come from profiles with complete information and a history of reviewing businesses.

This can make it difficult for many companies, especially small businesses, to establish a presence on the site and build their online reputation. Still, there are ways to increase awareness about your company's presence on Yelp. Adding a Yelp button on your website or email signature and posting materials at your business are two effective ways to let customers know that you're active on the site.

Companies also shouldn't forget about social media platforms like Facebook when crafting a strategy to ask customers for reviews. Since reviews posted on Facebook are incorporated into Google results, focusing some attention on the platform can be valuable. Many customers are active on the site and enjoy engaging with businesses through reviews.

If your business doesn't have a Facebook page already, create one and make sure the review feature is enabled. Like with Google reviews, companies can directly link to the Facebook review form when asking customers to evaluate their business. This makes it easy to integrate the link into marketing campaigns. Businesses should also consider encouraging customers to "check-in" to their location on Facebook in order to increase visibility.

A great way to ask customers for online reviews is adding a call to action to your email signature. Companies send hund-

reds of emails each month. Adding a review link to your email signature is an easy way to increase visibility and encourage customers to leave reviews.

STRUCTURE THE "ASK" TO ADDRESS CUSTOMER CONCERNS

Of course, businesses should always remind customers to leave online reviews. But, informative and detailed reviews are much more valuable than star ratings. Potential customers are more likely to trust comments that includes details about the reviewer's experience. That's why it's important to encourage reviewers to leave reviews that address customer concerns.

Companies should craft review requests that specifically match their industry and what potential customers want to see in a review. For example, real estate agents could compose a review request like the following:

"It was a pleasure working with you during your recent home search. I would greatly appreciate a thoughtful review of your experience. You might mention my knowledge of the local area, professionalism and ability to negotiate effectively. Thank you for your time and consideration!"

Customers are more likely to leave reviews for your business if you make the process easy and convenient. It's helpful to provide customers with sample testimonials or a model that they can use when filling out a review. Businesses can even create a roadmap for crafting their own unique review request that emphasizes keywords or phrases commonly found in reviews. The car sales industry, for example, the phrases found in 5-Star reviews often include:

* Easy and straightforward process
* Trustworthy
* Professional service
* Clear and honest communication
* No games (price was exactly as negotiated)
* Fair prices
* Attentive to customer's needs

By simplifying the review process, your business can increase both the quantity and quality of online customer feedback. Five-star reviews are great, but potential customer(s) really appreciate detailed and informative reviews. By structuring

the "ask" to address customer concerns, you can improve the feedback that your business receives.

STRUCTURE THE "ASK" AROUND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES

Customers notice when your company completes a job successfully. But guiding satisfied customers to leave an online review for your business can be a challenge. Informing customers about the value of online reviews can be helpful, and structuring the "ask" around your company's competitive advantages can improve the review itself.

There's nothing wrong with reminding customers about your company's strengths or how you helped them get a job done. When structuring the "ask" for an online review, consider highlighting those competitive advantages that provided value to the customer. For example, a real estate agent might remind a client about the issues resolved while buying a home.

Thank you for for choosing me to help find your new home. I hope you were completely satisfied, and I invite you to leave feedback about your experience. I've noted a few of the issues resolved during the process and hope you found them helpful.
* *Negotiating a lower selling price*
* *Securing carpet cleaning for the home*
* *Identifying a compatible neighborhood*

Alternatively, companies can guide customers or clients to share their positive feedback by structuring the ask with questions. These questions can be used by the customer to write their review. They should generally highlight strengths or competitive advantages. For example, the same real estate agent might use the following question to structure the ask.

Thank you for for choosing me to help find your new home. I hope you were completely satisfied, and I invite you to leave feedback about your experience. Here are a few questions that you can answer within a review.
* *Why did you choose me to find your new home?*
* *What was the best part of the experience?*
* *Would you recommend my services to others?*

By highlighting your company's competitive advantage or reminding customer about how you helped them, you can

provide the basis for a positive review. Of course, this won't guarantee that the customer will leave glowing feedback, but it does help to elicit a more detailed and informative review that both potential customer and your business will appreciate.

THE REVIEW 2-STEP

We know that asking for reviews isn't completely safe. Some of the feedback will be positive and some will be quite negative. Depending on the type of business (typically B2B or B2C with long-term relationships) it might be possible to conduct a strategic 2-Step review process.

Start with an open-ending request for insight and feedback from the customer without the constraints of a 3rd party rating system. A simple email or letter that expresses gratitude to the customers and asks "How did we do? Would you let us know?"

By keeping it casual, the business gains candid feedback. If the details are negative, the business is in a great position for a private conversation about what went wrong and what it would take to put the relationship back on a positive track.

If the feedback is quite positive, the company can then respond with "We are so happy to read that you had a great experience. Would you be comfortable sharing that experience at [insert platform that allows this form of recommendation]."

MAXIMIZING POSITIVE REVIEWS

Businesses of all sizes wonder how they can increase positive online reviews. While there's no easy solution or formula for increasing positive reviews, there are proven strategies that can help boost your company's online reputation. Asking for customer reviews can be challenging, but the investment can really pay off for your business.

In addition to the strategies discussed above, companies should keep the following general rules in mind when crafting an effective strategy for asking for customer reviews.

EDUCATE CUSTOMERS ABOUT LEAVING REVIEWS

Companies should always think about how they can educate customers about leaving online reviews. Sometimes, customers will leave feedback without your asking, but most need to be prompted. Posting flyers in your business or adding instructions to your website can help educate customers about leaving online reviews.

SIMPLIFY THE PROCESS

Wherever possible, companies should simplify the process for customers. If a customer is taking time to leave a review for your business, you should make it as easy as possible for them. Don't just ask for a review. Connect customers directly to the review page. Using links to review pages can be especially helpful for customers.

RESPOND TO REVIEWS

Responding to reviews not only mitigates the effects of negative reviews but also encourages customers to leave positive comments. When customers see that your company responds to reviews and appreciates feedback, they'll be more likely to write a positive review.

Actively engaging with customers on review pages can have positive results. It builds your credibility on review sites and impacts your company's bottom line. By responding to online reviews, you can attract new customers with your thoughtful response. This superior level of customer service can boost retention rates, which makes a difference for your sales and profits.

Customers increasingly expect responses to online reviews from companies. A LocalClarity survey found that 64% of customers expect a response at least some of the time. If your company isn't responding to online customer comments, it's falling behind. When your competitors respond to online reviews, they have an upper hand in the market.

UTILIZE PROFESSIONAL REPUTATION MANAGEMENT TOOLS.

For some businesses, it's a good idea to consult a reputation management company to manage online customer reviews. Businesses with more than one location (e.g. franchises) can especially benefit from the sophisticated tools and insights of companies like LocalClarity.

REPORTING & INSIGHTS VALIDATING THE R.O.I.

A vital component of any business improvement process is reporting. Without tangible evidence to support the impacts of the investment, it becomes difficult to continue to justify the investment, especially when there are always other projects competing for scarce resources.

Fortunately, there are a number of ways that companies of all sizes can track the impacts of a thoughtful review management program.

RATING VOLUME CHANGE

The most direct measurement of increased engagement with customers is the increase in the number of reviews received - overall, by location, and by key platforms.

Reviews collected vs Average rating
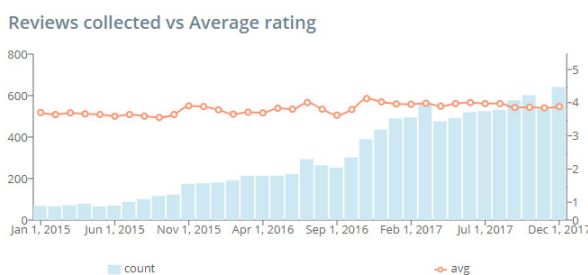
The blue bars in this client sample demonstrates the significant increase in the volume of Google reviews received over the last several years due to the growth of the LocalGuides platform and Google aggressiveness soliciting reviews. Yelp is a bit more stable (as of January, 2018) while Facebook is still seeing a stready volume increase.

A large number of reviews helps to:

- Validate the review average. As a potential customer, what would you rather see? One 5-Star review or dozens of reviews that average to 4.8 Stars.

- Validate each location. Searches are increasingly local in nature and the reviews presented to customers are typically for a specific location. The main location might have hundreds of strong reviews but that provides little support to new branches competing for attention.
- Insulate from an operational "hiccup." The more reviews a location builds in its "reputation bank" the easier it will be to survive a poor operational episode.

Case Study
Late one night I was fielding questions on the LocalClarity website chat. A gentleman asked me for advice on where he might be able to sell his business on Google. He was trying to liquidate a company he had run for 25 years but apparently nobody wanted anything to do with the enterprise that allowed him to make a nice living, pay for a nice home, and send his kids to college. I explained that LocalClarity wasn't specifically designed to help with this challenge, but I was curious as to how he came to our site. He described how he was combining some searches that included "reviews" and "google" and our page showed up.

He went on to explain that two years ago he had a critical supply vendor completely disappear on him during the holidays. He simply couldn't get his product on time. He also lost a couple of key employees in early December. This left him working

day and night for weeks trying to field calls and emails from increasingly agitated customers. No matter how much effort he put into the resolution, people decided to aggressively share their experiences. The business owner had relied on personal word-of-mouth for decades so he didn't invest time or effort into his online reputation. Now, the only opinion presented to potential new potential customers were from the one, disastrous season.

STAR RATINGS CHANGE, OVER TIME

The most direct and beneficial of all metric changes is a sustained increase in the average review score. A break past 4.0 provides material benefits.

While a string of increased scores will improve the quantitative averages, some research suggests that for retail industries reviews need to be less than 3 months old to influence consumer decisions. People view both the full track record and how a business has performed recently.

Reviews collected vs Average rating
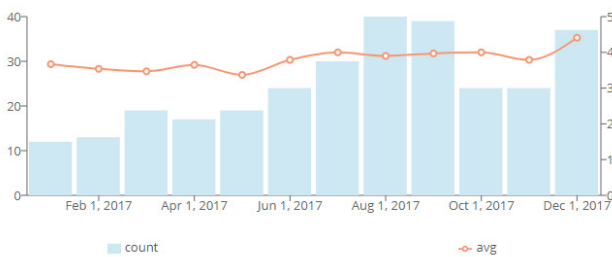
Increases in avg. rating and review volume in peak months is the ultimate goal.

The line in the chart represents the average review scores each month for the past 12 months for this client. It was great to see a nice increase in scores for the critical month of December.

STAR RATING CHANGE, YEAR OVER YEAR

Depending on the seasonality of the business, the best approach to monitoring long-term rating improvements may be to compare equivalent time periods.

Most retailers are dependent on a strong holiday season for

this year's sales and a strong customer experience to make certain that customer come back year after year.

Case Study
I was looking at the long-term review picture of a retailer and noticed a pronounced dip in reviews toward the second half of January every year except 2012. At first, this seemed like a statistical anomaly. If the issues were related to Christmas sales, the dip would have been in the second half of December and into the first week of January since this company received most reviews within 2-3 weeks of the transaction.

What could cause a drop in customer satisfaction in mid-January for most years but not one specific event? After digging into the details, I saw that during the holiday season of 2011, this company ended the year with a disturbingly high level of product inventory.

It appears that the benefit of ample product inventory at the end of the year meant that customers in January had a full selection of products in-stock and ready to ship. In the other years, the company ended the year with the target inventory levels suggested by the accounting department, but insufficient to support product demand for the start the next year.

A Sentiment Analysis (looking at a word count of the actual reviews) revealed that many of the negative reviews in most Januaries included words such as delayed, back ordered, delivery, and shipment. This was not the case for January of 2012. The company changed its inventory policy to support its customers all year round.

NET PROMOTER SCORE EQUIVALENT CHANGE

It can be difficult to see a material change in average reviews scores despite the efforts to embrace even aggressive reputation management practices. This is simply due to the fact there is often little numeric distance on a 5-point scale between industry leaders and industry laggards.

One way to look at the impact of improvements in customer experiences is to take a look at the percentage of positive experiences (4-Star and 5-Star) minus the percentage of negative experiences (1-Star and 2-Star), while ignoring 3-Star reviews. In terms of a Net Promoter Score construct, it looks

at the Positive Experiences minus the Negative Experiences. For example, let's take a look at two sets of review scores. The first set has an average of 3.5 Stars and the second has an average of 3.6 Stars. In the ebb and flow of reviews it might be hard to declare that the second set is actually better.

1,2,3,3,3,4,4,5,5,5 = 3.5 average
1,2,3,4,4,4,4,4,5,5 = 3.6 average

If you look at the data in terms of customer experiences, you begin to see a different story. In the first set, there are 5 positive experiences, 3 neutral and 2 negative ones. This would result in a Net Promoter Score equivalent of 30%. In the second set, there are 7 positive experiences, 1 neutal, and 2 negative ones, resulting in a score of 50%. It can be argued that this is suggesting an improvement in the median customer experience.

REVIEW CONTENT, WORDS PER REVIEW

Research on customer feedback loops in the hotel industry conducted by Cornell University strongly suggests a relationship between customer engagement and the volume of words used to describe the experience.

As hotels began to respond to customer reviews, they observed that the average length of reviews increased. Customers provided more in-depth descriptions of their experiences, both the negative and the positive ones.

While it might not be the goal of brands to have customers with poor experiences choose to be more expressive, the research suggests an interesting benefit. When people expect the brand to respond to negative reviews there is a sense that a fully detailed review is required. This perceived incremental effort ultimately dissuades some people from leaving a review in the first place.

REVIEW CONTENT, SENTIMENT CHANGES OVER TIME

The very best tactic to improve business success is to adapt company operations based customer feedback. By analyzing the keyword sentiment contained within the review, company managment can identify the core issues behind the nega-

tive reviews - at the store, city, or regional level.
After a policy change, new system integration, or even a staffing replacement, companies should review the post-change sentiment to validate that the cause of a cohort of poor reviews is no longer resident in the data.

GOOGLE - MAP SEARCH INCLUSION

The evidence is quite strong. Google is actively (and increasingly) using customer feedback to help determine local search ranking. Signals for both review count and review rating determine map inclusion per algorithm. An increase in Map Result inclusion would be a very strong signal that company efforts are driving increased visibility.

Companies that might hope to return in the result when a customer uses a qualifier such as "good" or "best" will lose significant opportunities if their review score is below 4.0. A search for "best thai food near me" will often execute with a extra filter that blocks any restaurants without at least a 4-Star review.

As voice search continues to grow in popularity, it is expected that qualifiers will be an ever increasing element in local searches.

How customers find your business

451,718	442,257
50.53%	49.47%
In Maps	In Searches
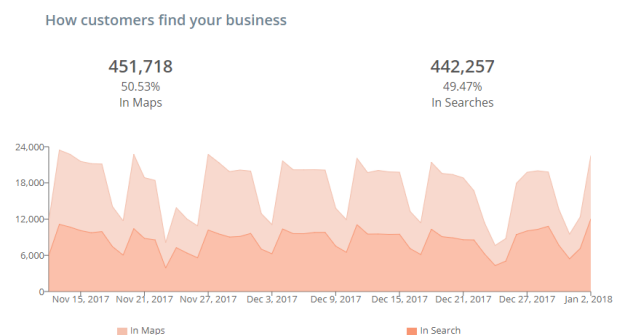
A good example of how Map inclusion drops over weekends for companies with standard M-F hours.

GOOGLE - ACTIONS PER LOCAL SEARCH RESULT

Clicking from a local search result to the company's website is often not the most important metric of engagement. For many companies, the ideal engagement is driving directions or a direct phone call. To evaluate the impact of higher reviews scores and more reviews on both Google placement and the customer interaction with the search result page, we recommend total interactions (driving directions + website visits + phone calls) divided by the number of searches or views.
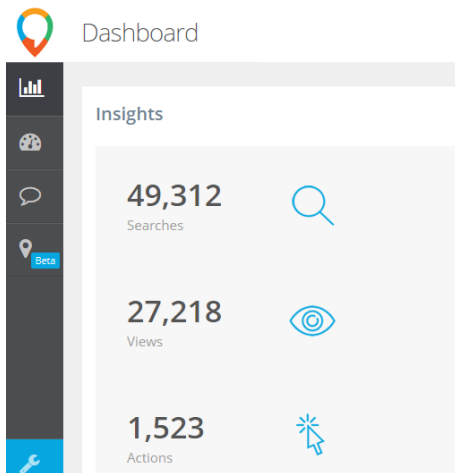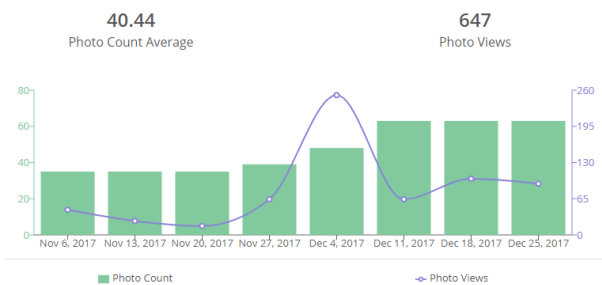

This client's ratio of actions to searches is a bit low at 3.1%, but this business has the benefit of appearing very frequently in indirect searches.

GOOGLE - PHOTO VIEWS PER PHOTO

One of the secondary effects we see in Google My Business reporting from an increase in customer engagement is a material increase in the number of local photos viewed.

We see strong correlations between the number of photos added to each Google My Business location and customer engagement

CONCLUSION

Online customer reviews are the foundation of a company's online reputation. As customers increasingly trust online reviews to make purchasing decisions, businesses must respond with proven strategies to protect their brands. Today, every customer experience is sharable, and there's no hiding from online reviews.

In this playbook, we've provided a comprehensive guide to effectively managing online reviews, responding to positive and negative customer reviews and asking customers to leave online reviews. Each of these components should be reviewed carefully and considered essential elements of a reputation management strategy.

The business of responding to online customer reviews isn't always easy. Negative reviews can be painful, and creating well-crafted responses can be even more challenging. However, the cost of leaving negative reviews unanswered is much higher. Responding to negative reviews can go a long way in protecting a company's online reputation.

While it's possible to mitigate the effects of negative reviews, companies can't improve their online reputation unless they actively engage customers and ask them to leave reviews. More reviews give potential customers a fuller picture of a company's reputation. Structuring the ask effectively can even lead to more positive feedback.

If a company stands by its products or services, it shouldn't be afraid to hear what customers have to say. That doesn't mean companies shouldn't be prepared to manage online reviews and respond appropriately. It may be true that online reviews can make or break your business's reputation and success, but it's also true that there are proven strategies to keep your company's online reputation intact.

APPENDIX -

DEALING WITH SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

THE REVIEWS PRESENTED FIRST ARE NEGATIVE

This is a common challenge for businesses of all shapes and sizes.

Negative reviews might appear first if they are the oldest, the newest, or have received the highest amount of engagement on a review site (most likes). Regardless of the reason, these reviews make a bad impression on customers, even if your company's overall rating and is above average.

While you can't change the order in which reviews appear, you can improve your overall profile on a review site. Responding to these negative reviews and implementing a strategy to engage customers for more positive reviews are two good ways to improve your standing.

ACTION PLAN

- Identify the negative reviews that appear first in search results for each location.

- Respond to these reviews effectively and in a professional manner as outlined in this Playbook.

- Apologize as necessary for the customer's poor experience and try to make things right.

- Work to improve your overall company rating and increase the number of positive reviews from customers.

- If you have more locations that you have resources to respond to reviews, make certain that top reviews are always addressed first.

- If youhave resolved the review to the point where the customer is now fully satisfied, request an edit or even a removal.

Case Study
You have worked hard to earn great reviews for all of your locations. You have achieved a higher average review score and more reviews than your competitors.

But...the review presented in the very first spot on the platform highlights an unfortunate customer experience in all of its gory detail. Not only that, but the review has been marked as Helpful (Google), Liked (Faccebook), Useful (Yelp), etc. by a number of people.

There is no profanity and the reviewer has followed all of the protocols of the platform. What can you do?

Unfortunately, there isn't much you can do other than following every single best practice for review management. Initially, you respond in detail as to why this experiencce is singular in nature and then you build a program that overwhelm this one review with dozens (or hundreds) of new reviews that present a more accurate depiction of what customers should expect from your business.

Note, that numerous academic and business studies suggest that a perfect 5.0 review report card is not ideal. Too many glowing reviews causing a degree of skepticism. A healthy mix of a negative and neutral reviews lends substantial credibility to the positive reviews presented.

DISGRUNTLED EMPLOYEES ARE LEAVING FAKE REVIEWS

Sometimes, former employees will try to damage your company's reputation by leaving negative or fake reviews about your business.

Reviews from disgruntled employees can be especially harmful, since these individuals often have detailed information about your organization. Always try to get these reviews removed by flagging them on the site.

Google's new review policy (as of December, 2017) prohibits "posting negative content about a current or former employment experience."

If you can't get the review removed, respond in a neutral and even-handed manner. It's important to communicate that the reviewer's account does not represent your business or the experience of customers.

ACTION PLAN

- Identify and confirm fake reviews from disgruntled employees as quickly as possible.

- Flag the reviews as fake or inappropriate to the specific review site.

- If the review isn't removed, respond professionally to the platform so that future customers can see that the comments are not from a customers.

- Acknowledge the issue but strongly express your company's values and high standards.

- Do not engage in a war of words in a public forum. Regardless of the circumstances, keep everything short and sweet.

YOU DON'T HAVE ANY REVIEWS YET

Some businesses would love to respond to online reviews, but they simply don't have any.

Keep in mind that different industries have different tendencies for reviews. While restaurants often have many reviews, medical professionals may have very few reviews, until a sense of community is established on the review site.

If your business doesn't have any reviews, start engaging customers about leaving online reviews and increase the visibility of your presence on review sites.

ACTION PLAN

- Identify all the relevant review sites where your business lacks a clear presence.

- If you haven't already done so, claim your business page in all platforms. Take the initiative by activating your Yelp, Google, Facebook or other page. Go all out by adding photos, descriptions, menus, phone numbers, hours of operation, etc.

- Follow the strategies outlined in this Playbook for asking customers to leave online reviews for your business. Be careful to play by the rules of each platform.

- Think about advertising in the platforms. Google Guides are on Google so advertisement in this platform for your business will connect to people most likely to leave reviews. The same is true for Yelp. If you are in the right industry, consider TripAdvisor, etc.

- Engage customers consistently and nurture a strong online presence.

- Be certain to respond to reviews as this actively encourages more reviews from new customers.

- Reach out to your first batch of customers using the Review 2-Step process to build early engagement, while doing everything possible (and according to platform rules) to make certain your first reviews trend positive.

- Don't forget B2B Review platforms if this is your business model. G2Crowd and Capterra are great resources.

APPENDIX

IT'S YOUR FIRST TIME MANAGING A SPECIFIC REVIEW SITE

Looking at a new, large review source for the first time can be overwhelming, but it doesn't have to be.

When scanning the site, be methodical. A good first step is to search the reviews for obvious spam or profanity that should be flagged or reported.

Then, look for opportunities to connect your processes for managing online reviews. Be aware of any insights that the new site might uncover about your business and implement standard procedures for responding to online reviews.

ACTION PLAN

- Identify the review sites where your business lacks a clear presence.

- If you haven't already done so claim your business page for this platform

- Dig into the details of the reviews to look for outdated content or issues that have been addressed by company improvements. Set up a process to respond to old reviews explaining how future customer experiences will be improved - be very specific.

- Temporarily redirect proactive review encouragement activities to this new platform to make certain it has the most current -- and positive -- comments.

- Engage customers consistently and nurture a strong online presence.

Case Study
One LocalClarity client started with over 50,000 reviews that had not received any previous moderation attention. As we onboarded the client we noticed that some of the poorer reviews contained profanity that we might have expected the platform algorithms to automatically block.

As part of the onboarding process we built up a set of synonyms for vulgar words and phrases (s##t, etc.) and found dozens of 1-Star and 2-Star reviews that contained these targeted words. We worked with the client (over a four week period) to slowly flag them as innappropriate. The project was a big success. Dozens of reviews were removed.

The client saw an immediate improvement in review scores, plus the company's online evaluation no longer contains not-safe-for-children language.

LocalClarity is the platform empowering multi-location businesses to take control of their reputation and presence.

Brands around the world use our tools to gain insights into customer feedback trends; build relationships through direct review responses; discover insights across locations, cities, states, or even countries; and drive additional local web traffic to power sales.

REPUTATIONS MATTER. // TAKE CONTROL. //