5 tactics that encourage customer reviews

In the crowded and ultra-competitive world of e-commerce, there's one thing that almost everyone agrees helps you stand out: reviews. According to one study, 97 percent of online shoppers surveyed said that customer reviews factored into their buying decisions, and 73 percent said written reviews were more useful to them than star and number ratings. In other words, you don't just need good ratings – you need detailed reviews that are helpful to your customers.

That can be a bit of a tall order, and the bad news is that there are no shortcuts to a glowing reviews page on Google, Amazon or any other platform that customers use to find your product. Any service that promises big, instant increases in reviews is probably selling snake oil. But there are simple steps that you can take to gradually build your reviews presence into a selling point for your brand that will also improve your SEO presence.

Here are five relatively easy, common-sense ways to get started.

1. Make sure your business pages are claimed and ready for reviews

The first steps toward getting more reviews involve making sure that it's as easy as possible for customers to leave them. One part of this is something you should be doing anyway – making sure you have easy-to-find pages on Google, Facebook and other major review platforms. If a customer can't easily find your profile, they'll almost never leave a review. You can use the established best practices of local SEO to claim your business listings and ensure you've got easily accessible

pages on Google My Business, Facebook Business and Yelp.

2. Ask customers for reviews (but don’t push)

Sometimes, you’ll need to reach out to customers and ask them for reviews. This doesn’t have to be painful, and it should never be intrusive. This is one area where it’s easy to annoy a customer if you go overboard. But it’s a good way to get some momentum on your reviews page.

Follow-up emails asking for a review are one common way of doing this. They’re usually sent after the customer receives their purchase, and they usually offer a direct link to the page where a customer can review the product or service. You can also add a “thank you” page to your site that asks customers to review once they’ve made a purchase. This is good for software downloads and other goods or services that the customer receives instantly.

Offering discounts and coupons to customers who leave reviews is an option that can deliver good results, but businesses need to be careful. First, check your review platform’s policies regarding paying for reviews. Yelp, for example, has a policy that explicitly prohibits merchants from asking for reviews at all, and its algorithm targets reviews they believe have been solicited. Amazon, meanwhile, is a little more lenient, but still prohibits “any attempt to influence or manipulate reviews.” If you ask your customers to leave a review and want to offer them something for it, you’ll want to ensure that your customers are posting the reviews on a platform that allows it.

3. Focus on the platforms your

customers are most likely to use

While having positive reviews on any platform can be a boon, remember that one of the golden rules of effective e-commerce SEO is to focus on the platforms that are most relevant to you and your customers. Consumer goods companies will likely focus on Amazon and other retail sites. Restaurants, bars and venues will want to keep a good Yelp rating, as will professional service providers like plumbers and accountants. (Businesses of the latter type may want to keep Angie's List in mind as well.) Facebook and Google reviews, meanwhile, are broadly applicable across many types of goods and services.

4. Respond to the reviews you get

Responding to customer reviews on your page can be a great way to show customers that their opinions are genuinely valuable to you. Customers love to feel like they're being listened to, so if they see that leaving a review is likely to get a response, it can help encourage them to go through with posting one.

It's best to have someone with social media and PR expertise tackling this, as it can be easy to say the wrong thing in a review response if you don't think it through carefully. But if you choose to do it yourself, follow some basic best practices of review responses. When responding to negative reviews, focus on addressing the customer's complaint, take responsibility and be polite (but not fawning). If the complaint is about an unavoidable circumstance or something that is actually the customer's fault, try to seed your response (subtly) with information on options available to mitigate the problem for other customers who might encounter it. With positive reviews, be sure to thank the customer, invite them back and use the opportunity to talk up the products or services mentioned in the review.

5. Investigate legitimate paid review programs

The phrase “paid reviews” might make you think of shady practices and even fake reviews, but there’s an interesting new legitimate service that can do this: Amazon Vine, an Amazon-run program that allows some vendors to send reviewers free product in exchange for honest reviews. Vine is rigorously controlled so that vendors have no contact with reviewers, and reviews are in no way guaranteed to be positive, so make sure the products you send out are your very best. You’ll also need to be a member of Amazon’s high-level Vendor Central platform.

The other potential downside of Amazon Vine? It’s not cheap — at all. Sources report that it costs as much as $2,500 to $7,000 per ASIN. But it’s worth crunching the numbers to decide whether it might be right for you. Hopefully, we’ll see more services like Vine pop up in the future, since there’s certainly an appetite among e-commerce merchants for more ways to get product reviews.

And just in case you’re toying with the idea of using an unofficial paid reviews program to pad your numbers and ratings, we strongly encourage you to reconsider. Getting caught paying for reviews through an unauthorized program can have serious consequences, including being penalized by the review platform or even fined by the government. Moreover, it’s the kind of stain on your reputation that’s hard to get out — so don’t risk it.

Reviews are an essential component of building relationships of trust with your customers, and they should be part of any comprehensive e-commerce SEO strategy. Getting a page full of great reviews isn’t easy, or fast — but like all of the best long-term investments, the results pay for themselves many times over.

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