Should you continue to solicit reviews during the outbreak? Local SEOs disagree

Google has suspended publication of reviews and review responses in Google My Business. Yelp modified review guidelines to protect local businesses from "reputational harm" during the outbreak but is still accepting them. Facebook, TripAdvisor and others don't seem to have made any changes in review acceptance or review guidelines.

The question of how to address reviews during the COVID crisis was the subject of some discussion, and different viewpoints, during last Friday's Live with Search Engine Land. So, as I did with store-hours guidance, I decided to follow up with a number of local marketers: **Mike Blumenthal** of **GatherUP, Claire Carlile** of **Claire Carlile Marketing, Adam Dorfman** of **Reputation.com, Miriam Ellis** of **Moz** and **Joy Hawkins of SterlingSky**.

I asked them to respond to the following questions:

- How should businesses seek out and respond to customer feedback right now?
- Should businesses continue to solicit reviews during this time, given that GMB reviews are not being published? And what will happen to the reviews on GMB currently in (moderation) review purgatory?
- On Yelp and other review platforms: Should you be doing anything differently right now?

A range of perspectives surfaced. Joy and Miriam mostly counsel against asking for reviews right now. Mike argues "it depends" and Adam and Claire say it's important to maintain existing review-generation practices in anticipation of a return to normal.

Joy Hawkins, SterlingSky

We are advising customers not to ask for reviews on Google right now. Google hasn't been overly transparent about what is happening to reviews that are being written currently. There is a possibility that they will publish once the review functionality is turned back on, butthere is the possibility that they won't.

In the case of the latter, it would be a ton of wasted effort if the business worked to get tons of reviews that don't publish in the future. In my opinion, since we're not clear on what's going to happen it's not worth risking.

We are currently directing all review requests to Facebook or other niche review sites such as Avvo, Homestars, etc.

Miriam Ellis, Moz

I recommend pausing any review acquisition programs for the present. Transition those resources to email, social media, answering form submissions and phone calls as promptly as possible. This would also be a good time to create a COVID-19 FAQ page on the website, aggregating the most common questions the business is receiving. Link to this page from a sitewide banner so that anyone can understand changes your business has undergone and currently available services you still provide.

I strongly believe that now is the time to build goodwill rather than to ask for public proofs of it in the form of reviews. I won't forget the local businesses that have helped my family during this public health emergency – they are building loyalty.

Finally, if a business has a timely offering that is being underutilized, there is no harm in asking grateful customers to please mention this offering to family and friends who might be helped by the product/service. Word of mouth can be

an offline, personal form of reviews that can help both customers and brands right now.

Mike Blumenthal, GatherUp

Now it is more important than ever to “listen to your customers.” And the fact that Google is closed doesn’t change that. What your customer thinks is more important than where they post it. So minimally, I would expand which sites a business monitors and pay more attention to Facebook and other prominent sites in your industry.

Whether you should solicit reviews is very dependent on your industry and your geography. If you are in a business that is deemed appropriate to stay open, then asking your customers how you are doing and what you can change seems very important. In those sorts of businesses, I might focus on direct-to-business feedback and first party reviews. If your service is critical, it’s essential that you provide not just good service but great service. If you are in Florida selling bathing suits, I think it a different situation.

Business should not continue to solicit reviews at Google. I can’t speak to what Google has said but I can say that they are incredibly short staffed, having sent many workers home and they have a lot on their plate managing store closings and hours. I think it’s possible that Google will try to publish reviews that came in during their “furlough.” On a good day, Google has their difficulties with reviews so who knows.

Should other sites stop accepting reviews? I think it is up to each of them to assess their own markets and customers. If Yelp has the staff to provide the extra level of curation needed, more power to them. I think reviews could be helpful during this period. Did that restaurant that switched to take out do a good job? Does Best Buy kill it with their curb side delivery? Those are things that consumers will need to know.

Adam Dorfman, Reputation.com

For businesses that are temporarily closed, now is a great opportunity to seek out and respond to feedback from your customers in all of the places it might exist. Whether it is surveying your customers via email on new services, products or offerings they would like to see when you reopen, engaging on social media outlets like Facebook or Twitter, or making sure you are still picking up the phone whenever somebody calls so you can personally speak to people, there are many ways to interact with people during this time.

For businesses that are still open, it's highly important to be more empathetic and available than ever should customers reach out to you with feedback in any channel whether surveys, reviews, social media, messaging, phone calls, or in person.

If businesses are not comfortable soliciting reviews on Google today, they can use this time to work towards increasing the total amount of reviews that exist on other sites and apps like Facebook, Foursquare, or TripAdvisor. But diverting all review requesting away from Google might have ranking and visibility implications in the future as the ranking signals that exist today are unlikely to change moving forward.

If Google, as they have said they will, eventually publishes reviews being left now, businesses that have been requesting reviews will likely have increased the amount of GMB reviews for their businesses when compared to competitors that haven't.

Google has made it clear that they plan on publishing reviews in the future. Here is a screenshot we were able to capture after a review was left for a business on GMB:

Claire Carlile, Claire Carlile Marketing

Continue to solicit reviews. Reviews are still important and retain the same importance in shaping people's purchase decisions. I'm sure that Google will publish the "hidden" reviews at some point in the future; however, if there are other platforms where reviews are still visible for your business I'd make sure these are included in your review and feedback strategy, if they're not already.

Check if you have third party reviews showing natively in your business profile, Google your brand name, and your brand name plus "reviews" – what sites do you see? These are the sites that it's likely that your customers and potential customers will also see. Consider investing some time and energy into these sites while new GMB reviews aren't being published.

So, What Should You Do?

The group believes that customer feedback continues to be important during the outbreak, and perhaps more important than ever. However, there's disagreement about whether to continue actively soliciting reviews for Google My Business or whether the "hidden" or "furloughed" reviews will eventually be published. Claire and Adam believe they will ultimately become public. But there's also a recommendation to invest in cultivating reviews for other platforms under the current circumstances.

One thing discussed in Adam and Miriam's responses is that you have to talk to customers very differently right now and be mindful of their circumstances. That extends to any request for feedback. If asking for reviews, it can't be boilerplate copy or business as usual. And you must display appropriate, genuine empathy or risk damaging the consumer perception of

your business or brand.

About The Author

Greg Sterling is a Contributing Editor to Search Engine Land, a member of the programming team for SMX events and the VP, Market Insights at Uberall.
http://feeds.searchengineland.com/~r/searchengineland/~3/AeZkIDfN-Rc/should-you-continue-to-solicit-reviews-during-the-outbreak-local-seos-disagree-332000