Turning reviews into opportunities for reputation and SEO impact

30-second summary:

- Reviews are absolutely crucial to a business’s success and need to be acknowledged.
- Engagement with consumers will positively benefit your business and bring in more reviews in the future.
- Staying honest with your reviews will pay off in the long run.
- Take most reviews as honest opinions about your business and work to build on them for a better consumer experience.

When a busy day means dinner will be takeout instead of home-cooked, chances are you don’t simply choose a restaurant at random. Most likely, you’ll use Google or Yelp to search for data on locations or types of food, and then, most importantly, you’ll look at customer reviews. With tacos on your mind, you may look for a casual Mexican restaurant or fast food. But what if it has less than four stars on Yelp? Scenarios like these have become part of daily life in the communities being served by almost any brand you market.

Reviews and web exposure

Customer reviews have played a significant role in customer choices for decades, and they aren’t specific to restaurants. In recent years their importance has increased exponentially

and can even decide a business's fate. With 93% of consumers using the internet to search for businesses – and 34% of those reading more reviews than before due to the coronavirus – it's impossible to understate the importance of a good review.

Good reviews positively affect business exposure. The perceived quality of a company will contribute to a consumer's eventual decision, and very rarely will a customer trust a three-star repair shop over a five-star one. Often, the three-star business will rank too poorly to be featured in Google's sets of three local results, called "local packs". Google's local packs are meant to make it easy to find top results that match a customer's query while suppressing less-recommended options. Exposure alone is helpful, but reviews impact both visibility in the packs and searchers' ultimate decisions.

Increasing presence and reviews through engagement

Reviews generally follow the trend of highlighting a specific feature of the company that stood out to the customer – good service, speed, cleanliness, and so on. If there are multiple negative reviews, there's a good chance there will also be specific issues reviewers are citing. There are two actions a business can take, ignore the bad comments or actively engage. Since only 48% of people would even consider using a business with less than four stars, negative customer reviews should be taken as serious critiques (at least most of the time).

A good way to immediately engage with reviewers is to simply reply via the owner response function Google provides in the Google My Business dashboard. Replies, thoughtful replies, can net forgiveness, understanding, and even a changed star rating for your business. Customers are more forgiving than you think and actively wait for owner responses. Even without incentives like coupons or gifts, they will appreciate the time and

effort you took to understand their grievances. For smaller businesses, a few three-star reviews changed into four-stars can generate a meaningful boost in Google or Yelp search results. Direct communication increases trust from both current and future consumers and can lead to tangible business gains.

Staying honest and relevant

Faking positive reviews is nothing new in the business world. While review platforms like Google and Yelp have some safeguards in place for catching or filtering out fake reviews, they don’t automatically discover every review that violates their guidelines. This means that it’s often up to business owners to do their part by asking themselves whether it’s right to intentionally mislead consumers with false advertising.

The answer is, of course, no. Brands that lean on fake reviews in hopes of a quick gain in rankings or foot traffic may find themselves on the wrong end of lawsuits, legal penalties, business listing removal, and permanent reputation damage.

A far better approach for local brands that hope to enjoy many years of success in business is to commit to constantly earning and improving reputation through exceptional customer service. Rather than misleading the public with fake sentiment, embrace consumers as providers of both free quality control (in the form of negative reviews) and the best sales copy anyone could possibly publish about your company in the form of positive reviews.

When you receive an honest but negative review, consider it a mini-inspection one customer made of your business, citing elements you can often actively correct. A flood of negative reviews mentioning similar grievances may require fundamental operational changes to improve customer experience, prompting action on your part that can eventually lead to an enviable,

lucrative online reputation. Your brand is so much better off when dissatisfied patrons speak up because stated problems can be solved, and when your public responses show how seriously you act on complaints, you're offering rock-solid proof that your brand puts the customer first.

Meanwhile, when a happy customer takes the time to leave a positive review, make the respectful gesture of thanking them in return. Use the owner response space to express appreciation and, where possible, mention something exciting about your business like a new menu item or the debut of a new service that you hope they'll stop by again to experience. Don't be too sales-y, but do engage. Reviews, at their best, are two-way conversations.

If you're just beginning to promote your business online and are feeling a sense of urgency about getting your first reviews, study the guidelines of the various review platforms and then create a compliant review acquisition campaign that yields results. But take it slow, too many reviews at once can result in removal, and keep in mind that you'll be earning reviews for the life of the business you're marketing. It's a long hike rather than a sprint. Avoid guideline violations and center excellent customer service and you'll be ahead of the review game from the get-go.

Miriam Ellis is a Local Subject Matter Expert at Moz.

More about:

https://www.searchenginewatch.com/2021/02/17/turning-reviews-into-opportunities-for-reputation-and-seo-impact/