What you need to know about Yelp’s latest update dubbed ‘Ghost’

In early December, I had been approached by a client who was upset – his chiropractic office in California had lost a large portion of Yelp reviews. Curious, I asked him when he first noticed the reviews went missing. He had mentioned He first started noticing his reviews drop in early November. By mid-November, he had lost 40 percent of his total reviews to the “not recommended” section of Yelp.

He wasn’t alone. I discovered there were a number of businesses facing this problem. In extreme cases, some businesses had lost over 1,000 reviews to “Not Recommended.”

It was apparent something major happened to Yelp’s recommendation software and it was now recommending fewer reviews for public consumption. Yelp, when asked to comment, would not publicly confirm or deny a major update occurred.

They instead provided the following statement:

However, anonymous sources in their sales department did confirm that engineers at Yelp had performed a major update to their systems around late October. One had said roughly 90 percent of the phone calls he receives are business owners

upset about losing reviews.

That insight led me to start looking at Yelp's Twitter.

In looking at tweets dating back to 2008, what I found was interesting – in November and December of 2018, Yelp's replies about their recommendation software spiked sharply. Users have been inquiring about lost reviews now more than during any other period. (Yelp joined Twitter in 2008.)

So not only was there an update, this was likely the most significant Yelp update to have ever occurred on its platform. The update deserves a name so we're calling it "Ghost."

Key insights about Ghost:

The update received its name for three reasons:

- The update began happening on or around Halloween.
- Several user reviews are now “ghosted,” disappearing into the “not recommended” section.
- The update seemed largely invisible. Hardly anyone (besides those affected) noticed the major update occurred.

To get an idea of who was affected by Ghost, I examined a dataset of 696 monitored Yelp business profiles. I looked at the review counts on the profiles before and after the update occurred.

Of the 696 Yelp monitored accounts, 187 lost one or more reviews in late October to early December.

Of the 187 businesses that lost reviews:

- 46 companies lost 20 percent or more (on average it was 31 percent) of their reviews.
- 61 lost 10 to 20 percent (on average 16 percent).
- 80 lost 5 to 10 percent (an average of 5 percent)

There were 507 businesses that had not lost any reviews. So of this sample size, roughly 1 in 4 businesses were affected.

5 take-aways

1. This update was a cross-platform wide update. Everyone was affected.
2. The reviews that were filtered into “Not Recommended” weren’t all 5-stars. Of the 187 business that lost reviews, two business lost enough reviews to lose one full-rating point; 45 lost .5 rating point; but 140 lost no rating points at all.
3. Whether or not a business was an advertiser with Yelp

didn’t seem to matter.
4. Whether or not you were a Yelp Elite did not seem to matter, these reviews would have also been filtered.
5. Reviews that have been on the platform for several years were filtered.

What can you do if you were affected by the Ghost update?

It’s unknown what factors specifically Yelp updated in its recommendation software. However, Yelp must have found certain trends in reviewer activity internally.

There are signals we know Yelp looks for in its recommendation software when considering whether or not to filter reviews. It is provided on its website:

> *“The software looks at dozens of different signals, including various measures of quality, reliability, and activity on Yelp. Most of all, however, it’s looking for people who are intrinsically motivated to share the wide range of rich and detailed experiences they have every day with local businesses.”*

Or in the words of Mike Blumenthal, “Yelp wants current, active reviews from active reviewers. Reviews that are valuable to the business may not be valuable to the consumer.”

This is a great transition into the final points.

Yelp’s negative stigma

I’d recommend not getting upset with Yelp. While Yelp has a negative stigma for being home to largely negative reviews, the reality couldn’t be further from the truth. According to Yelp’s factsheet, 68 percent of reviews left on Yelp are 4 or 5 stars.

Only 16 percent of reviews on Yelp are one-star reviews.

Expert David Ciancio offers his advice: “Hating Yelp is kind of an ignorant thing. People look at it as a driver of negative energy. If you pay attention to your Yelp profile, you will see the benefits. 68 percent of all Yelp reviews are positive. By simply saying thank you and responding to your reviews, you’ll see a 1-star increase. Over time you’ll see a .4-star lift in rating.”

Other things you can do to improve your Yelp presence:

Do

- Have a “Check-In” offer.
- Share positive Yelp reviews on social media from its platform.
- Install the Yelp review widget onto your website.
- Log into your profile and respond to reviews.
- Monitor your reviews on Yelp.

Don’t:

- Directly ask your customers for reviews.
- Send out direct links to your business profile (Yelp can track referring URLs).
- Use review solicitation software that allow you to send out solicitations for Yelp reviews.

Were you affected by Ghost? Do you have any tips we missed? Please comment below; we’d love to hear from you.

One other thing we’d still like to know: Can reviews that are currently “not recommended” move back into “recommended”?

Opinions expressed in this article are those of the guest author and not necessarily Search Engine Land. Staff authors are listed here.

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