

How to Make and Maintain an Incredible Review Profile

Those familiar with local search ranking factors will need no convincing of just how important review signals are for wider search visibility. [Moz's 2017 Local Search Ranking Factors survey](#) eloquently confirms this, concluding review signals yield a 13% influence in local search. What's notable about this figure is that behavioral signals were rated at just 10% and social signals at 4%.

Search aside, online reviews are becoming more important to consumers year-on-year. The [BrightLocal 2016 Local Consumer Review Survey](#) was definitive in its findings;

- 8 out of 10 consumers trust online reviews as much as a personal recommendation for a business, product or service.
- 91% of consumers read online reviews.
- 74% of consumers say that positive reviews make them trust a local business more.
- 50% of people now read online reviews regularly, compared with just 33% in 2015.
- Only 9% of consumers today neglect to read online reviews, compared with 29% in 2010.
- Just 5% of consumers say they don't pay attention to online reviews. This is down from 11% in 2015.

Your most valuable marketing asset

The power of reviews is nothing new. Word-of-mouth has long been the most successful form of marketing. The challenge today is that those spoken neighbor-to-neighbor recommendations are now digital snippets accessible to all and available online forever. Making and maintaining a fantastic review profile is not solely about reputation management. It isn't just a PR exercise, though that plays its part.

A strong review profile is your most valuable marketing asset. It's a conversion optimization tool. A trust signal. A mode of customer acquisition. And of course, a crucial ranking signal.

Increase your Google Reviews

Building an incredible review profile starts with Google. Google My Business reviews are one of the first things consumers see when they conduct a search on Google or Google Maps, so naturally they're also the foundation of an incredible review profile.

Our own research determined that 7 out of 10 consumers will leave an online review if asked to do so. You can offer an incentive such as a discount on a subsequent purchase for a review but, common sense, the Federal Trade Commission's (FTC) Endorsement Guides and Google's own policing of incentivized reviews should be your yardstick for what is and isn't ethical.

For ease of reference, [Google's policy](#) states, "Conflict of interest: Reviews are most valuable when they are honest and unbiased. If you own or work at a place, please don't review your own business or employer. Don't offer or accept money, products, or services to write reviews for a business or to write negative reviews about a competitor. If you're a business owner, don't set up review stations or kiosks at your place of business just to ask for reviews written at your place of business."

Develop industry-specific review profiles

Once your framework is in place for how to increase Google reviews, move onto industry-specific review sites. If you're in the travel industry, sites like TripAdvisor are ideal. If you're in interior design, Houzz will be your main aim. There are thousands of niche review sites covering most sectors. Too many to choose from? Begin with the most popular and work from there.

Don't neglect social media reviews

Social media – specifically Facebook – is another crucial building block in your mission to create an incredible review profile. If you haven't actively pursued reviews via Facebook previously, simply go to settings and check the Show Reviews option is switched on.

After Facebook comes a host of directory sites like Yelp, Bing and Yahoo!. These are critical for local search so should form part of a well-rounded profile.

Don't fall into techie traps

Building a stellar review profile organically and effectively is not without its pitfalls.

Firstly, never collect reviews on your site using an API. Google's algorithms are able to detect if most of your reviews are coming from the same IP address. Obviously this can rouse suspicion – even if each review is completely authentic.

Likewise, avoid asking people to review your business while they're on the premises, especially if they're connected to your Wi-Fi. It can appear as though you're simply leaving reviews for yourself, even if that's not the case.

Instead, set up a reviews page on your website which directs customers to the relevant review platform. This dedicated review page can also be set up to show some of your best reviews, as well as things like TrustPilot ratings and any other awards or testimonials you might want to showcase.

Don't be tempted to 'fake it 'til you make it'

One of the most important things you can do to maintain a great review profile is to prioritize authenticity as much as possible. To the uninitiated, there's little harm in buying a few fake reviews to get the ball rolling. In practice, just one fake review picked up by Google can result in your whole business being removed from the web's most valuable directory. Getting reviews online is not a quick fix. It's a long process and there are no shortcuts.

Authenticity also counts

Slow and steady actually does win the race when building and maintaining an incredible review profile. Having a colossal volume of reviews on every review platform you frequent can look inauthentic, especially if you're a small local business. As a local tradesman or a mobile hairdresser, you'd benefit more from 50 high-quality reviews packed with useful opinions than from 5,000 generic reviews that aren't of any use to your specific demographic.

When questioned for our Local Consumer Review Survey, 73% of consumers were of the opinion that reviews older than three months were no longer relevant. Focusing on obtaining a small number of reviews consistently is not just a more sustainable approach, it's also the more strategic play for customer acquisition.

Following on from authenticity, it's important to focus on high-quality reviews. Be on the lookout for Google 'Local Guides' – these are individuals who review a lot of businesses on Google and their reviews carry a lot of weight, both with Google and with other users.

Embed review acquisition and management at every stage of your operational process

Developing a strong review profile is rarely a job for one. Your wider team can also make a significant contribution to the process, provided that they're sufficiently trained on your firm's reputation management policy beforehand.

Identify opportunities where reviews would fit naturally into your day-to-day operations. You could train sales associates in making after-sales pitches for reviews to share their experiences of doing business with you for example. You may consider offering bonuses to employees that get great feedback. It's discouraged to incentivize the actual reviews with cash offers or free products, but there's nothing wrong with incentivizing your employees to solicit feedback as part of wider customer service actions.

Consistency counts

Realistically, reviews need to be a consistent part of your strategy. If you have a sudden influx of reviews one week and then nothing for three weeks after that, it can look strange to visitors and to Google. If you're getting a handful of reviews each week however, it shows that you're creating steady streams of satisfied

customers that feel moved to share their thoughts. It's important to make sure you have recent reviews as well as older reviews – keep them coming in organically as much as you can.

Handle negatives with grace

Not every review is going to be a glowing, five-star assessment of your business. Even the most respected of establishments have the odd negative review. There will always be customers who felt they had a poor experience and want to share it with others. This is where your reputation management skills will be put to the test.

Firstly, you should make sure you respond properly to each and every negative review. Some reviews you receive might come across as unpleasant, unreasonable – perhaps even downright unhinged. But by responding in a completely professional manner, you show off your exceptional customer service skills to other potential customers and you demonstrate that perhaps the original reviewer may have been a little harsh.

Address the problem directly and be realistic

When you're composing a response to a negative review, always remember that your words are not just for the reviewer's benefit. Anyone who visits your review page trying to get an idea of the kind of business you are will be able to see how you respond.

Don't resort to generic responses when confronted with negative reviews. Consumers want to see that you're willing to step up when a customer has had a bad experience. They don't like to see other users being fobbed off with a pre-written response from the management which doesn't address or even mention the particular problems faced. A genuine apology, an acknowledgement of what went wrong and an outline of steps taken to rectify the issue is appropriate in most cases.

While a poor review can feel like your entire reputation is about to be derailed, it's important to remember that having a 100% 5-star review rate can actually work against you. More seasoned online shoppers will admit to being skeptical when faced with a perfect score. Cynical or not, it's easy when presented with nothing but five star reviews to assume that some must be fake, even if that's not the case. The occasional negative review can actually keep your profile looking organic and trustworthy.

Flag inappropriate reviews or request removal

If you feel that a review has overstepped the boundary between constructive and insulting, you can flag it up to Google and request it be removed. Google will look for language that is against its guidelines, including the use of profanities or abusive language. Unfortunately, this isn't a tactic which can be used against fake reviews, because the flagged reviews are sent to Google without context.

Other review platforms will have their own policies when it comes to abusive or defamatory reviews. In some cases, you'll be able to request a negative review be removed – you'll usually have to show that it was malicious, defamatory or downright untrue.

How to get solicit reviews from customers

There are a number of ways to ethically request customer reviews. A combination of two or more methods is most effective, but only trial and error will determine what best suits your particular customer demographic. If soliciting reviews is new to you, try these suggestions and then refine your approach based on what works and what doesn't:

- At point of sale, hand out postcards or business cards with the URL of your review page on it. Customers are more likely to leave reviews if you make the process easy for them, rather than leaving them to track down your review option themselves.
- Send out personalized emails to your customers thanking them for their business and asking for honest reviews.
- Simple reminders are important. Many consumers won't specifically plan to leave a review, but 7 out of 10 are happy to do so if asked.
- Make it as easy as possible for customers to leave a review by offering a range of formats and streamlining the process. Try to ensure they only have to click one link and avoid asking them to login in order to vocalize their opinions.
- Reach out to customers promptly to encourage them to leave a review after a sale. If you get in touch with them two weeks after their purchase, they're far less likely to post an accurate review than if you contact them a day or two later.

We'd love to hear your thoughts

We'd love to hear how you deal with customer reviews. What techniques do you use to solicit customer reviews? How do you go about maintaining a strong review profile?