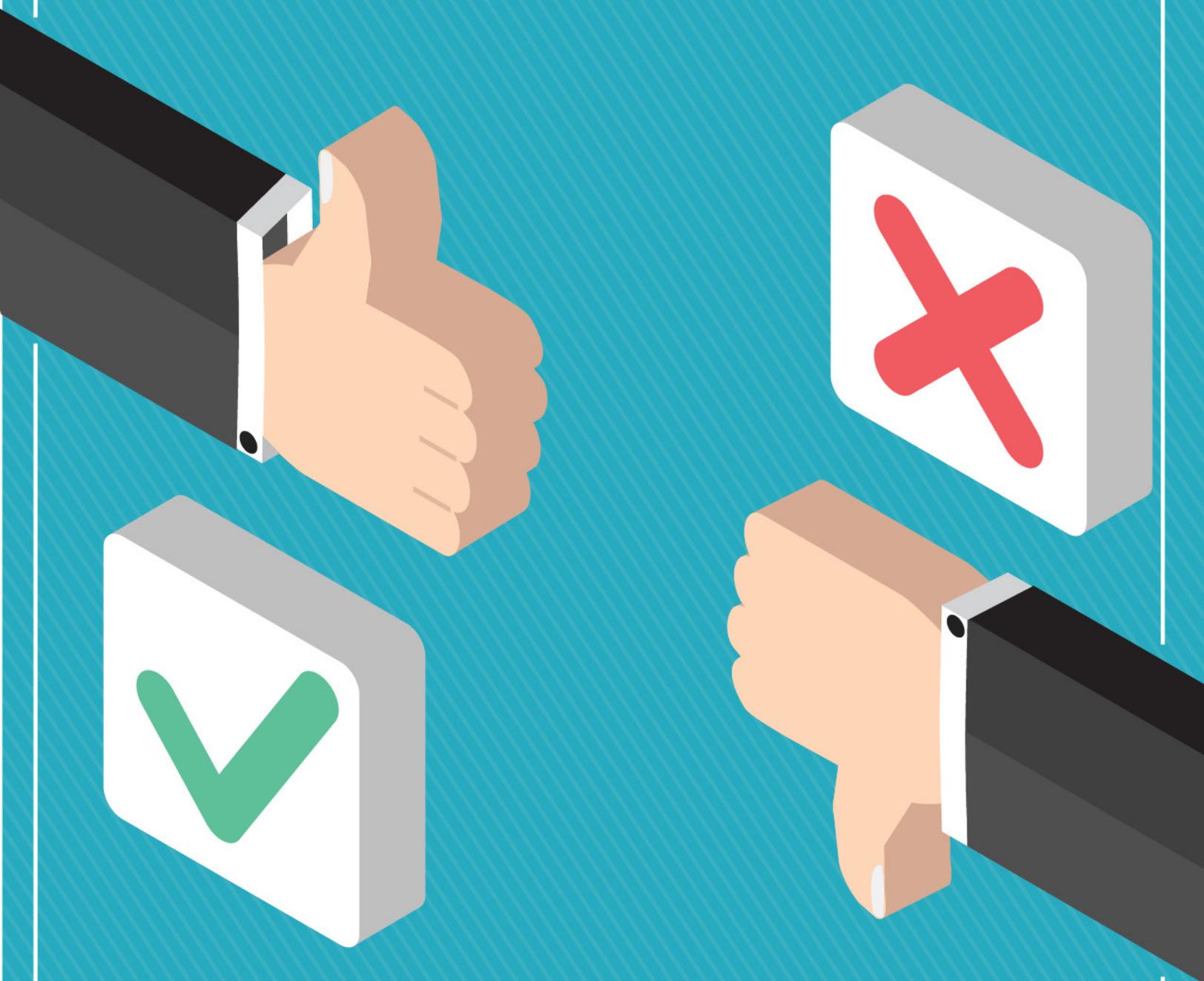


THE BUSINESS OWNER'S GUIDE TO

ONLINE CUSTOMER REVIEWS

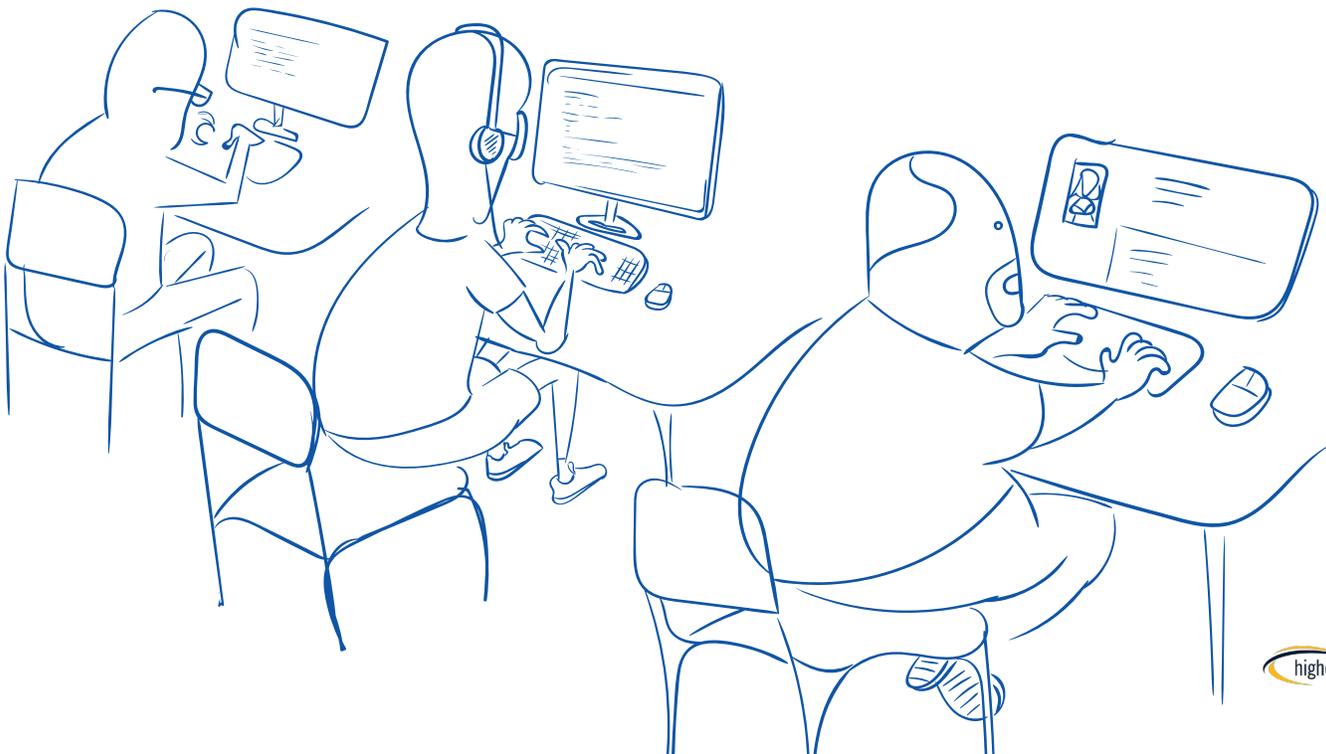


THE IMPORTANCE OF ONLINE REVIEWS FOR LOCAL BUSINESSES

In the 21st century, how has the decision-making process changed for consumers? Is it really all that different from the last few centuries? Yes... and no. People make decisions in largely the same way they always have—seeking out trusted advice from other people. The big difference now is that there's almost unfettered access to information from anywhere and at any time.

What are the root causes? First and foremost, the Internet has altered consumer patterns and habits in a number of ways. Second, the technology that enables Internet access has rapidly advanced to allow for faster transmission of information across both political and geographical borders. Third, the number of sources for information has proliferated, meaning consumers have a growing list of references they can use to base their decisions upon.

So, instead of just asking their friends and relatives for advice about a local business—whether it's a restaurant, vendor or retail company—consumers have every opportunity to see what other customers have said about a business before making the decision to work with or buy from them. In a sense, there's a huge interconnected web of reviewers that become the trusted advisors that consumers want and need to make informed decisions.



CONSUMERS TRUST REVIEWS



This puts local businesses in a unique position. It's increasingly difficult to influence consumers with heavily branded messaging. In effect, local businesses need customer reviews to project a sense of authenticity, trust and relevance.

According to a 2014 study from BrightLocal, **88 percent** of consumers have read reviews to determine the quality of a local business. At the same time, nearly **9 out of 10** customers trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations. The picture this data paints is pretty clear: Consumers not only rely on online reviews to make smart decisions about their businesses they choose to visit or work with, but they also hold these reviews in high regard.

88%

OF CONSUMERS HAVE
READ REVIEWS TO
DETERMINE THE QUALITY
OF A LOCAL BUSINESS

Online reviews are a way for local businesses to establish trust with consumers—that is, if your reviews are positive and authentic. The Bright Local study found that **72 percent** of consumers say positive reviews instill more trust in a local business. And this sense of trust is strengthened with multiple, authentic reviews. Most consumers need sufficient third-party validation before they have full confidence in a business. In fact, **85 percent** of consumers read up to **10 reviews** before they trust a business.

YOUR REPUTATION—AND REVENUE—IS AT STAKE

Local businesses are most affected by online reviews. Depending on a local business's Web presence, review sites may be the major source of online traffic for your local business. A surprisingly limited number small business owners have a website. In a study of more than **3,800 small businesses**, Google found that **55 percent** of SMBs don't have a website. This adds even greater importance for businesses to have a strong presence on review sites. For instance, a study from Harvard Business School found that every star rating added to a restaurant review on Yelp translated to a **5 to 9 percent** impact on revenue.

However, local businesses can't simply create a brand page on review sites and expect magical results. Without a strategy to monitor and manage online reviews, your business may struggle to compete as a direct result of negative comments—whether they're substantiated or not.

In this eBook, we'll discuss:

- What review sites consumers are using
- How reviews help local businesses in local search rankings
- How to monitor online customer reviews
- How to respond to customer reviews
- Tactics for getting more customer reviews

CUSTOMER REVIEW SITES: WHERE CUSTOMERS ARE TALKING

The first step in developing a strategy for online customer reviews is straightforward: Local businesses need to understand what websites their customers are using to publish their online reviews. The list of purely review-based sites is fairly limited, but an ever-expanding number of commercial and social media sites have dedicated significant Web real estate to customer feedback.

For starters, here are some of the heavy-weights for online reviews:



Founded in 2004, Yelp is one of the very first online companies dedicated solely to customer reviews. It allows businesses from virtually any industry to create a page that consumers can visit to post reviews or research a company. As of the third quarter of 2015, Yelp boasted **89 million** unique visitors and archived more than **90 million** reviews. Local businesses complete their profiles by filling out their name, category, address and phone number, links to their website, photos and other pertinent information for their specific audience.

Generating revenue by selling ads, Yelp has evolved with technology to offer mobile apps for almost every operating system, in addition to the standard website. The site uses an algorithm to filter out spammy, malicious or deliberately falsified reviews. The strength of this site resides in the massive number of reviewers and reviews, which gives consumers a clearer picture about a specific business. Furthermore, business owners get access to the Yelp dashboard. This is an online tool that gives insight into traffic to their Yelp profile and user actions.

Angie's list.

Another longtime online customer review resource, Angie's List is largely representative of small businesses, especially service providers. The site aggregates ratings and reviews for businesses comprising **720 services**, and it has been a resource for more than **3 million** households in the U.S. The big differentiator for Angie's List is the fact that consumers have to pay to become members, thereby granting them access to the **60,000 reviews** that members post on a monthly basis.

3 MILLION

HOUSEHOLDS USE ANGIE'S
LIST AS A RESOURCE FOR
READING AND LEAVING
BUSINESS REVIEWS

So, reviewers have to be dedicated to making Angie's List worthwhile, which makes it potentially more difficult to earn reviews on a consistent basis.

Members review service providers based on the quality of their work, price, professionalism and number of other characteristics. Another differentiator is that the reviewers aren't anonymous, meaning the business can see exactly who left the feedback. Members are also limited to writing one review per 6-month period of time, which Angie's List uses to help avoid repeat reviews per service provider.

Google

Given that Google is the **No. 1 search engine in the world**, it shouldn't come as a surprise that it's also a significant source for reviews for local businesses. A quick experiment to test this out is to search for any type of business you'd like and add "near me" to the keyword phrase; see how many listings show up with reviews. Besides the paid ads, the first search result to show up is likely a map with the names of specific service providers listed out with their contact information, the number of stars they've earned and a link to their reviews.

To get started here, local businesses need to sign up for **Google My Business** or create a **Google Plus page**. So that businesses get the full value out of their listing, it's critical that they completely and accurately fill out their contact information. Google's algorithm tends to favor businesses that provide consistent information across their digital footprint, meaning all information should match on their website, social media sites and Google My Business page. This is also a great benefit for consumers, who will not only use these listings to read reviews but contact the business as well.

facebook

Similar to the way that Google has become the preeminent search engine, Facebook is the reigning champion of social media—and it has made customer reviews a part of the strategy for its business-centric offerings. It's also a recent feature, having launched at the end of 2014. Similar to other customer review sites, consumers assign a business a certain number of stars based on their experiences.

One development that local businesses need to recognize is that while the reviews largely affect the business's placement in users' Facebook news feeds, they're becoming increasingly visible in search engine results. So, Facebook reviews will also show up in search among **Yelp** and **Google** ratings. Facebook gives business owners significant control over whether they allow reviews and visibility, making this social site more influential in the sphere of online consumer review influence.

While these four may be some of the more visible consumer review sites, local businesses should also pay close attention to sites like Consumer Reports and the Better Business Bureau. Other websites that may not have the same notoriety include Trustpilot, TripAdvisor and mobile apps like Foursquare, Goodsnitch, Manta and MerchantCircle.

These also are sources for informed reviews and ratings that consumers rely on to make better decisions and give local businesses the chance to develop a larger, more positive online presence.

HOW REVIEWS HELP BUSINESSES IN LOCAL SEARCH RANKINGS

It was hinted at before, but it can't be overstated how important online customer reviews are for a local business's search ranking.

REVIEWS STAND OUT IN THE SEARCH RESULTS

There is increasing evidence that Google and other search engines favor online reviews and position them favorably in the search results. This is incredibly important for local businesses and small business in particular. Because many SMBs don't have a unique website, online review sites and Google Plus pages are often the only interaction that customers have with the company. These are also the primary pages that search engine crawlers will catalog and subsequently feature in SERPS.



There's also the matter of the rating system. With sites like Google, Yelp and now Facebook, the stars are typically brightly colored and have a specific color based on the quality of the rating. This influences user behavior, motivating consumers to click on businesses that have favorable ratings. Furthermore, websites such as Google and Yelp give customers the chance to filter results based on customer reviews, similar to the way Amazon gives users the ability to filter products by consumer ratings.

SEO software provider Moz identified a number of factors that influence local search ranking. The 2015 report found the review characteristics that appear to influence rankings are:

- Quantity
- Quality
- Velocity
- Diversity

In other words, the first of the primary factors that have an impact on local search through customer reviews is the number of reviews that a business earns. Second, it's important for reviews to be written by people who have had an actual encounter with the business. It's increasingly critical for all content published on the Web to be written in natural language and the result of individuals paid to write keyword-packed copy.

Third, the speed at which a local business generates reviews is also influential, likely because this is strongly tied to online traffic and is also indicative of whether the review is genuine. Lastly, the variation in reviews is also a major influence on search rankings because it suggests that the reviews are authentic and not the result of bots or a scheme to gain false positive reviews

BE WHERE THE CONSUMERS ARE—AND BE INFLUENTIAL

For local businesses, half of the battle is figuring out where the target consumer audience is. With online reviews, business owners are in a better position to identify who their customer base is, what their experiences are and leverage them as a force to influence future customers.

The fact of the matter is that **88 percent** of customers have read online reviews to determine the quality of a business. Local businesses that ignore this fact are shooting themselves in the foot. For instance, **90 percent** of Yelp users said that positive reviews influence their purchasing decisions. Meanwhile, businesses with Yelp accounts see an average increase of **\$8,000** in annual revenue.

90%
OF YELP USERS SAID
THAT POSITIVE REVIEWS
INFLUENCE THEIR
PURCHASING DECISIONS

Once you know how to reach customers to earn their reviews and understand why it's important for your bottom line, the next step is paying close attention to what they're saying..

HOW TO MONITOR ONLINE CUSTOMER REVIEWS



While some consumer review sites like Yelp and Angie's List will provide you with an online dashboard you can use to keep track of traffic and the reviews listed to your profiles, it's important to stay vigilant about what customers are saying across all channels.

Google Alerts

One of the best options for staying up to date with the Web has to say about a local business is Google Alerts. In addition to being a free resource, it's also a powerful tool that can be customized to fit the needs of the business owner. All the user really needs is an email address and the name of the business. From this point, it's as simple as choosing the result type, frequency and the number of alerts. It's a well-worn tool for public relations professionals, and it should also be fully implemented to help businesses keep track of everything mentioned about them online.

ReviewPush

Austin-based ReviewPush was founded in 2011, and its sole purpose is to provide small businesses with a software platform that allows them to automate many aspects of online reputation management. For instance, the platform is set up to monitor multiple online review sites, including Google, YellowPages, Foursquare and Facebook, which lets business owners keep on top of everything that customers are saying about their local business. ReviewPush will notify a business via email, and the user can reply to the reviews using email as well.

The platform has great functionality for businesses with multiple locations, allowing for comparative rankings between stores and a tool that enables operators to request reviews. Finally, another key tool notifies business owners if their review profiles are incomplete, which ultimately influences local search rankings.

If This Then That

Another free resource that's highly customizable and a potent weapon in the battle to track online customer reviews is If This Then That. The beauty of this website is that business owners can set up rules for monitoring online reviews or mentions through a vast number of channels, including all of the social networks—Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram and more. IFTTT functions similarly to Google Alerts in the way that it will notify the business owner when the company is mentioned. So, a local business can set up an alert for an RSS feed for a specific industry website and then it can receive either a text message or email as it happens.

Meltwater IceRocket

The next phase of monitoring online consumer mentions is a bit more hands-on. Like most search engines, IceRocket allows business owners to enter a number of keywords that they can use to find out what customer reviews say about them in blog posts and social networks. The advanced search option is a big help here because the user can identify specific words in a blog post title, as well as the tags. Business owners can also search a unique domain or even individual authors. In the case that a local business operator knows of a prominent reviewer, he or she could quickly and easily search through this person's blog posts to find mention of the company.

Topsy

While Topsy may appear limited on the surface—it's an advanced search/filter tool for Twitter—the fact is this resource is highly effective in finding out what consumers may be saying about a particular business, as well as gauge the sentiment of their tweets. Another component to keep in mind is that Twitter often serves as a way to distribute a variety of content, meaning tweets aren't simply 140-character mini-rants but frequently contain links to other, more information-rich sites. Additionally, business owners can search for posts written by industry influencers, who likely have more prominence and influence over consumers.



Once a business owner has a plan in place to listen and monitor customer reviews, he or she needs to make sure there's a sound strategy to respond to customers.

HOW TO RESPOND TO CUSTOMER REVIEWS

Eventually, business owners with a presence on multiple review sites will have to step up and respond to reviews. Not to worry—it's not all doom and gloom. The best part about customer reviews is that businesses should get a blend of positive, lukewarm and negative reviews—all of which are vital in the grand scheme of things.

To ensure businesses don't come out of encounters with customers on these review sites with egg on their faces, a clear workflow is vital. Here are some suggestions:

FOR POSITIVE REVIEWS

Respond in a timely manner – Customers who go out of their way to leave a positive comment or review shouldn't be greeted with silence, nor should the business operator wait a year to reply.

Express your gratitude – A little humility goes a long way.

Be conversational, but respectful – This is a chance for a business to show off its human side, especially if it's in an industry not known for great customer experiences.

Reinforce the positive elements – A reply shouldn't be overly self-congratulatory, but it's definitely a chance to play up what the business excels at.

Embrace professionalism – Limit the number of times “dude” or “YOLO” are included in the reply.

Strategically use keywords – Do so naturally and avoid stuffing a bunch of keywords in to earn the attention of Google.

FOR NEGATIVE REVIEWS

Give yourself time to cool down – Nothing good ever comes from a rage-induced rant, especially when addressing a problem that the business may be entirely responsible for.

Consider the complaint and ensure that there's a basis for it

- o Don't add fuel to the fire with Internet trolls
- o Make sure the reviewer is making factual claims
- o Ensure you can feasibly fix the problem
- o Consider the viral impact of the complaint/conversation

Address the problem – Own up the issue and show the customer their concerns are important to the business.

Give your initial response – In other words, apologize for the bad experience.

Move the conversation offline – To ensure the issue is resolved to the utmost ability of the business owner, it's a smart idea to take the conversation out of the spotlight of the public eye.

Monitor the issue – Was this a one-time occurrence or an issue that's built into the business's operating model? Negative reviews are a learning moment for the business. Don't neglect their importance.

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At this point, business owners should own up to the fact that customer reviews—good and bad—are critical to the success of their company. They're indispensable resources for other consumers, draw significant traffic online and help businesses grow. So, how can local businesses get more reviews?

TACTICS FOR GETTING MORE CUSTOMER REVIEWS

Considering the popularity of online customer reviews, getting reviews shouldn't be a monumental feat. As long as a local business has customers, it's likely they'll be more than willing to leave their feedback. However, it's more likely that a consumer will leave complaints rather than shower a business with compliments, so it's still a great idea to have a plan in place to entice customers to leave reviews. There is a variety of ways business operators can do this:

SHOWCASE EXISTING REVIEWS

An added benefit of having a dedicated website is that local businesses can highlight the feedback they're getting from the customers on their own branded site. This approach reduces the number of clicks that consumers have to make to find the third-party validation they need to decide if they should purchase the products or services from the company.

Not all businesses will have the time, budget or capabilities to build out their website to include customer reviews. So, an alternative is to place links within the existing website that lead consumers to sites like Yelp, Angie's List and the Better Business Bureau. By doing so, the business is facilitating the research phase for potential customers and demonstrating the confidence they have in their customer relationships.



INITIATE THE DISCUSSION

Rather than be a passive spectator in fostering the growth of online consumer reviews, local businesses can take the initiative in a number of ways. First, the simplest tactic is to simply ask for feedback. Whether it's during a phone call, email or face-to-face encounter, business owners can tactfully remind their customers how valuable their feedback is for the company and work it into the conversation. Additionally, email signatures are a great place to add a reminder that links to external review pages. This way, there's an ever-present message going out to contacts asking for their feedback.

A not-so-technical approach for companies with a brick-and-mortar location is to put up signage notifying customers about the importance of customer reviews. An important factor to keep in mind if local businesses go this route is to offer incentives that will motivate customers to take the desired action. Online businesses have the advantage of being just a click away from a review site. Starbucks and a number of other coffee shops have used this strategy with customer receipts.

REMARKETING CAMPAIGNS

For local businesses interested in leveraging Google AdWords to advertise their products or services, it's a fairly simple and inexpensive step to implement a remarketing campaign. Companies can take a few approaches to this using cookies. Cookies are essentially a text file that Web servers can store on a customer's hard drive that collects information about them. For a broader reach, businesses can put cookies onto customer review sites and then ads requesting feedback will follow the user when they go to different websites. While businesses are likely to reach customers this way, they may also end up asking for reviews from people looking for information. A more targeted approach would be to put cookies onto a purchase confirmation screen, which ensures the person is a verified customer.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Reviews can make or break local businesses. Customers have consistently shown a demand for them and the search engines are increasingly prone to give reviews greater prominence in the SERPs.

Reviews are also a great way to find out where a local business is succeeding or missing the mark. Customers are a barometer for the performance of a company's individual products, services, staff members and the business as a whole. Without paying attention, it's very difficult for a local business to understand where problems exist.

Before going ahead and creating company profiles on every single customer review site, businesses should consider which review sites will be most relevant. Local business operators need to take the time to create a strategy to ensure they're making the most of online reviews. It's a major component of dominating search engine results and making sure local businesses succeed.

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