

Gearing for growth with online reviews



By [Ashleigh Wainstein](#), issued by [Social Places](#)

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Improving online review ratings is a strategic necessity for franchises and multi-location brands as more customers engage with them via online listings - and expect a response.



Image credit: You X Ventures on Unsplash.

Companies that adopt effective online review strategies are reaping the benefits and typically see an increased score of 0.2 out of five stars every six months. Most consumers won't consider a business with less than four stars and 88% of consumers say online reviews influence their buying decisions.

Feeding feedback

They are eager to leave reviews too – seven out of 10 consumers will leave feedback if asked to and more than 80% of these are positive.

It's one of the reasons a growing number of South African companies, particularly big brands, are formalising their review strategies as consumers flock to sites like Google, Facebook and TripAdvisor to get recommendations, read reviews and check star ratings.

Collecting reviews and feedback at a store level allows brands to identify strengths and weaknesses for each location and can be used to fix operational shortcomings and identify successes.

Increasingly, consumers are writing and checking reviews from their phones via these sites. More than 21 million South Africans have smartphones with GPS – which allows them to do location-based searches for shops and restaurants and then review them, even on-site.

Social media channels are a relatively inexpensive way for brands to standardise their messaging to their customers and respond to and manage the feedback they receive through online reviews. However, these channels need to be carefully

managed.

It's no longer enough for organisations to simply have a social media presence – they need to have a strategy for managing and responding to reviews left by customers.

These steps can help companies to formalise their review strategies:

Site seeing

Identify the sites and directories for your industry that have reviews. Then make sure you have created a profile on these sites and have claimed them.

Restaurants would have a presence on Facebook, Google, TripAdvisor, Zomato and *Eat Out*, for example, while retail, financial or telecommunications companies would utilise Facebook, Google and HelloPeter.

Do not ignore a platform that is important for your industry. You will find rogue pages are created by customers, competitors or the sites themselves if you are not actively managing the pages.

Remain on brand

Multi-location brands should not allow reviews on their national brand page – some customers will use this space only to complain. This results in brand pages with very low review scores – which impacts overall online reputation.

Reviews should be activated on individual store pages. Recent research among 163 multi-location global brands showed the top 10 franchises that adopted local strategies saw average sales growth of 12.8% – three times more than their competitors.

Ensure your review response tone matches the rest of your brand messaging; website, community management and review response message tone should all align.

“ *DISCLAIMER: No Twitter users are harmed in the making of our clapbacks.* 🍻🍻🍻🍻🍻🍻

<https://t.co/WTn0AgPmyT>— NandosSA (@NandosSA) [September 19, 2019](#) ”

Playful brands should keep their positive responses in line with this persona. Negative review responses should always be handled in a more serious manner and you should always consider the tone of the reviewer before using too much humour.

Create a response template that has strategic relevant keywords to boost local SEO. For instance, a high-end restaurant would use words and phrases like quality steak, premium service and best restaurant.

Right thoughts, right words, right action

Respond to all reviews and ensure negative reviews are responded to within 24 hours and positive reviews within 48 hours. Don't admit to serious allegations online before you can conduct an investigation in-store. Always answer reviews diplomatically to protect the brand but also be sympathetic.

Always take the conversation offline by offering a call to action like: “We are so sorry to hear that you had a negative experience at our store, please email with your details so that we can get in touch.” A call to action is any method of getting the customer's details and taking the conversation offline.

Request reviews from your customers – over 80% of reviews are positive and 70% of people will leave feedback if they are asked to. Brands that encourage customers to write reviews will typically increase their review score over time.

Consider using live in-store customer feedback tools. These allow brands to deal with customer feedback immediately, often while the customer is still in the store. They also help keep negative reviews offline.

Relate

Personalise responses with the customer's name and refer to specific events or happenings from their review.

If, for example, a customer mentions that they had a wonderful shopping experience with their daughter, your response should include statements like: "We look forward to welcoming you and your daughter back again soon for another positive shopping experience."

Typically, more than 50% of reviews contain a star rating and no comment. Utilise technology with customised response templates, to respond to large numbers of ratings with no customer comments.

Respond to all positive reviews – this creates customer loyalty and positive brand conversations.

Gather information

It's important to not only respond to reviews but also use them as valuable business insights.

When capturing these reviews, or using technology to capture them into a single dashboard, it is important that you have the ability to categorise the reviews and customer sentiment topics to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each store and then report on these findings in a simple and visual way.

Some technology will create these insights automatically for brands using artificial intelligence. This ensures operational teams can address the areas of improvement or reward the stores that are performing well.

ABOUT ASHLEIGH WAINSTEIN

Ashleigh started her career at an ICT company where she became head of operations and helped launch the company's EduSmart platform, enabling educational institutions to maximise their productivity through information technology. In 2013 she co-founded Social Places, a digital MarTech company specialising in location-based marketing and reputation management.

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