THE ONLINE REPUTATION MANAGEMENT GUIDE

For Multi-Location Marketers

SOCi

INSIDE THIS GUIDE

OVERVIEW

Most brands are aware of the importance of consumer feedback, and many find it crucial to take the pulse of customer sentiment through surveys, feedback forms, and Net Promoter Scores.

The advent of online reviews has changed the nature of such feedback, turning it from a private conversation between the customer and the brand into a public declaration of sentiment. If that sentiment is positive, reviews can help attract new prospects and turn them into customers. If sentiment is negative, however, reviews can have the opposite effect. These days, reviews are the **number one factor** consumers consider when making a purchase decision.

We all know the stats, but they're worth repeating:

Based on this data, we can assume that just about every consumer who does business with you has looked at reviews of your store locations on sites like Google, Yelp, and Facebook. Many of these same consumers are writing reviews themselves. In fact, overall review volume has grown significantly over the last four to five years. For multi-location businesses, dealing effectively with a high volume of reviews has become a major challenge. But, how do you scale the management of your locations' online reputation? That's where this guide comes in.

97%
OF CONSUMERS SEARCH ONLINE FOR LOCAL BUSINESSES.

86%
OF CONSUMERS LOOK AT ONLINE REVIEWS WHEN MAKING A PURCHASE DECISION.

91%
OF 18 TO 34 YEAR OLDS TRUST ONLINE REVIEWS AS MUCH AS PERSONAL RECOMMENDATIONS.

01

WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

The Multi-Location Marketer's Guide to Online Reputation Management is a set of recommendations for multi-location marketers who want to take charge of their brand reputation at the local level, but may be challenged in finding the resources or know-how to do so effectively.

Many brands receive hundreds of new reviews every week across multiple sites and store locations. At that kind of scale, it can be difficult to respond to every review with the right level of care and attention. You risk either not responding to some reviews, or doing so in a repetitive, impersonal manner that doesn't help to build customer engagement.

There is a solution. Effective review response at scale can be done in a personal, engaging manner, but this won't happen without a well thought out reputation management strategy. In this guide, we'll cover best practices for maintaining a strong online reputation by monitoring local reviews and responding at scale.

02

WHY SHOULD YOU RESPOND TO REVIEWS?

In case you -- or your upper management -- need convincing as to the reasons for launching a review response program, consider this - **97 percent** of users searched online to find a local business, **46 percent** of all searches on Google include local intent. Knowing this, most multi-location brands, chains, and franchises are actively managing their local listings, ensuring they are accurate and making them as attractive as possible with engaging photos, posts, offers, and more.

In short, the competition is fierce. But for many consumers, reviews are the true differentiating factor between one business and another. A brand who ignores its reviews risks falling short on three counts:

1. Praise from fans and complaints from detractors are both met with silence. Consumers see this and assume the brand doesn't care about consumer feedback.

2. Unanswered negative reviews influence other consumers, without any mitigating input from the brand.

3. Brands will miss out on constructive, unsolicited consumer feedback that can help them improve their business.

Review response is shown to encourage consumers to leave more reviews and often leads to more positive reviews. In one independent study, review volume increased by **12 percent** and ratings went up by an average of **0.12 stars** just because the brand started responding to reviews.

A strong review response rate creates a better consumer perception of your brand, and may even help improve your star ratings and review volume, both of which are competitive factors in local search.

Review Response Is an Everyday Activity

One of the first factors you should consider in your review response strategy is timeliness. Consumer expectations about brand engagement have been heightened by the real-time nature of social media. If a brand doesn't respond to a review in a timely fashion, the chance to change that reviewer's perception will be missed.

To develop a timeline for responding to reviews, you'll want to assess how many reviews your brand receives on a daily basis, and ensure your local marketing teams have the capacity to respond to reviews on a daily basis. While this may seem overwhelming, further in this guide, we'll be covering several strategies for making review response a more efficient activity. Some brands do quite well with a small staff and are still able to respond to all reviews each day.

Responding to as many reviews as possible is key, responses for negative reviews should always come first. We'll get more into this topic later, but first, let's look at where to start when it comes to review responses.

Where Should You Start With Review Responses?

This is a question that often comes up for brands who are launching a review response strategy for the first time. You may have accumulated several years of reviews on Google, Yelp, Facebook, and other sites. Do you need to go back and respond to all of them?

The answer is probably not. Remember, consumers expect timely responses, so if a review is 6 months or 2 years old, the benefits of responding to that aged review will have lessened, and the benefits have to be weighed against the fact that other consumers will see that the timestamp of your response is much later than the timestamp of the original review. Unless you acknowledge the fact that you're responding to the review after a long amount of time has passed, the response may seem inauthentic.

With that being said, if resources and time allow, it's a good idea to respond to any particularly notable reviews from the past, such as a review that expresses concern about a service which has since undergone substantial improvement.

For instance, if you're in the hotel industry and a review from 2 years ago complains about the datedness of the room decor, but you remodeled all the rooms last year. A response like this would be helpful to prevent other potential customers from getting the wrong impression about your decor: "Hello [Reviewer Name]! Sorry we did not respond sooner, but we wanted to let you know that since your stay, we've updated all of our rooms! We hope you come back and check out our comfy new beds and stylish furnishings."

Aside from these selective responses, at the beginning of a review response strategy **it's a good idea to respond to all reviews from the past 30 days, since these responses will still be perceived as relatively timely.** From the campaign launch date forward, you should respond to all your reviews, or as many reviews as possible. Setting a goal for your business before launching a review response strategy will help keep you accountable when it comes to responding to reviews.

Should You Respond to All Reviews?

Ideally, a multi-location business should respond to all reviews, both positive and negative. It's important to thank and encourage those leaving positive reviews with just as much care and attentiveness as you give addressing the negative feedback.

From a perception standpoint, if you only respond to negative reviews, you risk creating the impression that you only care about customer feedback when it makes you look bad or costs your business. Responding to all, or almost all, of your reviews shows that your brand cares about every customer's feedback and wants to create great experiences for everyone

However, there are some exceptions to this rule. You may have accumulated several years of reviews on Google, Yelp, Facebook, and other sites. Do you need to go back and respond to all of them?

How to Prioritize Review Responses

1. Timeliness matters more than completeness

First and foremost, if you lack the resources to respond to all reviews, it's far better to respond only to a subset, such as reviews of three stars or less, and to do so in a timely fashion, than it is to respond more slowly or not at all. This is an acceptable way to approach review response, especially if you are just getting started, and you can build your strategy over time.

2. You can skip text-free reviews.

Reviews that include a rating but no text, which are especially common on Google, don't always need a response. These ratings will still contribute to consumer perception and to your average star rating on the site where they appear, but it can be challenging to come up with variations of, "Thanks for the great rating!" that sound authentic and sincere. Doing so in response to dozens of four or five star ratings with no text may offer little benefit. Similarly, a low rating with no text is hard to respond to constructively. You may choose to respond to ratings without text if you have the capacity, but skipping them is okay when you're looking for ways to prioritize reviews that need a response.

3. Take delicate conversations offline.

Reviews that contain inflammatory language should be handled carefully. If someone simply offers an opinion in a rude manner, you can still respond, remembering to respond in a professional manner and offering to take the conversation offline. On the other hand, any reviews that threaten legal action, contain abusive or racist language, attempt to create political controversy, or are otherwise beyond the norm should not be responded to publicly. You can reach out to the reviewer privately, or if a review violates the terms and conditions of the site it's published on, your best course of action is to request its removal rather than responding to it publicly.

Who Should Respond to Reviews?

Determining who will respond to reviews can vary depending on the nature of your multi-location business. One of the following scenarios will likely make the most sense:

1. All reviews are handled by a team at the corporate office, who communicates with local or regional managers as needed.

2. Reviews are handled by regional managers, each of whom is responsible for a group of locations.

3. Reviews are handled by local office or store managers.

If your store managers are able to devote time consistently to review management, they can often provide the most direct, authentic, and personal responses to reviews. However, in many cases, store managers are pressed to find the time for such activities, and they may find it helpful for corporate to assist with the review response strategy.

By contrast, regional or corporate staff will have less familiarity with the daily happenings at a particular brand location, but may have an easier time maintaining a consistent, professional brand voice for all responses.

03

RESPONDING TO POSITIVE REVIEWS

Before we turn to best practices for responding to positive reviews, let's set the record straight. Many brands feel that consumers only leave reviews when they have something to complain about, but that's not the case. These days, consumers are actually more likely to share good experiences than negative ones. So what should a response to a positive review look like?

When responding to positive reviews, consider the following:

1. Thank the reviewer for his or her business.

2. Use the reviewer's name in your response.

3. Personalize your response by mentioning the subject matter of the review.

4. Invite the reviewer to return to your store or office.

To the right is an example of a positive review that was left for a local coffee shop.

In this example, the reviewer has good things to say about the staff, the food, and the options for people with dietary restrictions. A great response would sound something like this: "Hello Corinne, we're so glad you enjoyed your time with us and that you appreciate our many food options including our gluten free offerings. Please come back again soon!"

As you can see, in this response, we've personalized the message by using the reviewer's name and calling out specific details from the review.

In doing this, we've also used language that is designed to appeal to other consumers who might be looking for a coffee shop with gluten free menu items. It's not necessary to respond to every point mentioned in the review. Doing so might make your response seem artificial and inauthentic. Instead, the response should be personalized, natural, and to the point, while throwing in some powerful keywords for the category.

Corinne Furnice
Local Guide · 16 reviews
★★★★★ 2 weeks ago
I love this place. The employees and owner are very friendly and helpful. My favorite thing is tht they offer gluten free options, anything from sandwiches to baked goods. It is so wonderful to be able to go to a coffee shop and be able to have a coffee and a goodie to eat.

04

RESPONDING TO NEGATIVE REVIEWS

Responding to negative reviews requires sensitivity, attention to detail, and a constructive attitude. Remember, people who write negative reviews are usually not out to get you or to tarnish your reputation. In fact, many who complain are doing so out of a sincere desire to highlight how your customer experience could be improved.

Be Calm and Professional

It's best to approach the task of responding to negative reviews with the assumption that the reviewer means well. Don't take negative reviews personally, and don't use your response as an opportunity to prove that the reviewer is wrong. Whatever you say will be available for the public to see, so you want to make sure to always respond politely and professionally, even in cases where a reviewer has not done the same.

Develop Policies for Common Situations

It may seem like happy customers are all similar -- they praise you, you thank them. By contrast, negative reviewers can present a range of seemingly unique challenges, but these challenges usually fall into certain patterns. As a multi-location marketer, you'll want to develop a standard policy for each. Your review response policy can be a continuation of other company policies you likely already have in place, such as policies for customer service, the handling of complaints, and how to maintain a consistent brand voice when interacting with clients on social media.

Next, we'll look at some common negative review situations, and include insight into how a brand should properly respond. Remember, the list of common situations will differ by vertical and by brand, and policies may differ significantly as well.

1. Customer received poor service / manager was rude / staff was inattentive

For complaints about staff, where the customer was generally unhappy with the service received, it's often best to issue a general apology without rehashing the fine details. Although you might want to respond by defending your staff, remember that the customer is likely expressing what the experience felt like from their point of view. You don't want to risk the appearance of defensiveness in front of other potential customers who may read your response.

Here's an example:
> "Hello [Reviewer Name]! We're so glad that you took the time to share your experience with us. We always aim for the absolute best in customer service and we're sorry you didn't receive that. We've can promise that if you come back, you won't see the same issues repeated. Have a great day."

It's important to remember that customers who take you up on your offer to return may be on the lookout for specific changes in service and may even ask whether their negative review was discussed.

2. Customer unhappy with quality of product or service

This type of review could range from a criticism of food quality at a restaurant, to product quality or durability of items from a retailer, to a negative experience working with a professional such as a doctor, repairman, plumber, attorney, or insurance agent.

What all these experiences have in common is the feeling on the consumer's part that they didn't get full value from what they purchased. Again, such assessments are subjective, and it's best to take consumer feedback at face value.

Here's an example of a potential response:
> "Dear [Reviewer Name}, thank you first of all for choosing us. We're sorry that [the specific product or service] didn't meet your expectations. We take feedback like yours very seriously and will do our best to improve. We hope you'll give us another try!"

Again, don't say you take feedback seriously unless you do. You'll want to develop a means of keeping track of complaints about specific products or services, so that you can take meaningful action when many customers make the same criticisms.

3. Customer dissatisfied with circumstances outside your control

Sometimes, reviewers complain about things that your business can't easily change. For instance, a reviewer may complain that a restaurant was too loud on a busy Saturday evening and he or she was prevented from carrying on a quiet conversation with a dinner companion. While you may consider whether there is anything your business can do to reduce noise, you probably think that a busy Saturday evening is a good thing.

In this case, you can respond with sympathy and offer the customer options that might suit them better:
> "Hello [Reviewer Name]! Thanks so much for coming in. We're sorry the atmosphere was a bit loud. It can get that way sometimes on a Saturday night! If you'd like to stop by when it's quieter, we might suggest a weekday. In fact, Wednesday is all-you-can-eat shrimp night!"

As you can see, the general idea is to take the reviewer's side, sympathize with the complaint, and offer constructive feedback.

05

VARYING YOUR RESPONSES

If you've taken the time to develop a nuanced response strategy, you don't want to risk it all by responding repetitively in a way consumers will notice. For instance, if every time you get a positive review, you say, "Hello [Reviewer Name]! Thanks for the positive feedback," those who visit your listings will likely notice that you've posted the same response over and over again. It'll look as though it's copied and pasted without much thought, even if you typed each response separately and genuinely appreciated the review.

In order to avoid that impression, make sure the language used in your responses varies. This doesn't mean you have to put a lot of extra time and thought into your review responses. Instead, you can alter your responses slightly, ensuring there is some differentiation. Rather than saying, "Thanks for the positive feedback," you can say, "We appreciate the kind words," when responding to two positive reviews left in a row. This doesn't mean that you can never use the same responses, just make sure they're not back to back.

06

USE INCENTIVES WITH CAUTION

When responding to negative reviews, there will be times that it makes sense to offer a discount or incentive as a way to placate the customer who had a negative experience. With that being said, you should also be on the lookout for customers who may abuse the system and leave a negative review with the hopes of receiving something free. To avoid this from happening, any communication about offers or incentives should be taken offline and not happen publicly.

For instance, you could include a link to an online form or include a customer service phone number where the reviewer can contact your business and include more details about their experience. Once the conversation is moved offline, you can then provide an offer or incentive if warranted.

07

HOW TO WORK WITH TEMPLATES

Review response templates offer a variety of benefits when used properly. For instance, if your brand uses templated responses, you can be sure that no matter who is doing the work, your messaging will always be brand-appropriate. Templates also empower you collaborate with relevant team members to determine the optimal way to respond to common situations, and can greatly speed up the process of responding to multiple reviews

If you do use templated responses, it's important not to forget about the human aspect of responding to reviews. For instance, you can develop suggested responses for common situations, but make sure that whoever is responding to the review is free to customize and personalize those responses depending on the content of the review.

If you're starting from scratch, it's best to keep track of common themes in your reviews for several days or even a few weeks before you create templated responses. This way, you'll have a better idea of what the content in your reviews looks like and how templated responses should be composed so that they work well in a variety of similar situations.

IF YOUR BRAND USES TEMPLATED RESPONSES, YOU CAN BE SURE THAT NO MATTER WHO IS DOING THE WORK, YOUR MESSAGING WILL ALWAYS BE BRAND-APPROPRIATE.

08 FAKE AND INFLAMMATORY REVIEWS

While you should almost always accept a reviewer's experience at face value, there are exceptions to this rule. Sometimes, people write fake reviews about businesses online, and in some cases a review violates other rules of the review platform. When this happens, your business should treat the way you respond to these reviews differently, if you choose to respond to them at all.

Most review platforms have methods of filtering out reviews that show obvious signs of being fake, such as when a user only posts very negative reviews, or when the same user posts reviews of multiple locations of a business, but not all fake reviews are caught by automated filters.

Fake Reviews, Spam, and Inflammatory Content in Your Own Listings

You'll want to be on the lookout for reviews of your brand that are obviously fakes or that otherwise violate a site's rules. Fake negative reviews might be posted by a competitor, or even by an ordinary customer who, for whatever reason, wants to harm your business. Fake reviews have the potential to contain hate speech, profanity, advertising, and other types of spam, or might simply be irrelevant to your business.

Most sites will allow you to report reviews that violate their guidelines. For instance, Google lets you flag reviews that violate its policies on user comments which include:

- Don't spam or post fake reviews intended to boost or lower ratings.
- Don't post or link to content that is sexually explicit or contains profanity.
- Don't post or link to content that is abusive or hateful or threatens or harasses others.
- Don't post or link to any file that contains viruses, corrupted files, "Trojan Horses," or any other contaminating or destructive features that may damage someone else's computer.
- Don't post any material that violates the copyrights or other intellectual property rights of others.
- Don't impersonate any person, or falsely state or otherwise misrepresent your affiliation with a person or entity.
- Don't violate any other applicable law or regulation.
- Don't use comments as a forum for advertisement.

There are a few ways to report reviews to Google. First, you can simply click a flag icon next to the intended review, fill out a brief form, and submit your report. It can help to have multiple employees repeat the same action, since Google tends to pay more attention when

a review is flagged multiple times. You can also reach out to Google support through the link provided in the Google Business Profile Manager dashboard, or request help from the Google Business forum or by sending a tweet to the Google team on Twitter.

Responding to a Fake Review

In some cases, you may choose to post a response to a review you suspect is fake. Such a response might sound like this:

> "Dear [Reviewer Name], thanks for taking the
>
> time to share your thoughts. We have checked our records and, unfortunately, we don't see your name listed as a recent client. Could you perhaps have posted this to the wrong location? If you're sure it was us, please reach out at [phone number] and we'll do our best to resolve your issue."

These responses can be useful in mitigating the negative effect of a fake review, especially if you've been unsuccessful in getting it removed entirely. Now that you understand what it takes to create a winning reputation management strategy with a well-thought out review response plan, it's time to find a solution that can help your multi-location business manage the workload.
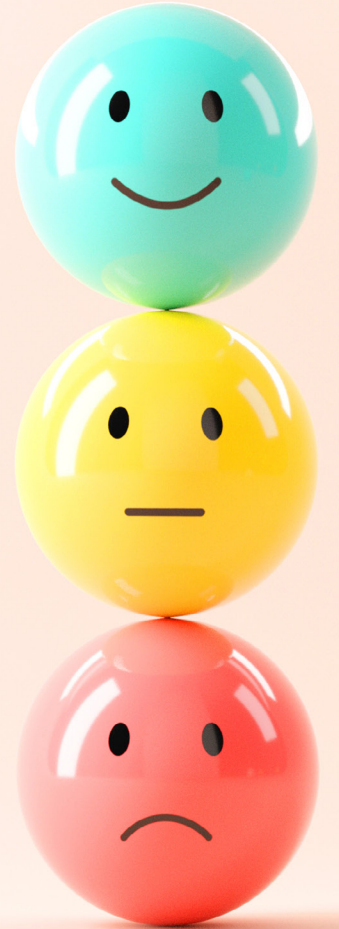
09

## SOCi'S STREAMLINED REPUTATION MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE

SOCi offers a range of services to help multi-location businesses manage their online reputation across 100s or even 1,000s of business locations. Through **SOCi's streamlined reputation management software**, users can view every action taken on reviews, and monitor every activity on social media. Now, your local, regional, and corporate teams will always know which reviews and social engagements are addressed, and which ones still require attention to ensure the prompt responses consumers expect.

Stay On Brand

Implementing review response workflows for multi-location businesses ensures brand-appropriate and prompt responses, and SOCi can help your team to do so. Local teams can receive notifications for new reviews, draft responses, get corporate response approval, and choose from pre-crafted responses with dynamic text capabilities to automatically personalize unique responses to each situation — all in one tool!

Attract New Customers

With SOCi's streamlined reputation management software, you can also increase customer satisfaction and attract new leads. By empowering your local users with a tool to efficiently create personalized responses, you are not only improving relations with every customer through a positive engagement, but also significantly increasing your business's search visibility with every review and response — meaning more happy customers for you, and more potential customers seeing your brand when they search!
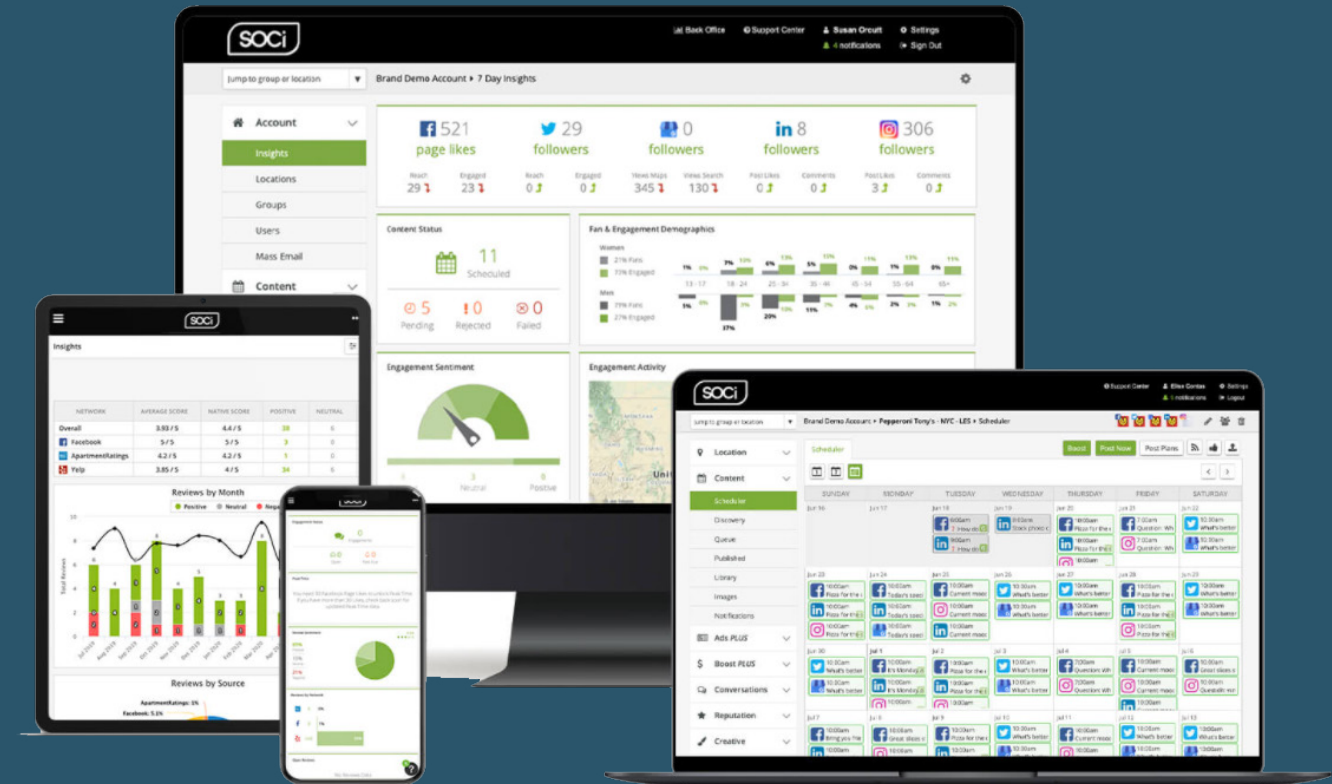
DISCOVER WHAT SOCi CAN DO FOR YOU.

MEETSOCi.COM

HELLO@MEETSOCi.COM