

THE ONLINE REPUTATION MANAGEMENT GUIDE

For Restaurant Brands



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OVERVIEW

Most restaurant brands are aware of the importance of feedback from diners and find it crucial to get the pulse of customer sentiment through surveys, feedback forms, and reviews.

The creation of online reviews has changed the nature of such feedback, turning it from a private conversation between the customer and the restaurant into a public declaration of sentiment. If that sentiment is positive, reviews can help attract new diners and turn them into regulars at your restaurant. If sentiment is negative, however, reviews can have the opposite effect. In the world of multi-location marketing, reviews are more important than ever. Reviews are the **number one factor** consumers consider when making a purchase decision. And positive online reviews are more important to the success of restaurants compared to any other type

of business, with consumers reading more reviews of restaurants in comparison to other industries.

This data further underscores the fact that effective reputation management can be the difference between tons of orders, deliveries, and reservations and slow dinner rushes with blank waitlists. Additionally, we can assume that just about every diner who eats at one of your restaurants has looked at your locations' reviews on sites like Google, Yelp, and Facebook. Many of these same diners are writing reviews themselves. The overall review volume has grown significantly over the past four to five years. Managing reviews across 100s or 1,000s of business locations has become a significant challenge for restaurant brands. But, how do you scale the management of your locations' online reputation? That's where this guide comes in.

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

97%

**OF CONSUMERS SEARCH
ONLINE FOR LOCAL
BUSINESSES.**

55%

**OF CONSUMERS NOW CONSIDER
ONLINE REVIEWS INFLUENTIAL
IN SELECTION RESTAURANTS.**

91%

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

01

WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

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

Many restaurant brands receive hundreds of new reviews every week across multiple sites and restaurant locations. At that kind of scale, it can be challenging 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. And review responses matter — nearly **half** of consumers report being more inclined to visit restaurants that respond to negative reviews, meaning quick feedback could be the difference between acquiring new customers and losing the chance to serve them forever.

There is a solution. Your multi-location restaurant brand can develop an effective review response strategy at scale in a personal, engaging manner, but not without a thoughtful reputation management strategy. In this guide, we'll cover best practices for maintaining a solid online reputation by monitoring local reviews and responding at scale while also providing tips on crafting responses for various types of reviews as well as prioritizing your influx of reviews.



02

WHY SHOULD YOU RESPOND TO REVIEWS?

If you're not already convinced that a comprehensive reputation management strategy is a must for your restaurant brand, consider this - **97 percent** of users searched online to find a local business, and **46 percent** of all searches on Google include local intent. What are potential diners going to see when your restaurant comes up in local search results? While claimed and updated local listings are a must, your online reputation is equally important.

The competition is intense, and for many diners, reviews are the differentiating factor between one business and another. Put yourself in the diner's shoes. If they have to decide between two restaurants, and one has a slightly higher reputation, and you notice that the restaurant is taking the time to respond to reviews while the other isn't, which would you choose?

If your restaurant brand is not responding to reviews, it could cause your local restaurants to:

1. Come across as though you don't care about your diners. If a potential customer sees that a restaurant they're interested in hasn't responded to positive and negative reviews, it could tarnish their first impression.
2. Allow the reviews that haven't received a response to influence the diner without any mitigating input from the restaurant.
3. Miss out on constructive, unsolicited diner feedback that has the potential to help your restaurant brand overall.

Review response motivates diners 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** 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. The real-time nature of social media has heightened expectations about brand engagement. If your restaurant brand doesn't respond to a review in a timely fashion, your restaurant's chance to change that reviewer's perception will be missed.

To develop a timeline for responding to reviews, you'll first want to determine who will be responsible for responding to reviews. Will local teams manage review responses, or will there be any corporate oversight? Typically, local teams have more insight into what is happening at their local restaurant and may be better equipped to handle review responses.

After making this determination, you'll want to assess how many reviews your restaurant brand receives daily and ensure your teams can respond to reviews regularly. While this may seem overwhelming, further in this guide, we'll cover several strategies for efficiently responding to reviews. Some restaurant brands can respond to all reviews received each day with an effective process in place.

While responding to as many reviews as possible is critical, responses to negative reviews should always come first. We'll get more into this topic later, but first, let's look at where to start with review responses.

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.



Where Should You Start With Review Responses?

This question often comes up for restaurant brands 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, diners expect timely responses, so if a review is months or even years old, the benefits of responding to that aged review will have lessened. The benefits of responding to the dated review 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 that you're responding to the review after an extended amount of time has passed, the response may seem inauthentic.

With that being said, if resources allow, it's wise to respond to noteworthy reviews from the past, like a review that expresses concern about a service that has undergone substantial improvement.

For instance, as a restaurant operator, if you see a review from two years ago that complains about the datedness of the decor and seating, but you remodeled your restaurant last year, the review may be worth responding to. 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 we've completely remodeled our dining area since your visit! We hope you come back and check out our new modern seating and stylish decor."

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.** You should respond to as many reviews as possible from the campaign launch date forward. Setting a goal for your local restaurants before launching a review response strategy will help keep you accountable for responding to reviews.

Should You Respond to All Reviews?

In a perfect world, restaurant brands 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 diner feedback when it makes you look bad or costs your business. Responding to all or most of your reviews shows that your brand cares about everyone's input and wants to create great experiences for all diners. However, there are some exceptions to this rule which we'll get into next.



How to Prioritize Review Responses

1. Timeliness matters more than completeness

If your restaurant brand lacks 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 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 can build your strategy over time.

2. You can skip text-free reviews.

Reviews that include a rating but no text, prevalent on Google, don't always need a response. These ratings will still contribute 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 offers an opinion rudely, you can still respond while remembering to do so 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 publicly.

4. Ensure you're meeting industry standards.

Our [2022 Localized Marketing Benchmark Report](#) analyzes how top performing multi-location brands are performing in local search, local social, and reputation. The report looked at a variety of industries, including restaurant brands. When looking at restaurant brands, those studied in the report responded to an average of 32.9 percent of reviews received on Google, 19 percent on Yelp, and 31.4 percent on Facebook. While responding to as many reviews as possible is best, your restaurant brand should at least be meeting or exceeding these averages found in the report.

Who Should Respond to Reviews?

As mentioned previously, determining who will respond to reviews can vary depending on the nature of your restaurant brand. 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 operators or regional managers, as needed.
2. Reviews are handled by local restaurant operators or local team members.
3. Reviews are handled by a mix of both local and corporate teams. This hybrid model can often prove effective as long as everyone understands who is responsible for what.

If your local managers can consistently devote time to review management, they can often provide the most direct, authentic, and personal responses to reviews. However, in many cases, restaurant operators 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 restaurant location. Still, they may have an easier time maintaining a consistent, professional brand voice for all responses.

Restaurant brands must consider what works best for their structure and decide which plan best fits their needs and priorities.

DOWNLOAD OUR **2022 LOCALIZED MARKETING BENCHMARK REPORT** FOR A MORE IN-DEPTH LOOK AT HOW LEADING RESTAURANT BRANDS ARE CRUSHING THEIR LOCALIZED MARKETING EFFORTS.



DOWNLOAD THE REPORT TODAY!



03

RESPONDING TO POSITIVE REVIEWS

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

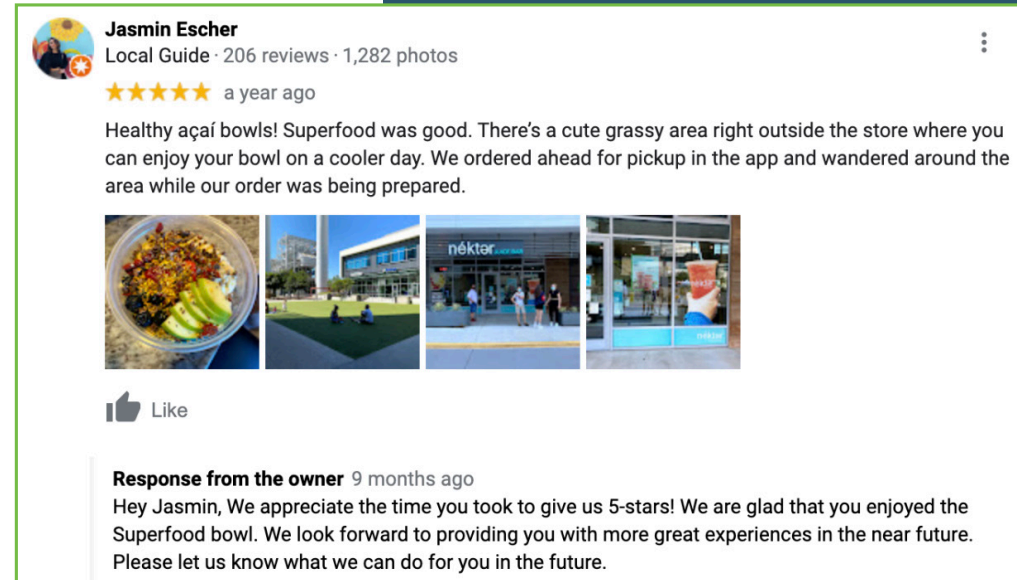
When responding to positive reviews, consider the following:

1. Thank the reviewer for their 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 local restaurant.

To the right is an example of a positive review left for Nekter Juice Bar at one of the Austin, Texas locations.

In this example, the reviewer has good things to say about both the food and location. They also provided images to further share their experience. As you can see, the owner responded to the review in a personalized manner, calling out specific details from the review, while also encouraging the reviewer to come back another time.

While a personalized response goes a long way, it's also worth mentioning that it is unnecessary 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.



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 tarnish your reputation. Many who complain do so out of a sincere desire to highlight how your restaurant brand can improve the diner experience.

Be Calm and Professional

It's best to approach 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 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 satisfied customers are similar — they praise you, and you thank them. By contrast,

negative reviewers can present a range of seemingly unique challenges, but these challenges usually fall into specific patterns. As a restaurant brand 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.

Below, we'll look at some common negative review situations and include insight into how a restaurant brand should adequately respond. Remember, the list of problems will differ by brand, and policies may differ significantly.

1. The customer received poor service, the manager was rude, or staff was inattentive

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 can promise that you won't see the same issues repeated if you come back. Have a great day."

It's important to remember that diners 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. Your restaurant brand must maintain a high level of customer service regularly.

2. The customer was unhappy with quality of product or service

This type of review could range from criticism of food quality to the quality of glassware you use to a complaint about the lack of options on your menu.

What all these experiences have in common is the feeling on the consumer's part that they didn't get total value from what they expected. 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 diners make the same criticisms. For instance, have you received multiple complaints about your queso coming out cold? If so, this is something your

restaurant brand could easily resolve.

3. The customer was 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 noisy 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. 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 diners 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 repeatedly posted the same response. 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.

To avoid that impression, make sure the language used in your responses varies. This doesn't mean you have to put extra time and thought into your review responses. Instead, you can alter your responses slightly, ensuring 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

HOW TO WORK WITH TEMPLATES

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

If you do use templated responses, though, it's essential not to forget about the human aspect of responding to reviews. For instance, you can develop suggested responses for everyday 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 creating 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 similar situations.



07

USE INCENTIVES WITH CAUTION

When responding to negative reviews, there will be times that it makes sense to offer a discount or incentive to placate a diner who had a negative experience. With that being said, you should also be on the lookout for diners 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 occur publicly.

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

violates other rules of the review platform. When this happens, your restaurant brand should treat the way you respond to these reviews differently, if you choose to respond to them.

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 reviews multiple locations of a business. It's worth noting that automated filters do not catch all fake reviews.

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 fake or otherwise violate a site's rules. For instance, a competitor might post fake negative reviews or even an ordinary customer who, for whatever reason, wants to harm your restaurant. Fake reviews have the potential to contain hate speech, profanity, advertising, and other types of spam or might 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 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, request help from the Google Business forum, or send a tweet to the Google team on Twitter. Hopefully, your restaurant brand won't come across many fake or inflammatory reviews, but it's good to know how to handle the situation if it does arise.

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 diner's experience at face value, there are exceptions to this rule. Sometimes, people write fake reviews about restaurants online, and in some cases, a review

09

START IMPROVING DINER LOYALTY AND RETENTION

While we've just gone through everything it takes to maintain a solid online reputation, why is it important? As a restaurant brand, one of your top goals is likely to build a customer base that keeps coming back to your restaurant. Reputation management is one of your restaurant brand's main ways to build customer loyalty and improve retention. The key to diner loyalty is to make the diner feel special.

With reputation management, your restaurant brand can make the diner feel special by:

- Responding to reviews thoughtfully, showing the diner that their feedback is important
- Implementing changes at your local restaurants based on feedback from reviews
- Providing high-quality customer service and answering any questions left in reviews
- Building trust through a positive online reputation that transfers into a positive dining experience
- Acknowledging when a diner had a negative experience and putting in the work to ensure their next venture will be better

As you can see, there are various ways reputation management and diner loyalty go hand in hand. As your restaurant brand begins to focus more on its reputation management strategy, there will be a positive impact on customer retention and loyalty.



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THE SOCI REVIEWS MANAGEMENT SOLUTION

Now that you understand what it takes to create a competitive online reputation management strategy, it's time to get started. SOCi offers a range of services to help restaurant brands manage their online reputation across 100s or even 1,000s of locations. Through [SOCi's streamlined reputation management software](#), users can view every action taken on reviews and monitor every activity on social media. 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 your restaurant brand ensures brand-appropriate and prompt responses, and SOCi can help your team 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 customized responses to each situation — all in one tool!

Attract New Customers

With [SOCi's streamlined reputation management software](#), you can increase diner satisfaction and attract new leads. By empowering your local users

with a tool to efficiently create personalized responses, you are improving relations with every diner through a positive engagement and increasing your business's search visibility with every review and response. This means more happy diners for you and more potential customers seeing your brand when they search!

Never Miss an Opportunity to Elevate Your Reputation

Save time and money by aggregating all your reviews across every business location into one centralized platform — accessible by corporate and local teams. Plus, give local marketing teams the power to respond to reviews and your corporate team the ability to maintain oversight by creating approval workflows.

With the ability to upload brand-approved, pre-crafted responses, reply to numerous reviews simultaneously, or generate responses based on machine learning, your local locations are empowered to be more personal, save precious time, and improve search visibility, all with a straightforward workflow. What're you waiting for? It's time to crush the competition with a next-level [reputation management strategy](#), and SOCi can help! Request a demo today for more insight into how SOCi can help your restaurant brand dominate its reputation management efforts!



DISCOVER WHAT SOCI
CAN DO FOR YOU.

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