Hyde & Co.

FREE RESOURCE · NO. XII

The reviews & reputation *playbook*

How to get more reviews, handle the bad ones, and stay the right side of two sets of rules.

Since October 2024 this carries **federal civil penalties**, and Google is stricter than federal law on incentives. Most review advice online predates both. This one quotes them directly.

FREE TO USE AND SHARE
COMPANION TO THE LOCAL SEO PLAYBOOK

AN AGENCY FOR BUSINESS OWNERS
ORLANDO, FLORIDA

Start here: there are now two rulebooks

Most advice about getting reviews was written before 2024 and is now actively dangerous.

Rulebook one — the platform. Google, Yelp and the rest have their own policies. Breaking them gets your reviews removed, your profile restricted, or a public warning displayed on your listing.

Rulebook two — federal law. The FTC's **Rule on the Use of Consumer Reviews and Testimonials** took effect on **21 October 2024**. It authorises courts to impose **civil penalties for knowing violations**. This is not guidance. It is an enforceable rule with money attached.

The two rulebooks overlap but are not identical, and on one important point Google is *stricter* than the law. This guide covers both.

PART I

What federal law now prohibits

i

The short version of the FTC rule, in the areas most likely to catch an honest small business.

Buying reviews

Prohibited. Businesses may not purchase consumer reviews they **"knew or should have known were false."** The brokers selling them are also in violation.

"Should have known" is doing real work in that sentence. Buying a package of fifty five-star reviews from an overseas vendor for $200 is not a defence — no reasonable person believes those are genuine.

Incentivised reviews — read this carefully

This is the most misunderstood part of the rule, and the place where the two rulebooks diverge.

Under the FTC rule, you may offer an incentive for a review. What you may not do is condition it on sentiment — there must be no **"express or implied requirement that the reviews have to express a particular sentiment."** You cannot suggest reviews must be positive in order to earn the promised incentive.

Under Google's policy, incentives are prohibited outright. Google's contribution policy bars merchants from offering **"incentives — such as payment, discounts, free goods and/or services — in exchange for posting any review or revision or removal of a negative review."**

So: a "$10 off your next visit for a review" promotion might survive FTC scrutiny if worded with real care, and still violates Google's rules and gets your reviews pulled.

The simple, safe position for a small business: **do not offer anything for reviews.** The upside is small and you are navigating two rulebooks simultaneously to capture it.

Suppressing negative reviews

You may not use **"false accusation," "physical threats," or "intimidation"** to suppress a negative review. Threatening a customer with a defamation suit to make a one-star review disappear is exactly the conduct this addresses.

Two things the FTC explicitly says are **fine**:
- **"organizing reviews is not suppressing reviews"** — sorting, filtering and displaying reviews in a sensible order is legitimate
- **responding publicly to negative feedback** — encouraged, in fact

Insider reviews

Anyone connected to the business — owners, staff, family — who posts a review must **"clearly and conspicuously"** disclose the relationship, unless it is already obvious to the audience.

The FTC's own guidance is unusually direct on this: *"You can ask your family members to write consumer reviews... but ask them to clearly and conspicuously disclose their relationship."*

Note that a **generalised solicitation to all customers** is exempt — you are not liable for a review from an employee who happened to receive the same email everybody else got.

What this means practically

If your business has ever done any of the following, stop:

- Asked staff to leave reviews without disclosing they work there
- Offered a discount, entry into a draw, or a free item for a review
- Sent a "how did we do?" message that routes happy customers to Google and unhappy ones to a private feedback form
- Threatened legal action to remove a review
- Bought reviews, at any price, from anyone

PART II

What Google prohibits on top

ii

Google's contribution policy, quoted directly:

PROHIBITED	GOOGLE'S WORDING
Incentives	"Offer incentives — such as payment, discounts, free goods and/or services — in exchange for posting any review or revision or removal of a negative review."
Review gating	"Discourage or prohibit negative reviews, or selectively solicit positive reviews from customers."
On-premises pressure	"When soliciting reviews, merchants should not require or pressure users to leave ratings or write reviews while on the premises, nor should they request that specific content be included."
Fake reviews	Content "not based on a real experience," reviews "paid for, directly or in kind," and content "posted from multiple accounts by or at the request of one person."

The two that catch honest businesses

Review gating. The "how did we do?" flow that sends satisfied customers to Google and dissatisfied ones to a private form is selective solicitation. It is extremely common, it is sold as a feature by reputation-management software, and it is explicitly prohibited.

The tablet at the counter. Handing a customer a device and standing there while they type is on-premises pressure. So is telling them what to mention.

The penalty is public

Google may block your profile from receiving new reviews, unpublish existing ones, and **display a warning to consumers that fake reviews were removed.**

That last one appears on your listing, where every prospective customer sees it. Whatever you paid for the reviews, that notice costs more.

And Google is watching this space

In July 2026 Google added specific guidance on **fake and undisclosed incentivised reviews** to its review snippet documentation. This is an area of active tightening, not a settled one.

PART III

What the research actually says

iii

Now that the rules are clear, here is what is worth pursuing — and it is not what most businesses assume.

Reviews do affect sales. how much is genuinely contested.

Two large peer-reviewed meta-analyses have examined this, and **they disagree with each other**:

- **You, Vadakkepatt & Joshi**, *Journal of Marketing* (2015) — 51 studies, 610 elasticities. Concluded that **rating (valence) matters more than count (volume)**.
- **Babić Rovira, Sotgiu, de Valck & Bijmolt**, *Journal of Marketing Research* (2016) — 1,532 effect sizes across 96 studies, 40 platforms, 26 product categories. Concluded the **opposite**: volume has the stronger impact.

The honest takeaway: both find reviews are positively associated with sales. Neither settles which lever matters more. So invest in both, and distrust anyone who tells you confidently that one is the answer.

A perfect rating is not the goal

Research from Northwestern University's Spiegel Research Center found purchase likelihood **peaks somewhere between 4.0 and 4.7 stars and declines toward a perfect 5.0**. A flawless record reads as filtered.

The same research found nearly all of the lift comes from the **first handful of reviews** — which is genuinely good news if you are starting from nothing. Going from zero to ten reviews matters far more than going from ninety to a hundred.

Negative reviews are not the disaster you think

- Peer-reviewed work by **Chevalier & Mayzlin** (*Journal of Marketing Research*, 2006) — the strongest causal evidence in the area — found negative reviews carry **more weight** than positive ones. Which is exactly why your public reply to them is so valuable.
- The Babić Rovira meta-analysis found negative reviews **do not necessarily harm sales**, and that **high variability in ratings is more problematic than negativity itself.** Consistency matters more than perfection.

Almost nobody replies

Baymard's benchmarking found **80% of sites do not respond to negative reviews.** This is one of the cheapest competitive advantages available to a small business: replying well, publicly, puts you in the top fifth of your market for the cost of ten minutes.

PART IV

A review system that is compliant *and* works

iv

The compliant version is also the simpler one. Ask everyone, the same way, every time, with nothing offered in return.

The four rules

1. **Ask every customer**, not the ones who seemed happy
2. **Ask at the moment of maximum satisfaction** — right after the work is done and the result is visible
3. **Make it one tap** — a short link or a QR code, never "search for us on Google and..."
4. **Never specify what to say**, what rating to give, or offer anything in return

The message

> [Name], thanks for [the specific thing you did] on [day].
>
> If you've got 30 seconds, a review really helps other
> [type of customer] in [town] find us:
> [link]
>
> Either way — thanks for the business.
> [Your name]

Worked example:

> Hi Sarah — thanks for having us out to sort the water heater yesterday.
>
> If you've got 30 seconds, a quick review helps other homeowners in Winter Garden find us: g.page/r/...
>
> Either way, thanks for the business — call any time. Dave

Why this is compliant: no incentive, no filtering by who seemed pleased, no instruction about content or rating, nobody watching them type, and the "either way" makes clear there is no obligation.

Building it into the business

A review system that depends on someone remembering will fail within a month. Attach it to something that already happens:

- Triggered when a job is marked complete in your scheduling system
- Included in the invoice or the payment confirmation
- Part of the technician's closing script — *"you'll get a text from us later, no obligation"*
- On a card left behind, with a QR code

Aim for a steady trickle, not a burst. Thirty reviews arriving on a Tuesday looks exactly like what it looks like. A few a week, indefinitely, builds a profile that is both more credible and more durable.

PART V

Replying, including to the ones that sting

v

Google states that positive reviews **and helpful replies** can help a business stand out. The replies are half of it.

To a good review

Be specific. Ten identical "Thank you for your review!" replies are worse than none — they signal a template rather than a business that reads them.

> Thanks Sarah. That heater had been fighting us for a while — glad we got it sorted the same day. Give us a shout any time.

Thirty seconds. Mentions what actually happened. Reads like a person.

To a bad review

You are not writing to the reviewer. You are writing to the next hundred people who read it — and they are reading to find out what kind of business you are when something goes wrong.

> [Acknowledge it, without defensiveness]
> [The fact, briefly, without arguing]
> [What you are doing about it]
> [An offer to resolve it directly, with a real contact]

Worked example:

> Sorry about this, Mike — a two-week wait isn't what we promise and I understand the frustration. We were short-handed after a burst-pipe week, which explains it but doesn't excuse it. We've since added a second van for exactly this reason. I'd like to make it right — I'm on (407) 555-0142 and I'll pick up.

The rules: reply once. Never argue publicly. Never mention details that identify the customer's circumstances beyond what they disclosed. Never imply they are lying, even when you believe it. Take it offline and mean it.

When a review is genuinely fake or abusive

Both platforms and the FTC recognise this happens. Flag it through the platform's own process and let it run. What you may **not** do is threaten the reviewer — false accusations, threats and intimidation to suppress a review are exactly what the FTC rule prohibits.

On aggressive flagging: practitioners widely report that heavily flagging reviews can result in a period where new reviews fail to post. Google does not document this mechanism, so treat it as field observation rather than fact. What is certain is that a well-handled negative review costs you far less than a visible gap in your review flow.

PART VI

Putting proof where it counts

vi

Reviews sitting on Google are doing half the job. The other half is on your own site, at the moment someone decides.

Where proof belongs

- **On the service page**, next to the thing being sold — not on a separate "Testimonials" page nobody visits
- **Next to the price**, where hesitation peaks
- **Beside the form**, where they are deciding whether to commit
- **On the location page**, from customers in that town

An awkward research finding

Nielsen Norman Group's usability testing found people are **more sceptical of testimonials hosted on your own website** than the same praise found elsewhere. Visitors assume you chose the flattering ones — which, of course, you did.

So link out to the platform. Being checkable beats being polished. A screenshot with a link to the live review is worth more than a beautifully typeset quote with a first name and an initial.

What makes a review persuasive

- **A full name and a location** — "Sarah M., Winter Garden" beats "S.M., satisfied customer"
- **Specifics** — a review that names the problem, the timeframe and the outcome does more than one that says "great service"
- **A photo**, where the platform supports it
- **Recency** — a wall of praise from 2019 raises questions

Structured data, honestly

You can mark up reviews so search engines understand them. Google supports review snippets, and its documentation was updated in July 2026 with specific guidance on fake and undisclosed incentivised reviews.

But be clear-eyed about the limits: a 2026 Ahrefs analysis found **no meaningful causal link between adding structured data and being cited by AI search features**, and Google's own May 2026 guidance states plainly that structured data is not required for generative AI features and there is no special markup to add. Mark up your reviews because it helps search engines parse the page — not because someone sold it to you as an AI visibility shortcut.

PART VII

The things people get wrong

vii

"We'll ask our best customers first." That is selective solicitation. Prohibited by Google, and the pattern the FTC rule is aimed at.

"We'll offer a discount to boost the numbers." Prohibited outright by Google. Permitted under the FTC rule only if scrupulously unconditioned on sentiment. Not worth the exposure.

"We'll get the team to leave a few to get started." Permitted only with clear and conspicuous disclosure of the relationship. Without it, this is precisely what the insider-review provision covers.

"We need to be at 5.0." The research says purchase likelihood peaks *below* a perfect score. You are optimising for the wrong number.

"We'll just delete the bad ones." You cannot, and the attempt — if it involves pressuring the reviewer — is prohibited by federal rule.

"Reviews on our site are enough." Visitors discount testimonials you control. The platform matters.

"88% of consumers trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations." This gets quoted constantly. It comes from a 2014 online panel survey of about 2,100 people, run by a company selling review management software, and the 88% is a *sum of conditional answers*. It is twelve years old and it is not about your business. Use the peer-reviewed research above instead.

The short version

1. Read Part 1 — since October 2024 this carries federal civil penalties
2. Ask **every** customer, never just the happy ones
3. Offer **nothing** in return — Google prohibits it outright
4. Never tell anyone what to write or what rating to give
5. Never let staff or family review you without disclosing the relationship
6. Build the ask into a process, not someone's memory
7. Aim for a steady trickle, not a burst
8. Reply to everything, specifically, within a day or two
9. On a bad review: reply once, publicly, calmly, then take it offline
10. Stop chasing 5.0 — the evidence says the sweet spot is lower
11. Put real reviews on the pages where people decide, and link out to the source

IF YOU WOULD RATHER IT SIMPLY HAPPENED

We build the asking into the *process*.

A review system that depends on someone remembering will fail within a month. The compliant version is also the simpler one, and it is in Part 4.

Building it into the systems that already run your business is what we do. Hyde & Co. is an agency for business owners.

i. We wire the request into your existing job or invoice flow.

ii. We make sure what you send complies with both rulebooks.

iii. You reply to the reviews, because that part should be you.

No obligation. And we will not manage your reviews for you — filtering them is exactly what the rules prohibit.

Book a consultation

hyde-co.com

Sources

USED IN	SOURCE
Part 1	FTC, *Rule on the Use of Consumer Reviews and Testimonials* — effective **21 October 2024**; authorises civil penalties for knowing violations. FTC business guidance, *The Consumer Reviews and Testimonials Rule: Questions and Answers*
Part 2	Google, *Prohibited & restricted content — rating manipulation*, contribution policy; Google Business Profile Help on enforcement and consumer warnings; Google Search Central review snippet guidance updated July 2026
Part 3	You, Vadakkepatt & Joshi, *A Meta-Analysis of Electronic Word-of-Mouth Elasticity*, **Journal of Marketing** 79(1), 2015 — 51 studies. Babić Rovira, Sotgiu, de Valck & Bijmolt, **Journal of Marketing Research** 53(3), 2016 — 1,532 effect sizes, 96 studies. Chevalier & Mayzlin, **Journal of Marketing Research** 43(3), 2006. Spiegel Research Center, Northwestern University (2017) — rating sweet spot, first-reviews effect; observational, run with a reviews vendor. Baymard Institute — 80% of sites do not respond to negative reviews
Part 6	Nielsen Norman Group, *Trustworthiness in Web Design* — external testimonials trusted over on-site ones; qualitative. Ahrefs analysis of schema and AI citations (2026); Google, *Optimizing your website for generative AI features on Google Search* (May 2026)

Not used, and why: the "88% trust reviews as much as personal recommendations" figure (2014 vendor panel survey, sum of conditional answers, about local services rather than products) and vendor-published "reviews lift conversion by 108%" figures, which compare shoppers who *chose* to read reviews against all visitors — a selection effect, not a measured cause.

This playbook is free to use and share.
The only goal is better websites and better results.

This is not legal advice. The FTC rule is summarised here in plain language for general guidance. If you are unsure whether a specific practice complies, ask a lawyer — the penalties are real.