

COLUMNS

7 reasons why retailers should respond to reviews

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By **Josha Benner**

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For a good portion of consumers, a review is merely the first step in a conversation with a brand.

That is the gist of a report we recently completed looking at consumer sentiment about reviews.

The research found some 65 percent of shoppers believe that stores should respond to customer reviews whether those reviews are positive or negative. And the implications of answering can be widely positive, and justifying the required investment.

Our data also showed that reviews maintain an outsize importance with consumers.

Retailers should also look at reviews as a means of outreach with their consumers. Here is why:

Consumers are looking for information, not just ratings in reviews. Ready-to-buy shoppers are not just looking for the rating of online reviews they are actually evaluating the quality of an in-store experience based on content of the reviews and the online responsiveness of businesses.

Reviews are an opportunity to personalize messaging. Our data shows that consumers are n't likely to be satisfied with a generic response.

When asked how personalized a store's responses should be to a customer review, 78 percent said that there should be some personalization. Forty-nine percent said responses should be "somewhat personalized," while 29 percent said "very personalized." Just 13 percent said "not very personalized" and 9 percent said "not personalized."

That sentiment is not wholly unexpected.

Google and Yelp have long encouraged businesses to post personal responses instead of anodyne responses that show little personality.

Responding to reviews shows that retailers care. For retailers, responding to reviews has tangible benefits.

When asked how likely they would be to shop at a store that responds to online reviews, 86 percent of respondent

said they'd be more likely.

Of that group, 47 percent said "somewhat more likely," while 39 percent said "more likely."

Only 8 percent said "somewhat less likely" while 6 percent said "not likely."

Responding to reviews is great for brand perception that leads to more new customers and repeat business from existing ones.

One fifth of customers always check reviews. When asked how often the survey's respondents check customer reviews to help them figure out where to shop, 57 percent said "occasionally," while 19 percent said "all the time." Seventeen percent said "rarely" and 7 percent said "very rarely."

Most people are checking store reviews to pick where to shop. There will be greater growth for those who always check, as more brands invest in driving eyeballs to their reviews, given the ROI they can deliver.

Most shoppers think online reviews are important. Customer reviews are important, period.

When asked about the importance of online customer reviews for a store, 74 percent cited them as either "moderately important" (40 percent) or "very important" (34 percent). Just 20 percent said "slightly important" and 6 percent said they were "not important".

With so many options out there, stores live or die based on their ratings.

Nearly 40 percent of consumers define a positive review as 4.0 and up. The idea of what constitutes a positive review varies.

We discovered that 39 percent consider "4.0 and up" a positive review. Other responses include: "3.5 and up" (20 percent), "4.5 and up" (15 percent), "5.0" (13 percent), "3.0 and up" (8 percent), "1.5 and up" (3 percent), "2.5 and up" (2 percent) and "2.0 and up" (1 percent).

Many people think a positive review has to be a 4.0 or up. This is not a surprise. Brands need to keep this in mind when evaluating their online presence.

If a store has a rating under 4.0, that is just not good enough anymore.

Responding to reviews as a positive impact on search engine optimization. A report by Harris Interactive in 2011 found that out of those customers who received a reply in response to their negative review, 33 percent turned around and posted a positive review and 34 percent deleted their original negative review.

While the report is somewhat dated, these numbers very unlikely went down to zero.

In consequence, answering to negative reviews helps retails to increase the average rating, which is a key SEO factor for rankings.

CUSTOMER REVIEWS are more important than ever.

Shoppers look to customer reviews to decide if they are going to choose a brand, and marketers follow them to better understand how their store is perceived.

Customer reviews will only become more important as shoppers continue to rely heavily on them for their purchasing decisions and in their daily lives.

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