



Get Great Reviews *Without* Gating

“Review gating” is unethical and banned by Google. Heres how to properly strengthen online reputation.

Virtually everyone and everything, no matter how great, gets a bad review (or a handful of them) eventually. That’s the nature of life.

Go on IMDB.com and look up the greatest films in history. While over 750,000 site users have given “The Godfather” a perfect 10-star rating, over 35,000 counter that by rating it just one star out of 10.

“The Godfather” might not be everyone’s cup of tea, but it’s patently absurd to give it the lowest rating on IMDB. Nevertheless, that’s the nature of consumer reviews.

I say this because your death-care firm might do everything perfectly every day of the week and you still might get a negative review from time to time. It happens.

As I’ve noted before, online reviews are critical to your business. The most recent statistics show just how important they are:

- More than 70% of people won’t make a final buying decision without reading online reviews.
- Almost all people (97%) turn to reviews when on the hunt for a local service provider of anything.
- More than 90% of those people say the content of reviews impacts the decisions they make.
- Just over 85% say negative reviews are a factor in their buying decisions.

You need online reviews. They help potential clientele discover and trust your funeral home. At the same time, you don’t need negative reviews.

They just throw gum in the wheels of your online marketing and reputation management efforts.

So, when you see a negative review of your firm, it’s hard not to get upset. It’s hard not to take it personally. That’s especially true when you know you’re doing a great job, but the family just didn’t see it that way.

Maybe there was a misunderstanding or miscommunication. Maybe if you could have just spoken to the reviewer and cleared something up before the review, the reviewer never would have hit you with such a tough public criticism. Maybe you could have persuaded that person to post a five-star review instead. Which is the mindset that brings us to review *gating*.

If It Sounds Too Good to be True ...

Wouldn't it be nice if there were a way to stop people from leaving negative reviews? What if only the people who seemed *satisfied* with your services got the opportunity to leave *public* feedback, whereas people who were *unhappy* could only air their grievances in *private*?

The technology does exist. It's a straightforward automated system that lets you ask people if they were satisfied with your services before they post a review online.

Those who say "yes" are escorted straight to Google to leave a review. Those who say "no" are transferred to an internal form to leave feedback only you can see.

In a nutshell, that's review gating, and as nice as it might sound, you don't want to do it. Here's why:

1. Google Banned It.

The search engine outlawed the practice. If Google discovers you're gating reviews, it's likely to penalize your business by removing all your existing Google reviews.

That's right. *All of them.* Whether you have six or 600 hard-won Google reviews, you put them in jeopardy when you attempt to control who leaves a review for your funeral home.

Having your reviews removed can be devastating for your conversions, your branding and even your SEO.

2. Review Gating Is Unethical.

At the end of the day, it's just as simple as that. Here's the thing: It's one thing to reach out to a family early *in the hope of* heading off a negative review. (That's fine, frankly, and I'll touch on that more later.) But it's entirely improper to outright block the review from occurring.

The entire concept of generating a positive online reputation is exactly that: You want local families to *trust* your firm. If word gets out that you're essentially obstructing other families from openly communicating their feelings on your funeral home,

that's potentially devastating for your reputation.

3. Negative Reviews Can be Positive.

Consumers don't expect a business to have *all* five-star reviews. If you have enough decent reviews, the occasional negative one won't set the tone for your online reputation. In fact, if you have a certain quantity of reviews (Let's say 50 or more), it just plain looks sketchy if all 50-or-so are five stars.

I mean, really? There's not a single four-star or three-star in the entire bunch? Literally every reviewer gave you the highest possible rating?

That just belies logic. It's reminiscent of all the five-star reviews an author will get on Amazon for a self-published book about alien aardvarks from Saturn who take over the world through mind control.

I mean, that *might* be a brilliant book, but more likely, the author's friends and family all showed their support by logging on and giving it five stars. (Alternatively, the author might have created several accounts and reviewed his own book or paid a firm to provide fake reviews.)

Here's the point: You want there to be at least a few less-than-perfect reviews of your firm. You don't want *many*, but you look far more legitimate if you have a few.

Negative reviews also provide the opportunity for a positive public interaction. You can respond to make the issue right or tactfully explain your side of an issue if you feel the review provided misleading information.

'Engaging Early' Without Gating

Earlier, I touched on having a process for reaching out to a family's representative before a review is posted without actually "gating" that person from leaving a negative review. Here's what that means:

At my firm, we provide an automated reputation management for clients who wish to use it.

This tool greatly increases both the quantity and quality of reviews.

We've structured it to request reviews through email with very thoughtful, reverent language appropriate for families still healing from their loved one's loss.

The tool is designed to help determine whether the recipient was satisfied or unsatisfied with the funeral home's services and thus more or less likely to leave a positive review. It also provides an *option* to reach out privately to the funeral home instead of leaving a public review (either negative or positive).

However, at no point does the tool segregate potentially positive or negative reviews. Want to leave a Google or Facebook review, either positive or negative? The tool lets the family representative do that. Want to reach out privately instead, either with positive or negative thoughts? You can do that if you prefer.

This is a way you can both encourage positive reviews and potentially intervene in a negative review situation without ever "gating" reviews either positive or negative (or impeding the family member's preferred process in any way).

It's perfectly fine to *properly* influence the process to the benefit of your firm. After all, no one would ever expect a business to strongly encourage an extremely dissatisfied customer to leave a public review. You have every right to prioritize your most satisfied families when soliciting reviews. Feel free to do that.

The line you can't cross is where you actually divert potential negative reviews to a private comment instead of allowing the opportunity to leave a public review. Don't go down that road.

Additional Reputation Management Strategies

An automated tool helps generate positive reviews faster, but that's not the only way to do it. Ask satisfied

families for reviews. You'll know the right time and circumstances to make the request. As a funeral professional, thoughtfully addressing sensitive subjects is a key part of your skill set. You can handle this.

Additionally, it's important to respond in a timely manner to any online review you receive.

Statistics show that about 90% of people read business responses to reviews. A negative review simply says something about *one time* your business provided service. Your response to the negative review says something about your *business as a whole*, and people are aware of this difference.

About 30% of people report they feel more positively about a business simply because it responds to its reviews, so this is a way to turn

a negative review into at least some positive goodwill.

More than half of consumers actually *expect* businesses to respond to negative reviews within the week. Given that 40% of negative reviews never get a response, this is a good way to set yourself apart as a death-care firm that truly cares about its clientele.

Additionally, you might occasionally get hit with an actual fake Google review. When this happens, immediately *flag* it. Here's what to do:

1. Ask at least four other people – such as employees, friends or family members – to also flag the review as fake. It takes five flags before Google will look at the review in question.

2. Respond to the review in a manner that's professional but also

indicates that the review doesn't appear to be completely accurate.

For example, you might say, "We have reviewed our documents and don't find or remember any incident/service that matches what you've written here. We strive to provide high-quality, compassionate service to all families we serve. Could you please contact us with additional information to help us match this potential issue to service we provided?"

Online reputation becomes more important for funeral homes every day – but it's just as important, if not more so, to do it the right way. Don't engage in review gating or work with any marketing firm that attempts to get you to do so. By generating great reviews properly, you bolster and protect your reputation now and in the future. •



There is a Better Way
to handle your funeral home communications

ASD

myASD.com 1-800-868-9950