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## Review Gating: Why You Can't Do It (and Steps to Take Instead)

By Welton Hong

Yes, reviews are important for your online reputation and help you show up in the right searches. And with more than 90 percent of consumers checking online reviews before deciding on a company or service, funeral homes and deathcare companies can't afford to ignore them. But you also can't afford to entirely control them. Controlling your online reviews in an attempt to absolutely prohibit negative reviews is called review gating, and Google doesn't stand for it. Unlike many statements made

about Google's stance on various marketing tactics, this isn't conjecture drawn from experience or the internet giant's vague posturing. In April 2018, Google came right out and said its policy was prohibitive of review gating practices.



Welton Hong

Google's policy update said, "Don't discourage or prohibit negative reviews or selectively solicit positive reviews from customers."

Okay, you're probably wondering why anyone would ever solicit negative reviews, but that's not what this language means. Google is pretty much saying you can't direct clientele on what to say in reviews, and you certainly can't integrate technology to ensure only good reviews are hitting the books.

Prior to this update, some companies were leveraging technology to prequalify reviews. For example, they might send an email to customers asking if they would like to leave a review and providing a link to do so. The customer was then asked to indicate a star rating for the review; if customers indicated a positive rating, they were shuttled through to Google to complete the process. If they indicated a negative rating, their review was sent to a private site or inbox. This is review gating, and you shouldn't be doing it.

First, Google will penalize you if it catches you gating reviews. That could mean removing all of your reviews or even banning you from the search engine results. Both are very bad news for your online marketing efforts. More than half of all traffic on webpage's comes from organic searches (and Google is the top contender in that arena), so getting black-listed is bad news for traffic, conversions, and revenue.

Second, gating your reviews is simply inauthentic, and if consumers find out you're doing it, it mars your brand. You become less trustworthy in general, which is bad for

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## Review Gating: Why You Can't Do It

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any company but can be especially disastrous for funeral homes and other death-care businesses where the differentiator is often your honest, compassionate dealings with families in need or those looking to preplan final arrangements.

If you can't be trusted to deal fairly with consumers looking to leave a review, someone might be less likely to trust you with prepaid funeral or cremation arrangements or the final memorial for a loved one.

But with reviews critical to funeral home online marketing, you may wonder what you can do to protect your online reputation. While you can't gate reviews, you can take action in different ways.

Start by providing the kind of service that translates to positive reviews. This may seem obvious, but it's the first step in creating positive word-of-mouth (digitally and otherwise).

Next, create processes that let clientele know that reviews are appreciated and help your business succeed. Depending on the type of services or goods you provide, you may not want to ask for a review at the time of service; it's not tactful to press grieving families to log into their mobile phone or a kiosk in your funeral home, for example. These are tactics that are better left to restaurants or retail establishments.

But deathcare companies can still ask for reviews in a number of ways:

- If clientele seek you out to offer praise or positive feedback, mention that an online review is very helpful for your company and other individuals who may be looking for similar services. Let them know that one of the best places to leave this type of review is on your Google My Business profile.

- Place a discreet note on your website letting visitors know how grateful you are to be able to serve at-need families and others and that you are also appreciative of any feedback they might provide. You might link to your GMB page so individuals can leave reviews.
- Periodically post tactful reminders on your social media pages that reviews are helpful and important to local businesses and that you appreciate feedback from former clientele. Keep this light and tasteful and don't overdo the requests, or it might cause your profiles to seem too self-serving.
- Incorporate review asks into follow-up contacts with clientele. You might include a short written call to action (CTA) about reviews on thank-you materials or invoices you mail out or send a follow-up email ensuring the family doesn't need anything else from you and include a link to leave a review. You also could make a follow-up call to check in on the family (and mention the review process if the vibe during the call is positive about your services).

You can't entirely control the review process, but you can take action to encourage reviews from individuals who seem likely to leave positive ones. And more (mostly positive) reviews helps boost your performance in search engines and inspire trust in potential clientele.

**Welton Hong** is the founder of **Ring Ring Marketing\*** and a leading expert in creating case generation from online to the phone line. He is the author of *Making Your Phone Ring with Internet Marketing for Funeral Homes*. For more information, visit [www.FuneralHomeProfits.com](http://www.FuneralHomeProfits.com).

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