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The Reviews You Can't Control (and What You Can)

You can't stop a bad review from happening. You can control how much it matters. Here's why review volume and recency, not suppression, are the actual lever.

At some point, someone is going to leave your business a review you didn't earn.

Maybe it's a client who misremembered what was agreed. Maybe it's a competitor, or someone who confused you with a different business. Maybe it's a legitimately dissatisfied person whose complaint is exaggerated. Whatever the cause, most owners respond to that first unfair review with the same instinct: get it taken down.

That instinct is understandable. It's also usually the wrong place to spend your energy.

Why Suppression Rarely Works

Google removes reviews only in narrow cases: fake accounts, hate speech, conflicts of interest, spam. A review that's unfair but written by a real person about a real interaction, even one you dispute, almost never qualifies. Owners spend hours flagging reviews, appealing decisions, and drafting rebuttals, and most of that effort produces nothing. The review stays up.

Some owners escalate further and threaten legal action over a bad review. This is rarely worth it. Defamation claims over online reviews are expensive, slow, and hard to win, since opinion is broadly protected speech. Even a technical win costs more in time and reputation than the review itself ever cost.

None of this means you should ignore a bad review. It means suppression isn't the mechanism that protects you. Something else is.

What Actually Determines Impact

A single bad review's effect on a prospect's decision depends less on its content and more on its context: how many other reviews surround it, and how recent they are.

A business with 60 reviews and one bad one from eight months ago reads as an outlier. A business with 8 reviews and one bad one reads as a coin flip. The math isn't emotional, it's proportional. One negative review out of sixty is 1.7% of the record. One negative review out of eight is 12.5%. Prospects do this calculation instinctively, even if they never do it consciously.

Recency compounds the effect. A bad review sitting at the top of a thin, stale profile gets disproportionate weight because it's the newest thing a prospect sees. A bad review buried under a dozen recent, positive ones barely registers, because the story the profile tells has already moved on.

This is the same mechanism covered in how review velocity affects local search rankings: a steady flow of recent reviews outperforms a static high total. It turns out the same mechanism protects you from the reviews you can't control, not just the ranking algorithm.

The Response Still Matters

Diluting a bad review's weight doesn't mean ignoring it. A calm, specific, professional response does real work, both for the reviewer and for the prospect reading it later.

Skip the defensive tone. Don't argue the details in public, and don't accuse the reviewer of lying, even when you believe they are. State what you understand happened, correct any factual error briefly and without heat, and offer to resolve it outside the review thread if resolution is possible.

Prospects read review responses as a signal about how you handle friction, not just whether the original complaint was fair. A composed response to an unfair review often builds more trust than a five-star review would have on its own. A defensive or combative one confirms the worst version of the story.

When a Flag Actually Works

There's a narrow set of situations where reporting a review to Google is worth the time, and it's worth knowing what they are so you're not spending effort on cases that won't qualify.

A review from an account with no history, posted the same week as a competitor launch or a personal dispute, is a legitimate candidate for a fake-review report, especially if you can point to something concrete: the reviewer was never a client, the dates don't match any real transaction, or the account has a pattern of similar reviews against other local businesses. A review that includes threats, slurs, or content unrelated to the business (a political rant that happens to be posted on your listing) also qualifies, since Google's policy is about content type, not accuracy of opinion.

What doesn't qualify, no matter how unfair it feels, is a review from a real former client describing a real interaction, even one where their account of events differs sharply from yours. That's a dispute about facts, not a policy violation, and

Google's removal process isn't built to adjudicate factual disagreements between a business and a customer.

Knowing this distinction upfront saves the hours most owners lose trying to get a legitimate but unflattering review taken down through a process that was never going to work for that case.

The Actual Fix Is Upstream

If a single bad review can meaningfully damage your business, the underlying problem isn't that review. It's that your total volume and recency are too thin to absorb normal variance. Every business that stays open long enough gets an unfair review eventually. The businesses that shrug it off aren't lucky. They built a review profile with enough depth that one outlier doesn't define it.

That's a generation problem, not a suppression problem. Why your online reputation doesn't reflect how good you actually are covers why most service businesses have far fewer reviews than their actual client satisfaction would predict, and what a consistent request process looks like.

COREfeedback™ is built around keeping that flow steady so no single review, fair or not, carries outsized weight. If a review is sitting there right now and you're not sure whether it's worth fighting, a 15-minute conversation is a faster answer than another appeal to Google.

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