



The Reputation Management *Blueprint*

Build a simple, rule-safe system that asks every customer once, fixes problems before they become reviews, answers every review on a clock and keeps your facts right where maps, search and AI answers look.

Digital Ingenuity

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BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Read this first

Your reputation is what a stranger reads about you before they call. You cannot write your own reviews. You can run almost everything around them: who you ask, when and how you ask, how fast you fix a problem, how you reply and what you report. This guide turns those choices into one system you can set up in 90 days.

-
- | | |
|-----------|---|
| <i>01</i> | Your reputation lives in five places: search results, map listings, review sites, social and AI answers. |
| <i>02</i> | Ask every customer once, a fixed time after the job is confirmed done, on the channel they agreed to. No filters, no gifts, no scripts. |
| <i>03</i> | The strictest rule wins. Google and Yelp forbid incentives that the FTC rule allows in some cases. ^{1, 2, 3} |
| <i>04</i> | Never ask for Yelp reviews. Never ask a customer to name a staff member or to say specific things. ^{2, 3} |
| <i>05</i> | Catch unhappy customers with a private check-in and fix the problem with no strings attached. The review ask still goes to everyone, after the same fixed delay. |
| <i>06</i> | Reply to every review on a written clock, and keep private details out of every reply. |
| <i>07</i> | Report only real policy violations, with evidence. Never threaten a reviewer. ^{4, 5} |
| <i>08</i> | Aim for a steady flow of reviews, not a burst. Google treats unusual volumes of reviews that look like an effort to manipulate a rating as rating manipulation, and it pauses new reviews during a spike in spam reviews. ^{2, 6} |
| <i>09</i> | Quote a customer's review on your site or in an ad only with their permission, and never hide the negative ones. ^{1, 7} |
| <i>10</i> | Write your crisis card before you need it. |
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Short on time? Take the scorecard at the back first. Each line names its chapter, so your lowest answers tell you where to start.

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Where your reputation *lives*

Before anyone calls you, they read about you in five places, and you control more of each one than you might think. Walk through all five this week and write down what a stranger sees. Every later chapter measures against that page.

1.1

The five rooms

Think of your reputation as five rooms a stranger walks through, usually quickly and often on a phone. **Search results** for your name. **Map listings** on Google Maps, Apple Maps and Bing. **Review sites:** Google, Yelp, Facebook, Nextdoor and the review site for your trade. **Social:** comments, tags and local groups. And **AI answers**, where an assistant reads the other rooms and replies in a paragraph.

1.2

What each room looks like now

Search results. Search your business name in a private window on a phone. Count how many first-page results you control (your website, your Business Profile, social pages you run) and how many you do not (review sites, directories, forum threads, news). Then type your name and stop before you search: the words the search box suggests after it are part of your reputation too.

Google Maps and AI in Google. Google says more reviews and positive ratings can help your local ranking.⁸ Google Maps shows a summary of what people like about a place, written with Gemini from reviews.⁹ On March 12, 2026, Google began rolling out Ask Maps in the U.S. and India, a way to ask Maps complex questions about places. Google says Ask Maps analyzes information from over 300 million places, including reviews from more than 500 million contributors.¹⁰ In Search, AI Overviews and AI Mode may run several related searches across subtopics and data sources, a technique Google calls query fan-out, and Google's advice for these features includes keeping your Business Profile information up to date.¹¹

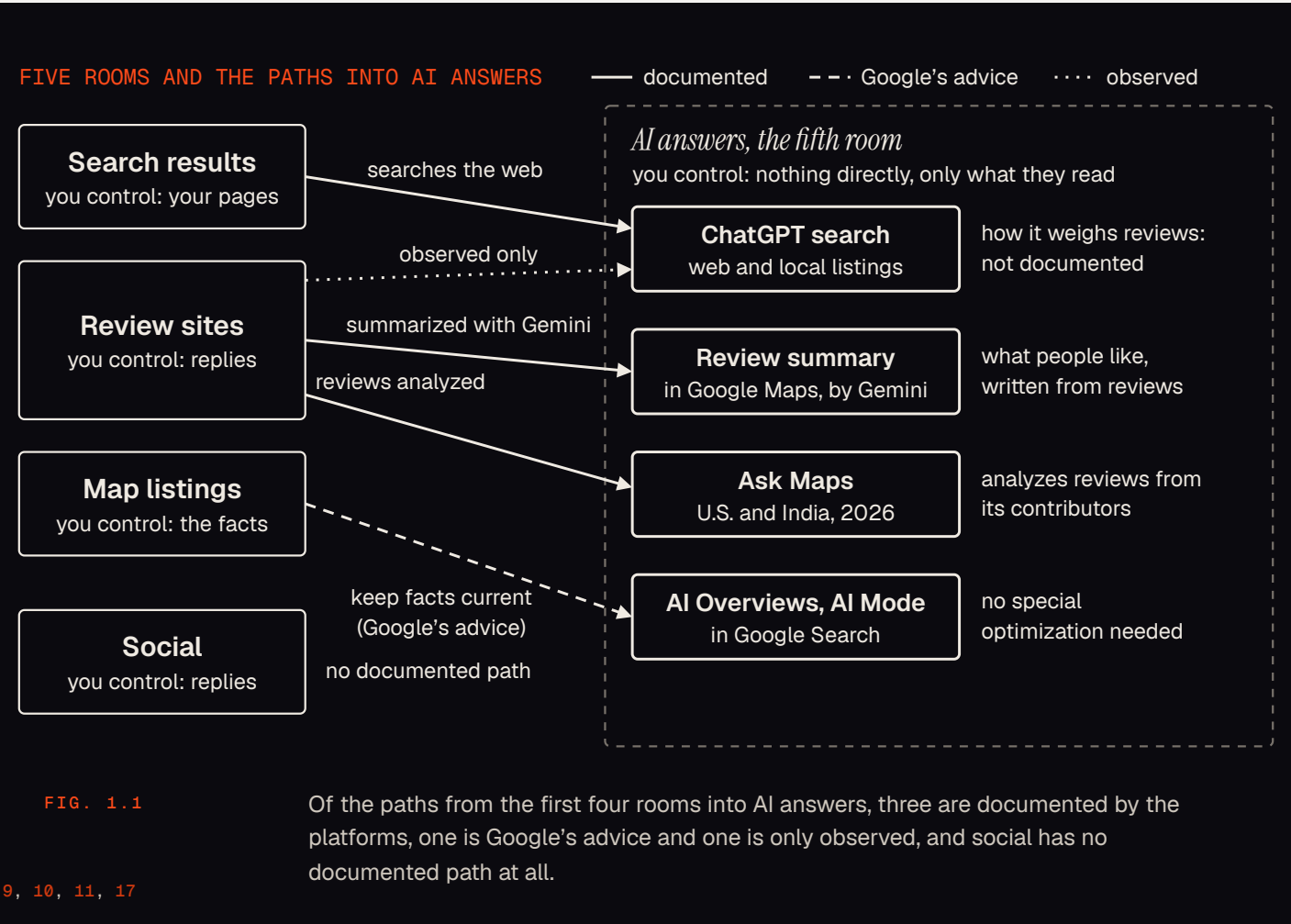
Apple. Apple's own ratings in Maps are a Like or Dislike for the available categories, not written reviews.¹² Your place card is now managed in Apple Business, which replaced Apple Business Connect on April 14, 2026. Existing Business Connect data moved over automatically.¹³ If you last checked Apple in 2025, check again.

Facebook and Nextdoor. On Facebook, reviews are called Recommendations, and turning them off removes your Page's rating and reviews.¹⁴ A Page may not show a rating until it has at least 5 reviews, only public recommendations count toward it, and Facebook says it does not verify that reviewers used the business.¹⁵ On Nextdoor, a Fave is a recommendation from a verified neighbor who hired or chose you, and Nextdoor says more Faves means more visibility there.¹⁶

Your trade's review site. Depending on your trade, that is a doctor rating site, a legal directory, a home services marketplace or a consumer complaint bureau. Step 3 of the audit below finds yours.

Social. Nobody hands you a rating here. Tags, comments and threads in local groups are reviews you were never asked about, and neighbors read them as reviews.

ChatGPT. ChatGPT's own help page says its search can use location to find local results, sometimes works with search partners, may share location with providers of local business listings, and does not guarantee placement. For restaurants, it can also show reservation times from booking providers, including Yelp in the U.S. and Canada.¹⁷ The page says nothing about how ChatGPT weighs reviews, so anything more you read about that is observation, not documentation.



1.3

What you control, and what you do not

TABLE 1.1 5 ROWS

YOU CONTROL	YOU DO NOT CONTROL
Your reply to every review	The reviews themselves
The facts on every profile: name, hours, phone, services	The summaries platforms write from your reviews
Who you ask, when and on which channel	Whether a customer posts, and what they say
How fast a complaint gets fixed	What neighbors say in a local group
Your website and what it shows	Which business an assistant names

Every chapter in this guide works the left column. None of it tries to game the right one.

METHOD

The Five Rooms Audit

01

Search like a stranger. Use a private window on a phone and search your business name. Write down the first thing a stranger would see, how many first-page results you control and what the search box suggests.

02

Open every map listing. On Google, Apple and Bing, note the rating, the review count and the date of the newest review.

03

List the review sites. Search for your business name plus the word reviews, and list every site on the first page of results.

04

Scan social. Look for tags, comments and local group posts that mention you in the last 90 days.

05

Ask the assistants. In a private or logged-out window, ask ChatGPT, Gemini and Perplexity the same three questions, with your city in each: “Is [business] in [city] any good?”, “Who is the best [service] in [city]?” and “What complaints do people have about [business] in [city]?” Ask each question twice and save both answers with the date. An answer that changes between two tries is itself a finding.

EXAMPLE

A three truck plumbing company in Frisco

The owner expected a quick pass. The Google profile was strong: 4.7 stars from 212 reviews, the newest two days old (all numbers in this example are illustrations). The rest of the audit was not. The Apple Maps place card had never been claimed and showed last year’s hours. A Yelp page held nine reviews nobody at the company had read, three of them unanswered complaints. The social scan found a neighborhood thread recommending the company twice. And when asked who the best plumber in Frisco is, two assistants named two competitors and never mentioned the company.

CONTINUED

The fix list wrote itself: claim the Apple place card and correct the hours, reply to the three Yelp complaints this week, thank the neighbors in the thread, and rerun the three AI questions every month to see whether the answers change.

☐ CHECKLIST

6 ITEMS

- ☐ Claim and verify every map listing you find: Google, Apple Business and Bing.
- ☐ Record the rating, review count and newest review date for each site.
- ☐ Store the login owner for every profile in one shared place.
- ☐ Mark every review that has no reply.
- ☐ Run the three AI questions twice each and save the answers with the date.
- ☐ Flag any listing with a wrong name, phone, hours or address, and fix it this week.

Your reputation baseline

Fill one row per site. Every later chapter measures against this page, so date it.

SITE	CLAIMED?	RATING, COUNT, NEWEST REVIEW	UNREPLIED	WHAT A STRANGER SEES FIRST
Search results for your name	Not needed	First-page results you control:	Not needed	
Google				
Apple Maps				
Bing				
Yelp				
Facebook				
Nextdoor				
Your trade's review site				
Social and local groups	Not needed	Mentions in 90 days:		

AI answers baseline

One row per question and assistant. Use a private window, put your city in the question and ask it twice. Rerun the same rows every month.

QUESTION	ASSISTANT	WHAT IT SAID ABOUT YOU	WHO IT NAMED	DATE, AND DID THE TWO TRIES MATCH?
Is [business] in [city] any good?	ChatGPT			
Is [business] in [city] any good?	Gemini			
Is [business] in [city] any good?	Perplexity			
Who is the best [service] in [city]?				
What complaints do people have about [business] in [city]?				

NOTES

— CHAPTER 1 · IN SHORT

“*You cannot write your reviews, but you run nearly everything around them.*”

-
- 01 Your reputation lives in five rooms: search, maps, review sites, social and AI answers.
-
- 02 Google Maps summarizes reviews with Gemini, Ask Maps analyzes reviews, and Google advises keeping your profile facts current for its AI features.^{9, 10, 11}
-
- 03 Apple Business replaced Apple Business Connect in April 2026. Check your place card.¹³
-
- 04 Fill in both baselines this week. Every later chapter measures against them.
-

02

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The *rules* before the tactics

Much of the review advice online was written before today's rules. The Federal Trade Commission, Google and Yelp each draw the line in a different place, and the strictest line that applies is yours. One four-gate test keeps every request on the right side of all three.

A note before the rules: this guide describes laws and platform policies as general information, not legal advice. Rules change, so open the linked source before you act on one, and ask your lawyer about any close call.

2.1

The FTC rule

The FTC’s rule on consumer reviews and testimonials took effect on October 21, 2024.¹ It bans six things. Here is each one, and what it looks like at a local business.

TABLE 2.1 6 ROWS

WHAT THE RULE BANS	WHAT THAT LOOKS LIKE AT A LOCAL BUSINESS
Fake reviews: by someone who does not exist, such as an AI-generated reviewer, by someone who never used the business, or misstating the experience ^{4, 18}	A friend who never hired you posts five stars. A tool writes reviews in customers’ names.
Incentives that depend on a review saying something positive or negative ⁴	A gift card only if the review is five stars.
Insider reviews by officers or managers without a clear disclosure, and asking staff or relatives for reviews that then appear without one ⁴	Your office manager posts as a happy patient. Staff ask their relatives to review you.
A website you control posing as an independent review site ⁴	A “Best of [City]” site you run that ranks you first.
Review suppression: unfounded legal threats, physical threats, intimidation or certain false public accusations, or presenting the reviews on your site as all or most of them when negative ones were held back ⁴	A letter threatening to sue a reviewer. A reviews page on your site that quietly drops low ratings.
Buying or selling fake followers, views or other signs of social media influence ⁴	Buying followers for your page to look bigger.

The FTC is acting on it. On December 22, 2025, it sent warning letters to 10 companies about possible violations.¹⁹

\$53,088

maximum civil penalty per violation, the figure the FTC cited in its December 2025 warning letters and still the amount in the federal regulation in September 2026. It is adjusted for inflation, so check the current figure before you quote it.

SOURCE 19, SOURCE 20

Asking only happy customers. This is called review gating. The rule has no specific ban on it, but the FTC says the practice could violate the FTC Act,¹ and its guide for marketers says plainly not to ask for reviews only from customers you think will leave positive ones.²¹ Treat it as off limits.

Contracts. The Consumer Review Fairness Act makes standard form contract terms illegal, such as online terms and conditions, if they bar a customer's honest review, penalize a reviewer, or take the customer's rights in what they write. It does not cover employment contracts or agreements with independent contractors.²² If your standard service agreement has a non-disparagement clause, take it out.

2.2

Google is stricter

Google's policy for Maps content lists the practices below under Rating Manipulation, next to its Fake Engagement rules against paid reviews and content not based on a real experience.²

TABLE 2.2 6 ROWS

WHAT GOOGLE’S POLICY BARS	WHAT THAT LOOKS LIKE
Any incentive, such as payment, discounts or free goods or services, for posting any review or for revising or removing a negative one ²	Free dessert for any review. A refund if the customer deletes a one-star.
Discouraging negative reviews, or asking only for positive ones ²	Sending the link only to customers who rated you 9 or 10.
Requiring or pressuring customers to review while on the premises ²	Handing over a tablet and waiting while the customer types.
Staff review quotas, and asking staff to collect reviews with specific content, such as a staff member’s name ²	A monthly review target per technician. “Please mention Sam.”
Reviews based on a conflict of interest, such as current or former employment, a contract, family or a competitor ²	Employees, former employees, relatives or a rival reviewing.
Unusual volumes or patterns of reviews that suggest an effort to manipulate a rating ²	A one-weekend push that brings in more reviews than the last six months.

§

RULE

Google’s penalties go past deleting reviews

When a business breaks the fake engagement policy, Google may block new reviews for a set period, unpublish existing reviews for a set period, and show customers a warning that fake reviews were removed. Google emails the owner before it applies a restriction, and the owner can appeal.²³

2.3

Yelp: do not ask at all

Yelp tells businesses not to ask anyone for reviews, whether customers, mailing list subscribers, friends or family, and says its recommendation software is designed to highlight reviews from people who want to share genuine experiences without being asked or tempted.³ Yelp also

posts Consumer Alerts on business pages, including when it has evidence someone offered incentives for reviews and when a business may be using legal threats to silence a reviewer.⁵

2.4

Facebook and Nextdoor

Facebook's help pages on Recommendations explain how to turn them on or off, how the rating is worked out and how to report one.^{14, 15, 24}

None of the pages we read sets rules for asking, so on Facebook the FTC rule and the test below set your limits. Nextdoor, unlike Yelp, asks businesses to share their Fave link.¹⁶ Chapter 3 shows how to share it without asking only your happiest customers.

2.5

Health care and law

The HHS Office for Civil Rights settled with a dental practice that disclosed patient information in replies to online reviews.²⁵ It also says a valid written HIPAA authorization is generally needed before posting a patient's information in a testimonial.²⁶ For lawyers, ABA Formal Opinion 496 says a negative review does not permit revealing confidential client information in a reply.²⁷ ABA opinions are guidance; your state's rules of professional conduct govern, so check them too. Chapters 5 and 8 turn these into templates and forms.

2.6

The strictest rule wins

The FTC allows some incentives that Google and Yelp forbid.^{1, 2, 3} So your rule is the strictest one that applies wherever the review will appear. Here is how eight common practices score.

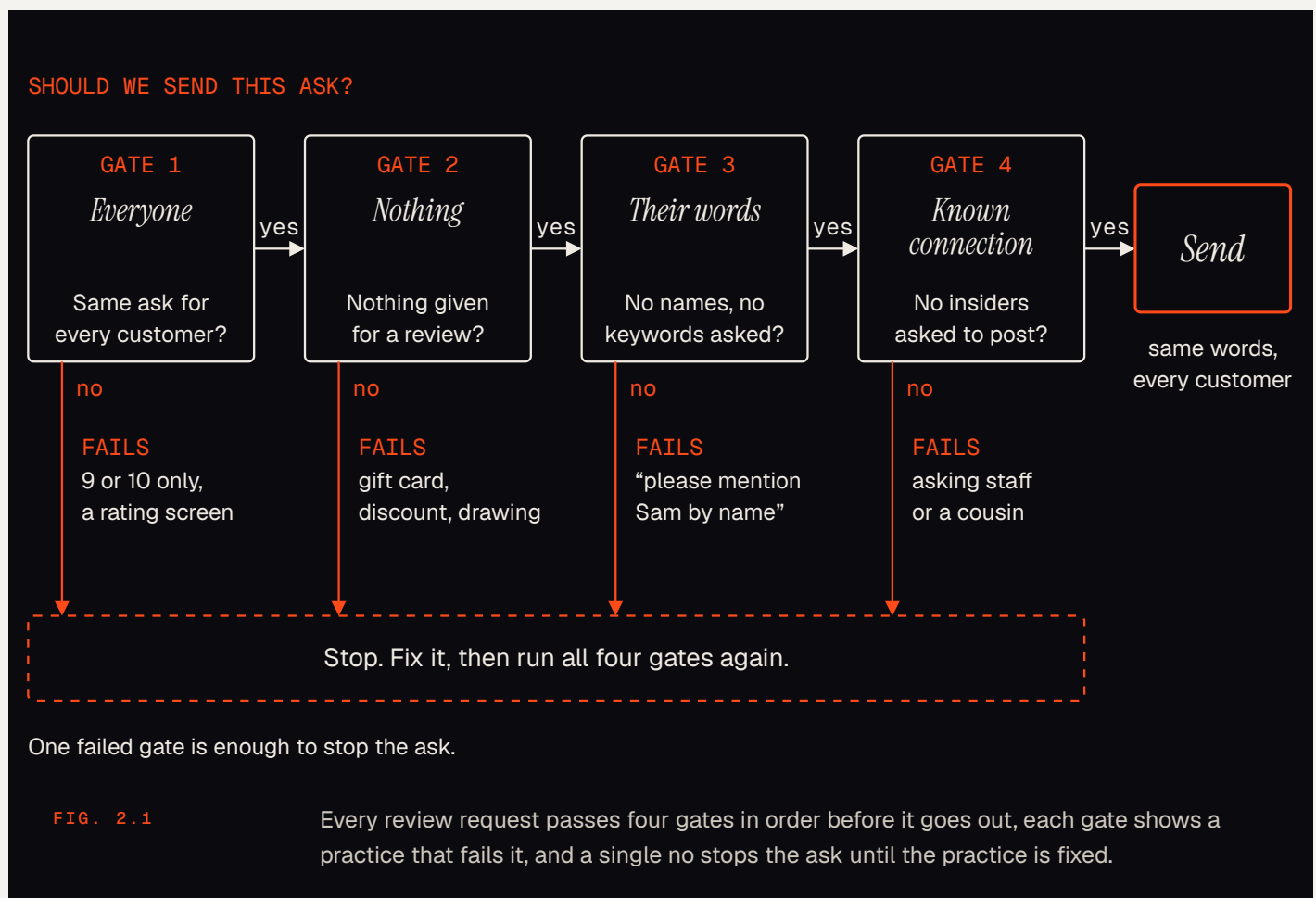
TABLE 2.3 8 ROWS

PRACTICE	FTC RULE	GOOGLE	YELP	OUR RULE
A gift card for any review, good or bad	Allowed if not tied to sentiment; disclose it ^{1, 21}	Not allowed ²	Not allowed ³	No
A prize drawing entry for reviewing	Allowed if not tied to sentiment; disclose it ^{1, 7}	Not allowed ²	Not allowed ³	No
Asking only customers who scored you 9 or 10	Risky: could violate the FTC Act ^{1, 21}	Not allowed ²	Not allowed ³	No
Asking customers to mention the technician by name	No specific rule	Not allowed ²	Not allowed ³	No
An employee review with the connection disclosed	Allowed with clear disclosure ^{1, 4}	Not allowed: conflict of interest ²	Not allowed ³	No
A refund offered if they remove a bad review	Risky: the FTC says asking a customer to change or delete a negative review could mislead readers ⁷	Not allowed ²	Not allowed ³	No
A QR code sign at the counter	Fine: a sign asks everyone, which is what the FTC guide wants ²¹	Allowed: Google suggests it ²⁸	Not for Yelp reviews ³	Yes, with no Yelp link
Handing over a tablet and waiting	No specific rule	Not allowed: Google bars requiring or pressuring reviews on the premises ²	Not allowed ³	No

METHOD

The Clean Ask Test

- 01 **Everyone.** Every customer gets the same ask, whatever you guess they will say.
- 02 **Nothing.** Nothing is given, promised or entered in a drawing because of a review.
- 03 **Their words.** You say nothing about what to write: no staff names, no keywords, no star counts.
- 04 **Known connection.** No employee, relative or vendor is asked to review you, and any connection a reviewer has is clearly disclosed.



EXAMPLE

Free dessert for any review

A family restaurant plans a card that reads: free dessert on your next visit for any review, good or bad. Under the FTC rule, an incentive that does not depend on what the review says is not banned, though it should be disclosed.¹, ²¹ But Google forbids incentives for any review,² and Yelp forbids asking at all.³ It fails the Nothing gate, so it fails our rule.

What the owner does instead: the same small card on every table with a QR code to the restaurant's Google profile and nothing on offer, a reply to every review within a day, and the dessert budget spent on fixing the slow Friday kitchen that the reviews keep mentioning.

☐ CHECKLIST

7 ITEMS

- ☐ Remove any contest, discount or drawing tied to reviews.
- ☐ Remove any rating screen that decides who gets the review link.
- ☐ Delete "please mention [name]" from every script and template.
- ☐ Stop asking employees, relatives or vendors for reviews, and end any staff review quota.
- ☐ Remove non-disparagement terms from your standard customer contracts and online terms.
- ☐ Take Yelp out of every review request.
- ☐ Health care and legal: route every public reply template past your privacy or ethics lead.

Clean ask audit

List everything you do today to get reviews: scripts, cards, emails, texts, signs, staff habits. Run each one through the four gates and write the first gate it fails.

WHAT WE DO TODAY	FIRST GATE IT FAILS, IF ANY	KEEP, CHANGE OR STOP	OWNER	DONE BY

NOTES

CHAPTER 2 · IN SHORT

“*Your rule is the strictest one that applies wherever the review will appear.*”

-
- 01 The FTC rule has been in force since October 21, 2024, and the FTC is sending warning letters.^{1, 19}
-
- 02 Google forbids any incentive, review gating, pressure on the premises, scripted content, staff quotas and unusual bursts meant to move a rating.²
-
- 03 Yelp says do not ask anyone for reviews.³
-
- 04 Every ask passes four gates: Everyone, Nothing, Their words, Known connection.
-

03

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Ask every customer *once*

Ask every customer the same way, once, a fixed time after the work is confirmed done, on a channel they agreed to. Everything below makes that one habit easy to keep and safe to defend.

3.1

Why once is enough

One ask is our rule, not the platforms’. Google’s own tips page says to remind customers to leave reviews,²⁹ so a second message is not against Google’s rules. We choose one because the customer has already given you their time, and a second or third message starts to look like the pressure the rules warn against. Timing matters more than repetition: a customer who just saw the finished work remembers it, and one asked a week later has to recall it. So ask once, while the memory is fresh, and then stop.

3.2

The moment

The private check-in from Chapter 4 goes out when the work is confirmed complete. The review ask follows one fixed delay later, the same delay for every customer. We use the next morning: the job is still fresh, and any problem the check-in found has had time for a callback first. Confirmed means the customer agrees it is done: they signed off, picked up, checked out or closed. Set the trigger on that event in your booking or job system, not on “invoice sent”, which can fire before the customer has seen the result.

No booking or job system? Keep a list of completed jobs, read it at the end of each day, and send the next morning’s asks from that list.

TABLE 3.1 7 ROWS

TRADE	CONFIRMED DONE MEANS	WATCH OUT FOR
Home services	Job signed off and photos sent	Asking while the technician is still on site
Auto repair	The customer picked up the car	Asking at the counter while they pay
Dental and medical	The patient checked out	Any mention of a treatment or condition
Legal	The matter closed	Asking mid-matter

TRADE	CONFIRMED DONE MEANS	WATCH OUT FOR
Real estate	The closing is done	Asking before the keys change hands
Restaurants	The meal is over; the ask is a table card or receipt	Any Yelp request
Private schools	An event or term has ended; ask parents	Any mention of a student

3.3

The channel and the consent

Text only customers who agreed to receive texts from you. Under the Telephone Consumer Protection Act, automated texts generally need the customer's prior express consent.³⁰ A customer can revoke consent by any reasonable method, including replying stop, quit, end, revoke, opt out, cancel or unsubscribe, and you must honor it within a reasonable time, no more than 10 business days.^{30, 31} If an automated text ever includes an advertisement or offer, federal rules require the customer's prior express written consent.³¹ Federal rules bar telephone solicitations before 8 a.m. or after 9 p.m. at the customer's local time.³¹ A review request may not count as a solicitation, but use that window as your outer limit anyway.

Email. Commercial email needs accurate sender details, a subject line that reflects the content, your valid postal address and a clear way to opt out, and opt-outs must be honored within 10 business days. The FTC's compliance guide lists the rest of the duties.³² Treat every review request email as commercial email and follow that guide. It costs little and settles the question.

Rules that are moving. Part of the FCC's revocation rule has been delayed to January 31, 2027 while the FCC reviews a pending rulemaking.³⁰ State telemarketing laws can add their own hours and consent rules, and they can be stricter than the federal ones. Check fcc.gov and your state's official pages, or ask your lawyer, before you start texting.

3.4

The link

In your Business Profile, choose Read reviews, then Get more reviews, to copy your review link or download a QR code. The QR code can only be made on a computer browser, not on a phone. Google suggests putting the link on receipts and in thank-you emails and displaying the QR code in your store.²⁸ Each location has its own Business Profile, so make a separate link and QR code for each location and test each one on a phone.

A second site. Our rule: the ask carries your Google link first and at most one other site's link, the same for every customer. Or leave the ask with one link and put the second site on the receipt or the thank-you page. Never choose the site by guessing who is happy.

Nextdoor. Nextdoor, unlike Yelp, asks businesses to share their Fave link by printing, texting or posting it.¹⁶ Its page also says to ask your best customers. Send it to every customer instead, because the FTC says not to ask only the customers you expect to be happy.²¹ Never include a Yelp link.³

! WARNING

Pressure at the counter

A QR code sign at the counter is fine; Google suggests it.²⁸ Handing a customer a tablet and waiting, or pushing them to post before they leave, is the kind of pressure on the premises Google forbids.² The sign invites. People do not.

METHOD

The One Ask

01

Moment. Trigger on “job confirmed done” and send after one fixed delay, the same for every customer. We use the next morning.

02

Consent. Use only the channel the customer agreed to, between 8 a.m. and 9 p.m. their time.^{30, 31}

03

Words. One short message, the same for every customer: your Google link first and at most one other site’s link, with nothing about stars, names or keywords.

04

Stop. One ask per job. No chasing, and every opt-out honored and logged.

EXAMPLE

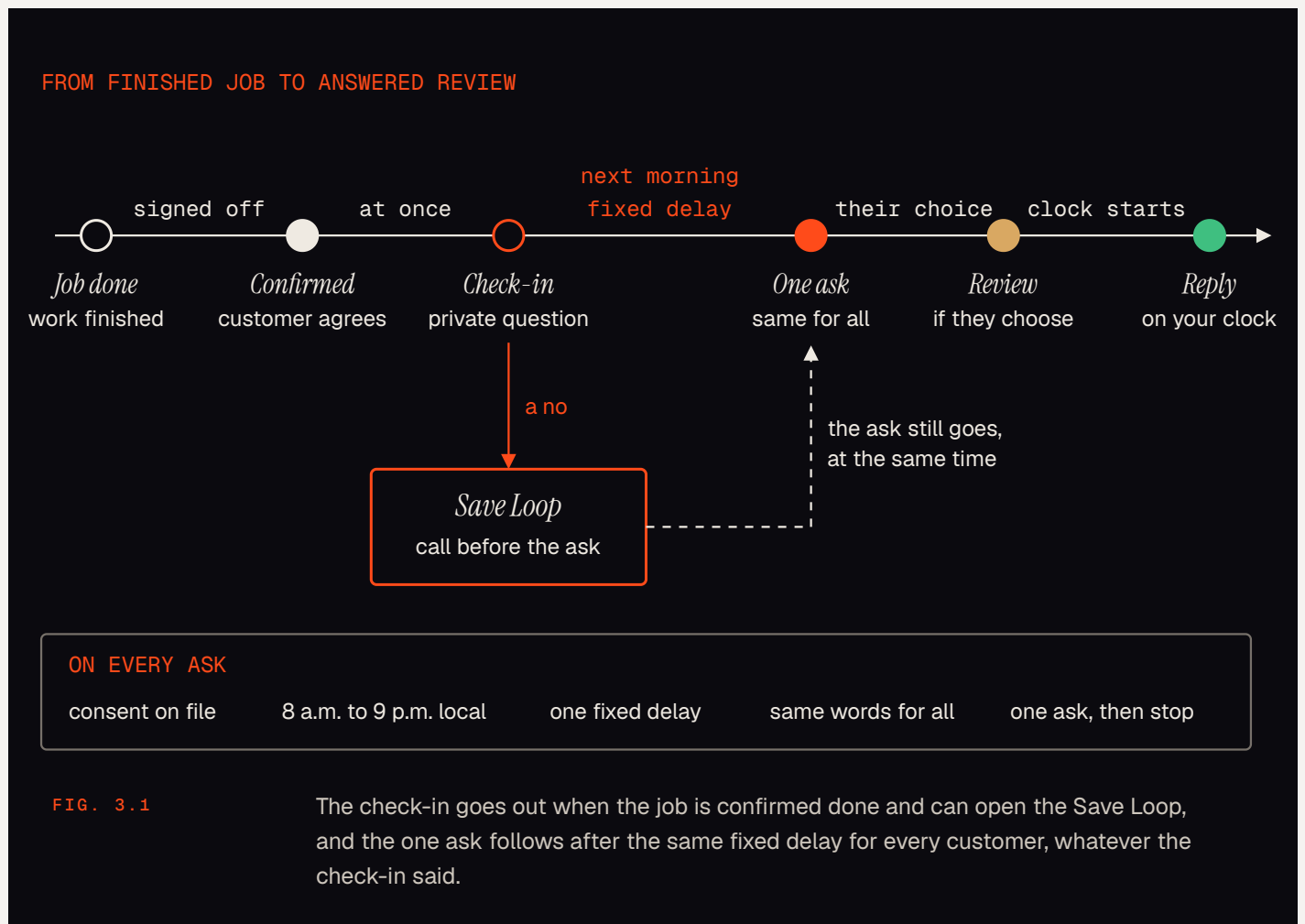
Four templates that pass the Clean Ask Test

Text. “Hi [first name], it’s [business]. Thanks for having us out for [service] yesterday. If you have a minute, would you share how it went? [link] Reply STOP to opt out.”

Email. Subject: “How did we do on [service]?” Body: “Hi [first name], thank you for choosing [business]. If you have a minute, we’d be grateful if you shared how it went.” Then one button with the link, and a footer with your postal address and an unsubscribe link.

Counter. “If you’d like to share how we did, the code on that sign goes to our Google page. No pressure at all.”

Dental and medical. “Hi [first name], thank you for visiting [practice] yesterday. If you’d like to share how your visit went, here’s the link: [link]. Reply STOP to opt out.” It says “your visit” and nothing about the care.



3.5

Who owns it

One person owns the trigger, one owns the templates, and one checks the weekly count of jobs done against asks sent. In a small shop that can be one person wearing three hats. Write the names down, because a system nobody owns quietly stops.

EXAMPLE

A two location dental practice in Plano

The practice set up a check-in text at checkout and a review text the next morning, both using the privacy-safe template, with an email version for patients without text consent. In the first month (numbers are illustrations), the two offices saw 610 patients. 480 had agreed to texts and 105 more had only an email on file. The other 25 had neither, so the front desk added the consent question to intake forms.

The weekly count found the real problem: only 520 asks went out. One office, with 250 of the visits, sent asks for only 175 of them, 70 percent, because the checkout step was skipped on busy afternoons. Fixing that step did more than any change to the wording.

CHECKLIST

7 ITEMS

- ☐ Add consent language for texts to your booking form and intake.
- ☐ Create a separate review link and QR code for each location on a computer, and test each on a phone.
- ☐ Set the trigger to “job confirmed done”, not “invoice sent”, and set one fixed delay for every ask.
- ☐ Write one template per channel and run it through the Clean Ask Test.
- ☐ Honor and log every STOP and unsubscribe.
- ☐ Set the send window inside 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. local time.
- ☐ Compare jobs done with asks sent every week.

One ask setup

One row per channel. If you cannot fill the consent column, that channel is not ready.

CHANNEL	TRIGGER EVENT AND DELAY	WHERE CONSENT IS RECORDED	SEND WINDOW	TEMPLATE, LINKS AND OWNER
Text				
Email				
Counter sign	Always on display	Not needed	Business hours	

NOTES

— CHAPTER 3 • IN SHORT

“Ask every customer once, while the memory is fresh, and then stop.

-
- 01 Trigger the ask on “job confirmed done” and send it after one fixed delay, the same for everyone.
-
- 02 Text only with consent, inside 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. local, and honor any reasonable opt-out within 10 business days. ^{30, 31}
-
- 03 Use one Google review link per location, share your Nextdoor Fave link with everyone, and never ask for Yelp. ^{3, 16, 28}
-
- 04 Count jobs done against asks sent every week.
-

04

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The *save*: fixing it before it becomes a review

The cheapest time to handle a complaint is before it is public. A private check-in catches it, a human call fixes it with no strings attached, and none of it changes who gets asked for a review or when.

4.1

Why the save comes first

A complaint you hear first is one you can fix. A complaint you read on a review page is one you can only answer. Set up the save before you send more customers to a review page, so you can catch problems while they are still private. It also feeds operations: keep your own log of what went wrong, and after a quarter it will show you your few repeat causes.

4.2

Catch: the private check-in

When the work is confirmed done, send every customer one short private question on the channel they agreed to: “Was everything done the way you expected?” A yes needs nothing more. A no, or any reply that is not a clear yes, starts the loop. Replies land in a shared inbox that alerts a named person, so a no never waits on one person’s phone.

The check-in is for you, not for sorting. It never decides who gets the review link. The moment it does, it becomes review gating, which the FTC warns against and Google forbids.^{2, 21}

! WARNING

The gate hidden in a survey

A common setup asks customers to rate you, then sends high scorers to Google and low scorers to a private form. That is selective solicitation, whatever the software calls it.² Send the same review ask to everyone, whatever the check-in says.

4.3

The ask and the customer who said no

The review ask goes to every customer after the same fixed delay from Chapter 3, including the ones who said no. Never skip it, hold it back or move it for one customer because of their answer. Holding it back from unhappy customers is the selection the rules forbid, and sending it minutes after a complaint looks careless. The fixed delay solves both,

because the callback happens first. On the call you can say: “You may get our standard request for feedback tomorrow morning. It goes to every customer, and you are free to ignore it.”

4.4

Call, fix, close

Call. Every no reaches a named person within the hour, and a human calls the same business day. Not an email, not a form: a voice. Five moves, in this order:

TABLE 4.1 5 ROWS

MOVE	WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE
Listen without interrupting	“Tell me what happened. I’ll just listen.”
Say back what you heard	“So the technician came two hours late and nobody called you. Is that right?”
Apologize without excuses	“I’m sorry. That’s not how we should work.”
Agree the fix and the time	“Here’s what I can do, and I can have it done by Thursday.”
Check it lands	“Would that make it right for you?”

Decide in advance who can offer what, so nobody puts an upset customer on hold. Anyone who makes the call can offer a redo or a return visit at no charge. A manager can refund up to a limit the owner sets. Anything more goes to the owner the same day.

No answer is not a yes. Leave a short voicemail with a direct number, send one message with the same number on the channel the customer agreed to, and try once more the next business day. Then log it as open.

Fix. Make it right with no conditions. Google forbids offering anything in exchange for revising or removing a negative review.² Yelp says you can’t offer incentives for users to remove reviews,³ and that pressuring or offering payment to change or remove a review violates its

guidelines.⁵ A refund, a redo or a discount is given because the work fell short, never because of a review. During the fix, nobody mentions reviews at all.

Close. Confirm with the customer that it is fixed, log the root cause in a word or two, and tell the team what changes.

4.5

If the review is already posted

Reply publicly with what you did, using the Four-Line Reply in Chapter 5. Google notifies the reviewer when you reply.³³ Do not ask for an edit as part of the fix. If the customer updates the review on their own, good. If not, your reply now tells every later reader how you handle a problem.

METHOD

The Save Loop

01

Catch. A private check-in goes to every customer when the job is confirmed done, and every no is routed to a named person.

02

Call. A human calls the same business day, listens first and agrees what a fix looks like.

03

Fix. Make it right with no conditions attached and no mention of reviews.

04

Close. Confirm the fix, log the root cause and change the process that caused it.

EXAMPLE

A missed arrival window on a hot afternoon

An HVAC company's check-in came back no at 4:10 p.m. with one line: waited all afternoon, nobody called. The service manager called at 4:40, apologized without excuses and booked a return visit for 8 the next morning at no charge for the visit (times are illustrations). Nobody asked for a review; the manager said only that the standard feedback request goes to every customer. It went out the next morning like every other one. At close, the log showed the cause: dispatch was booking four calls into windows that held three. The fix was a dispatch rule, not a script.

Had the customer already posted, the reply would read: "Thank you for telling us, Maria. You waited all afternoon without a call, and that's on us. We came back the next morning, and we've changed how we book arrival windows so it doesn't happen again. If anything still isn't right, call me directly at [number]. [Name], owner." It states the fix and asks for nothing.

4.6

The monthly root cause tally

Once a month, count the root causes in your save log and share the top three with the team. Pick one to fix in operations before next month's tally. This is where the loop pays for itself: every cause you remove is a complaint you stop getting.

CHECKLIST

7 ITEMS

- ☐ Add the check-in question to your job-complete workflow.
- ☐ Send check-in replies to a shared inbox that alerts a named person within the hour.
- ☐ Write down the same-day callback standard and the five call moves.
- ☐ Set what staff, managers and the owner may each offer to fix a problem.
- ☐ Remove any mention of reviews from every fix script. The one allowed line says the standard feedback request goes to everyone.
- ☐ Confirm the review ask still goes to every customer on the same delay.
- ☐ Share the monthly root cause tally with the team.

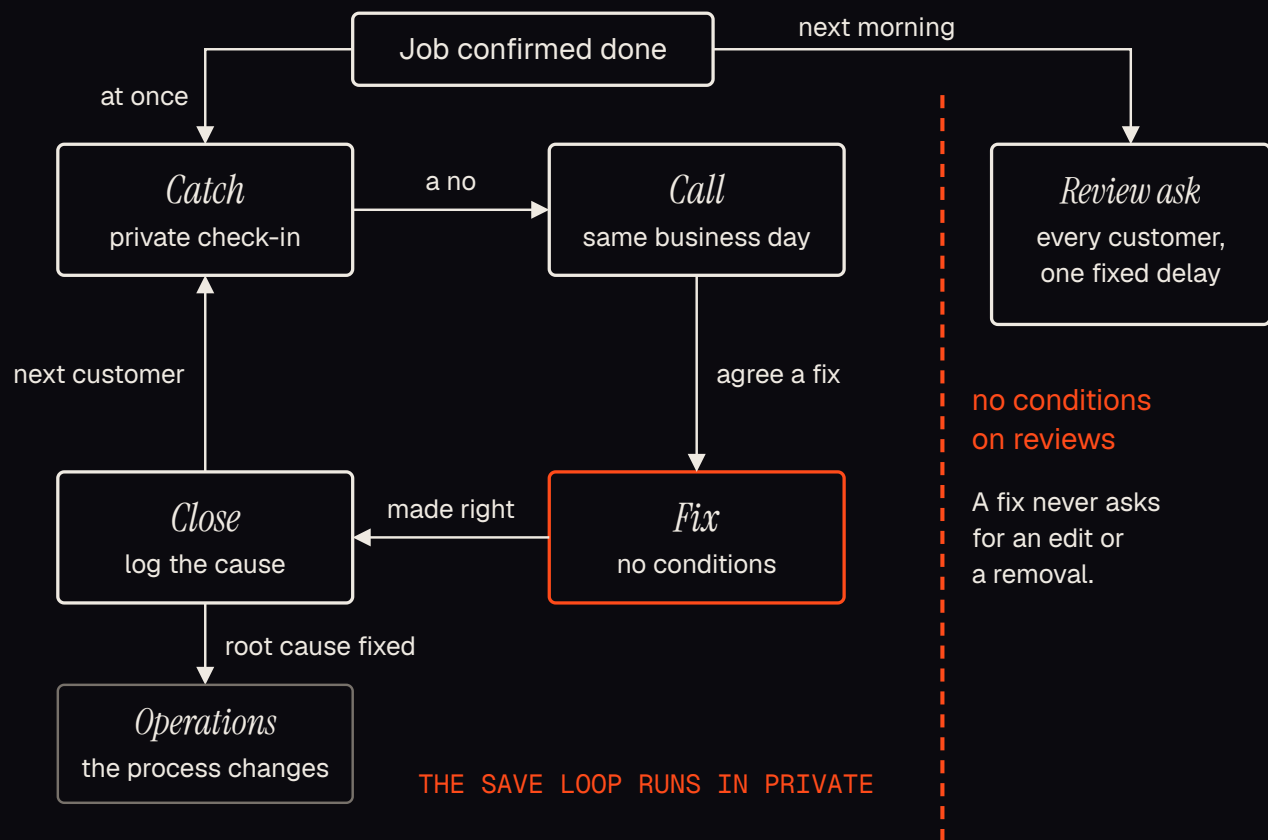


FIG. 4.1

The Save Loop runs in private and sends root causes back into operations, while the review ask goes to every customer on its own fixed schedule and no fix ever carries a condition about a review.

Save log

One row per no. Keep it internal: this log holds private customer details that never go in a public reply.

DATE AND CUSTOMER	WHAT WENT WRONG	CALLED AT, FIX GIVEN, COST	ROOT CAUSE	CLOSED ON

NOTES

CHAPTER 4 · IN SHORT

“*Fix the problem because the work fell short, never because of a review.*”

-
- 01 A private check-in goes to every customer and never decides who gets the review link.
-
- 02 Every no gets a human call the same business day, before the review ask goes out.
-
- 03 Fixes carry no conditions about reviews, ever.^{2, 3}
-
- 04 Log root causes and fix one in operations each month.
-

05

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Replying to every review, good and bad

A reply is addressed to the reviewer and read by every future customer. One four-line method covers most reviews, templates for nine kinds of review cover the common cases, and a few privacy lines in health care, law and schools are never crossed.

5.1

How replies work

On Google, only a verified business can reply. Replies are public, appear under the review, and the reviewer is notified. You can edit or delete a reply later.³³ On Yelp you can answer with a public comment or a private direct message.³⁴ Google's own advice: keep replies short and specific, don't make them promotional, and apologize when an apology is due.²⁹

10 minutes

*how long Google says a
reply usually takes to be
reviewed and appear.
Some take up to 30 days, so
a missing reply is not
always a failed one.*

SOURCE 33

5.2

Write for the next customer

The reviewer has already decided about you. The next customer has not. Write as if the next customer is reading over your shoulder, because they are. A calm, specific reply shows how you treat someone who is upset, which is exactly what a stranger wants to know. Before you publish, read the reply aloud as if the next caller were listening.

Positive reviews get a short version of the four lines, within three business days on our standard. No keyword stuffing, no sales pitch, no discount. Mixed and negative reviews get all four lines within one business day, and then the conversation moves offline. Never argue the facts in public.

METHOD

The Four-Line Reply

01

Thank. Thank them, by first name if the review shows one.

02

Detail. Mention one real detail from their review, so the reply is clearly not pasted; Google and Yelp both advise this.²⁹, ³⁴ Health care, law and schools: skip this step and repeat nothing from the review.

03

Own. Say what you did or will do, with no excuses and no private details.

04

Next. Give a next step: a direct line, a named person, or an invitation back.

§ RULE

Privacy comes before the reply

HHS settled with a dental practice that disclosed patient information in replies to online reviews.²⁵ The safe reading: a health care reply should never confirm that the reviewer is a patient, because that fact alone can be protected health information. Under ABA Formal Opinion 496, a lawyer may not reveal confidential client information in a reply, though a lawyer may say that a person who was never a client was never a client.²⁷ Your state's rules of professional conduct govern, so check them. For schools, our house rule: never discuss a student in public, not even to correct a parent.

5.3

Templates for nine kinds of review

Businesses and names below are illustrations. Change every bracket, and change the wording often enough that no two replies read alike.

ROUTING A NEW REVIEW

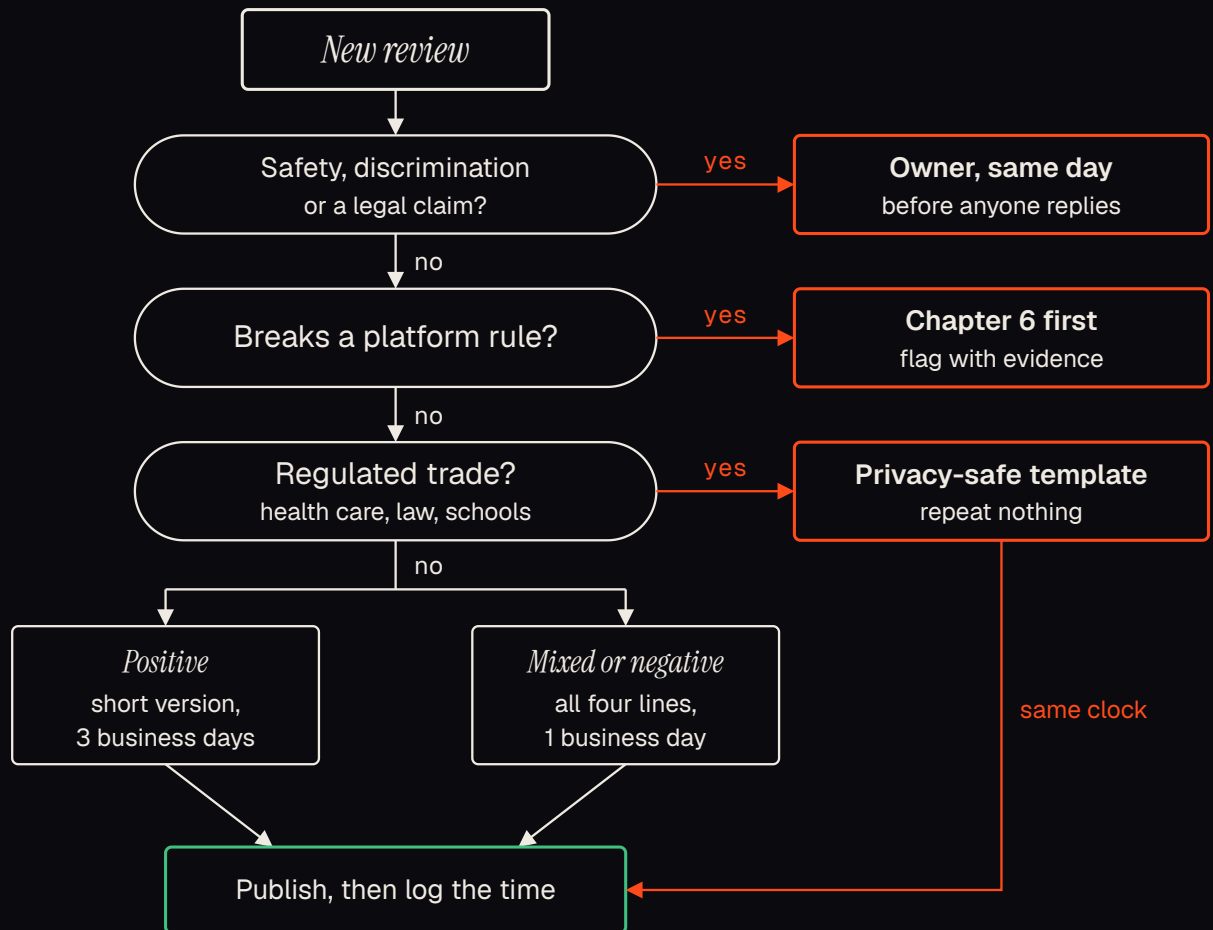


FIG. 5.1

Each new review is routed in order: safety, discrimination and legal claims go to the owner the same day, rule breakers go to Chapter 6, regulated trades use a privacy-safe template, and every other review gets a Four-Line Reply on a clock set by its kind.

TABLE 5.1 9 ROWS

REVIEW	REPLY
Five stars, plumbing: the water heater was fixed before a holiday	“Thank you, Dana. Getting your water heater running the day before Thanksgiving was a race, and we’re glad it held. We’re here whenever you need us.”
Stars with no text, auto repair	“Thank you for the stars and for trusting us with your car. See you at the next service.”
Five stars, dental: a happy review that mentions a treatment	“Thank you for the kind words. We appreciate you taking the time to write.” Nothing repeated, nothing confirmed.
Three stars, restaurant: slow service on a busy night	“Thank you, Luis. You’re right that the wait on Friday was too long, and I’m sorry. We’ve added a server on Friday nights since. Next time, ask for me, [name], or call [number].”
One star, HVAC: a missed arrival window	“Thank you for telling us. You waited without a call, and that’s on us. We’ve changed how we book arrival windows. Please call me directly at [number]. [Name], owner.”
One star, home services: no record of this customer	“We can’t find a record of this visit, and we’d like to understand what happened. Please call [name] at [number].” No accusation.
Law firm: an unhappy former client	“Professional obligations prevent us from responding in detail here. Please contact [name] at [number].”
Private school: a parent complaint	“Thank you for raising this. We’d welcome the chance to talk it through in person. Please contact [name], head of school, at [number].”
Mixed, real estate: a delayed closing	“Thank you, Priya. We should have told you sooner that the appraisal was running late, and I’m sorry we didn’t. We now send every client a weekly status update until closing. Congratulations on the new home.”

EXAMPLE

The same one-star review, answered two ways

A dental office gets this review: “Charged me twice and nobody called back. Avoid.”

CONTINUED

The reply that hurts. “We checked our records. Ms. R was not charged twice; her crown was billed to insurance and her copay was separate. We called her twice.” It confirms she is a patient, names a treatment and her insurance, and argues. That is the kind of disclosure that led to the HHS settlement above.²⁵

The reply that helps. “Thank you for the feedback. Our privacy rules keep us from discussing any person’s care or account in public, so we cannot say more here. Please call our office manager, [name], at [number] so we can listen.” It thanks, confirms nothing about who the reviewer is, repeats nothing from the review and gives a next step. If the caller turns out to be a patient with a billing problem, the fix happens on the phone, through the Save Loop.

5.4

AI drafts, human approval

In June 2026, Google began rolling out a way to connect a Google Business Profile to Gemini, everywhere except the EEA and UK, and ask it to draft a reply to a review.³⁵ Google’s help page adds limits: it works for an owner or manager of only one verified Business Profile, signed in with a personal Google Account, so a business that manages several locations from one account cannot use it.³⁶ A draft saves time. A person still reads, edits and approves every reply, because in health care and law an unedited draft can repeat the very details the rules protect.^{25, 27}

5.5

When not to reply yet

If a review looks fake, abusive or like part of an attack, work through Chapter 6 before you reply. If it mentions safety, discrimination or a legal claim, the owner sees it the same day before anyone replies. A calm reply can come later. An angry one can be deleted, but not before people have read it.

☐ CHECKLIST

6 ITEMS

- ☐ Save the reply library where every responder can find it.
- ☐ Read each reply aloud as if to the next customer before publishing.
- ☐ Keep patients, clients, students and staff unnamed in every reply; only the owner signs.
- ☐ Put no offers or discounts in replies.
- ☐ Have a person edit and approve every AI draft.
- ☐ Log each reply with its date for the response time report.

Your reply library

Write your own version of each template in your voice. Fill the “must never say” column first; it is the part that protects you.

REVIEW TYPE	OUR TEMPLATE	MUST NEVER SAY	WHO APPROVES	LAST UPDATED
Positive				
Stars only				
Mixed				
Negative				
No record found				
Privacy-safe, positive				
Privacy-safe, negative				

NOTES

CHAPTER 5 · IN SHORT

“*Every reply is written to one person and read by everyone who comes after.*”

-
- 01 Write every reply for the next customer.
-
- 02 Use the Four-Line Reply: Thank, Detail, Own, Next. Regulated trades skip Detail.
-
- 03 In health care, law and schools, reveal nothing, not even that someone is a patient, client or student. ^{25, 27}
-
- 04 AI can draft. A person approves. ^{35, 36}
-

06

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False, fake and *abusive* reviews

Some reviews break the rules and can come down. Most bad reviews do not, and fighting them makes things worse. Three checks tell you which kind you have and which door to use.

6.1

What platforms remove

Google removes content that breaks its policies, including fake engagement, rating manipulation such as conflict of interest reviews, harassment, personal information posted without consent, and off-topic content that is not based on an experience at the location.² **Yelp** removes a reported review only if it clearly violates its Content Guidelines, and it does not typically take sides in factual disputes.³⁷ **Facebook** may remove Recommendations that do not follow its standards, but Recommendations that only include a star rating cannot be reported.²⁴

6.2

What stays up, and what can come down

Google says not to report a review just because you disagree with it, and that it does not get involved in conflicts between businesses and customers.³⁸ A real customer describing a real bad day, in their own words, stays up. Your job there is a good reply and a real fix. Use this table before you report anything.

TABLE 6.1 6 ROWS

WHAT YOU ARE LOOKING AT	REPORT IT?	WHAT TO DO
A real customer, angry, in their own words	No	Four-Line Reply, then the Save Loop
A price or billing dispute	No: Google and Yelp stay out of these disputes ^{37, 38}	Reply calmly and take it offline
A former employee or a competitor	Yes on Google: conflict of interest ²	Report with what ties the account to them

WHAT YOU ARE LOOKING AT	REPORT IT?	WHAT TO DO
A review that names a staff member	Only if it posts personal information or threatens harm ²	Otherwise reply without naming anyone
A review clearly meant for another business	Yes on Google: not based on an experience at your location ²	Report, and reply that you have no record of the visit
Someone who never used you	Yes: not based on a real experience ²	Run the Three-Match Test first

6.3

Reporting, step by step

Google. Report a review from your Business Profile or through the Reviews Management Tool. Evaluation usually takes several days, and you can appeal once per review.³⁸ Make that one appeal count: send new evidence, not the same argument louder. Google says it blocked or removed more than 292 million policy-violating reviews in 2025.⁶ The ones on your page got past those systems, so make your report easy to act on: quote the exact policy line.

Yelp. In the Reviews section of your business account, find the review, click More Options (the three dots) and choose Report Review. Moderators check it against Yelp’s Content Guidelines, which may take several days, and Yelp emails you its decision.³⁹

Facebook. On your Page, click Reviews under Details, then See all next to Recent reviews. Open the Options menu on the post, select Report post and follow the steps.²⁴

1 appeal

per reported review on Google, after a first decision that usually takes several days. Save it for new evidence.

SOURCE 38

6.4

Extortion scams

Google describes a pattern: a sudden burst of 1-star and 2-star reviews, then a demand for money, goods or services to remove them. It has a dedicated report form, and it tells owners not to engage with or pay the people behind it, and not to try to resolve it themselves by offering money or services. Gather evidence at once: screenshots of each demand with the date, time and sender details, links to every review in the attack, and when the reviews first appeared.⁴⁰ Google says its systems now catch more of these patterns before the posts go live.⁶

6.5

The legal route

Google accepts defamation removal requests from the person or business defamed, or an authorized representative. It weighs the public interest, and it says reviews of professional services by past clients are likely to be of legitimate interest to future clients. Approved removals apply in the country where the content is considered defamatory.⁴¹ This door is slow and narrow. Talk to a lawyer before you open it.

! WARNING

Never threaten a reviewer

The FTC rule bans suppressing reviews with unfounded legal threats, physical threats, intimidation or certain false public accusations.⁴ Yelp can post a Questionable Legal Threats alert on your page when it has evidence a business may be using the legal system to silence a reviewer.⁵ Under the Consumer Review Fairness Act, a clause in a standard customer contract or online terms that penalizes someone for an honest review is illegal.²² If legal language goes to a reviewer at all, your lawyer sends it.

METHOD

The Three-Match Test

01

Match the record. Search your customer records for the name, the date and the service. Write down what you found or did not find.

02

Match the policy. Find the exact platform rule the review breaks and quote it in the platform's own words. If you cannot, the review is a reply, not a report.

03

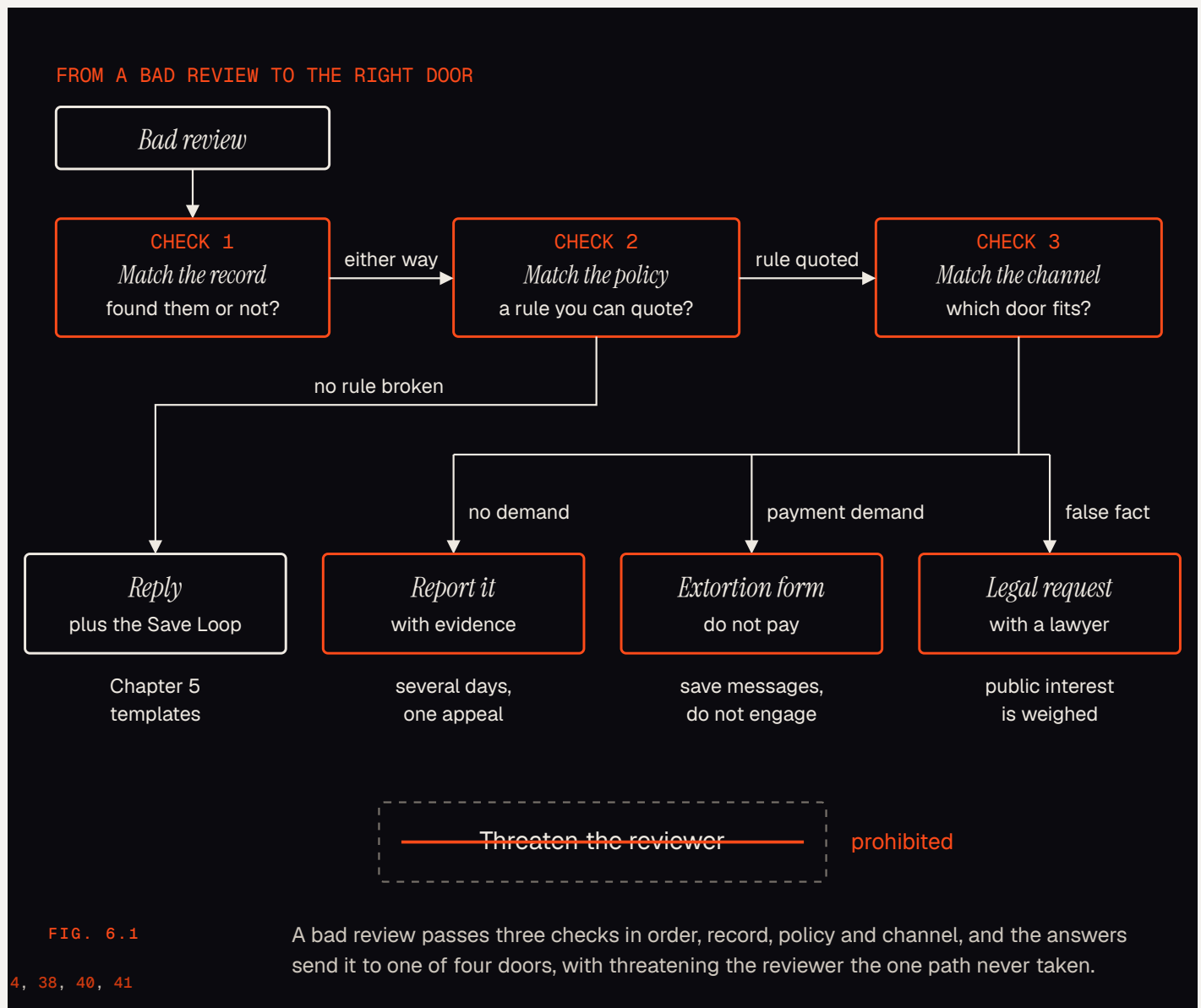
Match the channel. Choose the right door: the standard report, the extortion form, or a legal request through your lawyer.

EXAMPLE

A burst and a demand at an auto repair shop

An auto repair shop gets eleven 1-star reviews in two days, then a message offering to remove them for a fee (numbers are illustrations). Match the record: none of the eleven names appears in the shop's records. Match the policy: a burst followed by a payment demand is the pattern Google describes for extortion. Match the channel: the extortion form.

The owner screenshots the demand with its date, time and sender, saves links to all eleven reviews, and files the form. Nobody answers the demand and nobody pays, and the owner holds public replies until Google has reviewed the report, because Google's extortion guidance says not to engage.⁴⁰ If any of the reviews are still up after that, one calm line is optional: "We can't find any record of this visit and have reported this review to Google."



EXAMPLE

A review from someone who was never a client

A law firm gets a 1-star review from a name that appears nowhere in its client or intake records. The firm reports it as not based on a real experience, then replies with one sentence: “This person has never been a client of the firm.” That reply is allowed under ABA Formal Opinion 496, as long as the review does not describe a matter the firm actually handled, for example as written by an opposing party or a client’s relative.²⁷ ABA opinions are guidance; your state’s rules of professional conduct govern, so check them before you reply.

☐ CHECKLIST

7 ITEMS

- ☐ Screenshot the review with its date before you do anything else.
- ☐ Search your records and note the result.
- ☐ Check the table of what stays up, and quote the exact policy line in your report.
- ☐ Log the report date, the channel and the status.
- ☐ Appeal once, and only with new evidence.
- ☐ For extortion: save every message, do not answer it, file the form and hold public replies.
- ☐ Send legal language to a reviewer only through your lawyer.

Flag file

One row per review you believe breaks a rule. If the policy column is empty, stop: write a reply instead.

REVIEW LINK AND DATE	RECORD MATCH?	POLICY LINE QUOTED	REPORTED (DATE, CHANNEL)	STATUS, APPEAL, OUTCOME

NOTES

CHAPTER 6 · IN SHORT

“*If you cannot name the rule a review breaks, it is a reply, not a report.*”

-
- 01 Platforms remove policy violations, not reviews you disagree with.^{37, 38}
-
- 02 Run the Three-Match Test: record, policy, channel.
-
- 03 Extortion has its own Google form. Never pay, never engage.⁴⁰
-
- 04 Never threaten a reviewer. Legal requests go through a lawyer.⁴
-

07

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The *signal*: flow, freshness, spread and AI answers

Reviews do more than persuade readers: they feed rankings, ads, map summaries and AI answers. Put your effort on the paths the platforms document, keep an eye on the ones people only observe, and watch four numbers every month.

7.1

What the platforms document

Google says local results are mainly based on relevance, distance and popularity, which its page explains under the heading prominence: how well known a business is, including how many reviews it has. It also says more reviews and positive ratings can help your local ranking, and that there is no way to request or pay for a better local ranking.⁸ Your review score on Google is the average of all ratings published for your business, and after a new review it can take up to 2 weeks to update.⁴²

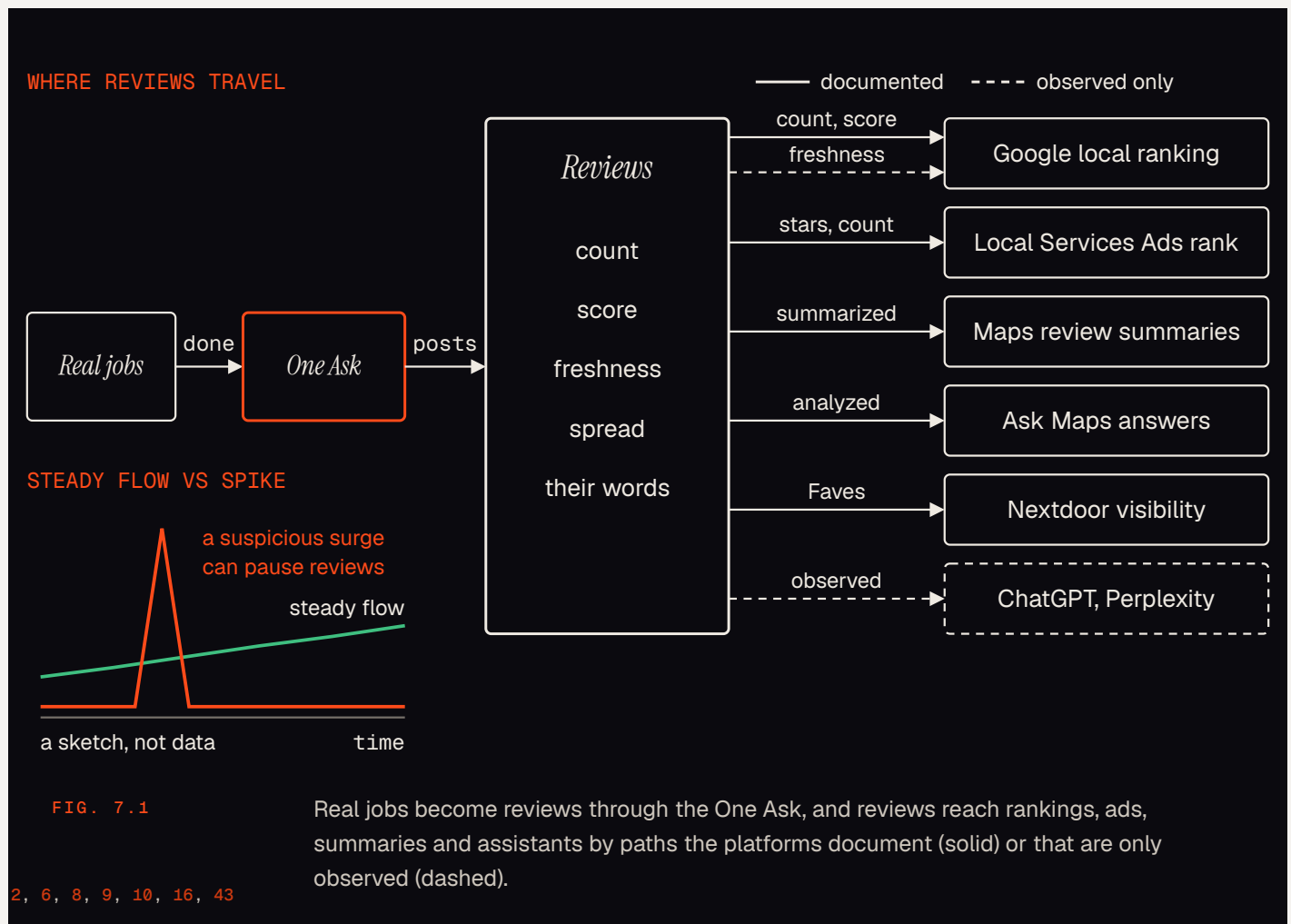
In Local Services Ads, star ratings and the number of reviews affect how a business ranks, and those reviews are managed through your Business Profile.⁴³ On Nextdoor, more Faves means more visibility.¹⁶

7.2

What we know about AI answers

Google says there are no additional requirements or special optimizations needed to appear in AI Overviews or AI Mode, and its best practices include keeping your Business Profile information up to date.¹¹ Maps summarizes reviews with Gemini,⁹ and Google says Ask Maps analyzes information from over 300 million places, including reviews from more than 500 million contributors.¹⁰ That is the clearest documented link between reviews and an AI answer. ChatGPT's help page says it ranks search results using multiple factors and that placement is not guaranteed.¹⁷

No provider documents more than this about how reviews shape an assistant's answer. The sensible bet is the one this guide already makes: real reviews on more than one site, and the same facts everywhere. Treat it as a bet, not a rule, and be wary of anyone who sells a guaranteed way into AI answers: Google says no special optimization is needed for its AI features.¹¹



7.3

Flow: steady beats sudden

Flow is what people in the business call review velocity. Google does not document how fast reviews arrive as a ranking factor. What it does document is that unusual volumes or patterns of review contributions that suggest an effort to manipulate a rating count as rating manipulation,² and that during a sudden spike in spam reviews it may pause new reviews, alert the owner and show customers a notice explaining why.⁶ Google does not say that a burst of real reviews triggers a pause. But a one-time review drive produces exactly the kind of unusual volume its policy names, so do not create one. A steady flow from the One Ask is the right shape, and it comes from asking every customer, not from campaigns.

7.4

Freshness and spread

Google does not document recency as a ranking factor either. We have no source on how readers sort reviews, but a newest review that is months old is easy for a stranger to notice. Spread is a hedge: if one site changes its rules or its layout, reviews on a second site still speak for you. Put Google first, then the one or two sites your customers already use, such as Facebook, Nextdoor or your trade's review site, using the second-site rule in Chapter 3. Yelp grows only through great service, never through asking.³

METHOD

The Four Dials

01

Flow. New reviews each month, next to jobs done that month.

02

Yield. New reviews on a site divided by asks delivered in the same period. Low yield means fix the ask: the moment, the channel or the link. Fine yield but low flow means you are asking too few customers.

03

Freshness. Days since your newest review, on each site.

04

Spread. The share of this quarter's new reviews on sites other than Google.

Our recommended standard, which works even from a baseline of zero: asks sent equal jobs done every month, your newest Google review is under 30 days old, and at least one new review lands on a site other than Google each quarter. Set a yield target only after three months of your own numbers, and work on one dial at a time.

EXAMPLE

The star math

A business has 80 Google reviews averaging 4.2 stars and wants to reach 4.5 (numbers are illustrations). Because Google’s score is the average of all ratings,⁴² you can work out how many new five-star reviews it takes, in three steps.

1. Total stars now. $4.2 \times 80 = 336$. **2. Total stars needed.** $4.5 \times 80 = 360$, so the gap is 24 stars. **3. Divide the gap by 5 minus the target.** Each five-star review closes $5 \text{ minus } 4.5 = 0.5$ of the gap, so $24 \div 0.5 = 48$ new five-star reviews. Check: $336 + 48 \times 5 = 576$ stars over 128 reviews, which is 4.5.

At 12 new reviews a month from the One Ask, that is about four months, and longer in practice, because not every new review will be five stars. Google’s help page does not say how the displayed score is rounded, so the number on your profile may change a little before or after the exact average reaches your target.

The lesson: a steady flow moves an average, and a quiet month leaves it where it was. The Save Loop matters here too, because every problem fixed before it becomes a low review protects the number.

CHECKLIST

6 ITEMS

- ☐ Record the Four Dials on the first business day of each month.
- ☐ Compare jobs done, asks sent and new reviews every month, and work out yield.
- ☐ Cancel any review push or campaign that would create a spike.
- ☐ Get reviews on at least one site besides Google every quarter.
- ☐ Keep your business name, phone, hours and services identical on every profile.
- ☐ Rerun the AI answers baseline monthly and save the answers.

Four dials tracker

One row a month. After three rows, circle the dial that moved least; that is next month’s focus.

MONTH	JOBS DONE, ASKS SENT	NEW REVIEWS: GOOGLE, OTHER SITES	YIELD: NEW REVIEWS ÷ ASKS	NEWEST REVIEW AGE, GOOGLE RATING

NOTES

CHAPTER 7 • IN SHORT

“*Put your effort on the documented paths and keep an eye on the observed ones.*”

-
- 01 Google says more reviews and positive ratings can help local ranking. It says nothing about speed or recency.⁸
-
- 02 Local Services Ads rank on stars and review count; Nextdoor visibility grows with Faves; Ask Maps analyzes reviews.^{10, 16, 43}
-
- 03 No one can pay Google for rank, and Google says its AI features need no special optimization.^{8, 11}
-
- 04 Watch four dials: flow, yield, freshness and spread.
-

08

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Show your reviews, with *permission*

Reviews work hard on your own website and in your ads, and that is exactly where the rules tighten: typical results in ads, no hidden negatives, exact quotes and written permission as a review travels further from where it was written.

8.1

A review in an ad is an endorsement

When an ad features one customer's result, the FTC expects you to have proof that the result is typical, or to make clear what results people can generally expect.⁷ "Sold in nine days" in an ad needs either evidence that most listings sell that fast or a plain line saying what usually happens. The same applies to a testimonial in a Facebook, Instagram or Google ad, or a boosted post.

8.2

Showing a selection

Organizing reviews on your site is fine. Organizing them so negative reviews are hard to find could be an unfair or deceptive practice,¹ and the FTC notes that holding back only negative reviews can create a biased picture.⁷ A reviews page that shows the good, the bad and your replies is the honest version, and in our view the more believable one.

8.3

Quote exactly

The FTC's endorsement guides say an endorsement may not be presented out of context or reworded so as to distort the customer's opinion or experience, and quotation marks tell readers they are seeing the customer's exact words.⁴⁴ So shorten a quote only if the meaning stays the same, never combine two reviews into one, and never tidy the wording in a way that changes its tone.

8.4

Permission

Ask before you use a customer's name, photo or story in marketing, and keep the answer. A short request works: "Hi [first name], your review of [business] meant a lot to us. May we quote it on our website with your first name and last initial? Reply yes or no. Either answer is fine." For a full story, a photo, a video or an ad, use a written release that states

what you will use, where it will appear, for how long, and how the customer can withdraw it. Have your lawyer check the form. Before you copy a review from a review site onto your own pages, read that site's terms too: the customer's yes covers their words, not the site's rules.

Health care is stricter. HHS says a valid written HIPAA authorization is generally needed before a patient's information goes into a website testimonial or a social media campaign. In September 2025 it announced a settlement with a group of health care facilities that posted 150 patients' success stories without that authorization.²⁶

\$182,000

*paid in the HHS settlement over
patient success stories posted
without written HIPAA
authorization*

SOURCE 26

8.5

Stars in search results

If your website marks up reviews of your own business with LocalBusiness or Organization structured data, Google will not show review stars for those pages, because the business controls the reviews. That includes reviews shown through an embedded widget, such as a Google or Facebook reviews widget. This rule has been in Google's guidelines since 2019, and any review content you do mark up must be readily visible on the page.⁴⁵ If your site, a theme or a plugin added review markup to chase stars, remove it, and never mark up reviews a visitor cannot see.

8.6

Reviews in ads

Google Ads can show store ratings, which reflect what it is like to buy from an online store. Google builds them from its own customer reviews program, approved review sites and its shopping research, not from your Business Profile reviews. Most merchants get one after 100 or more eligible reviews within the last 24 months, and a rating of 3.5 or above is needed to show one on text ads.⁴⁶ So unless you sell online, store ratings are not for you. For a local service business, the reviews that matter in ads are the Local Services Ads ratings, which come from your Business Profile.⁴³ Everywhere else, a review in an ad is an endorsement, and the typical results rule above applies.

METHOD

The Permission Ladder

01

Link. Point to your live profiles from your site, emails and receipts. The review is already public, so no permission is needed.

02

Quote. A short, exact quote with first name and last initial on your website. Ask first and keep the yes.

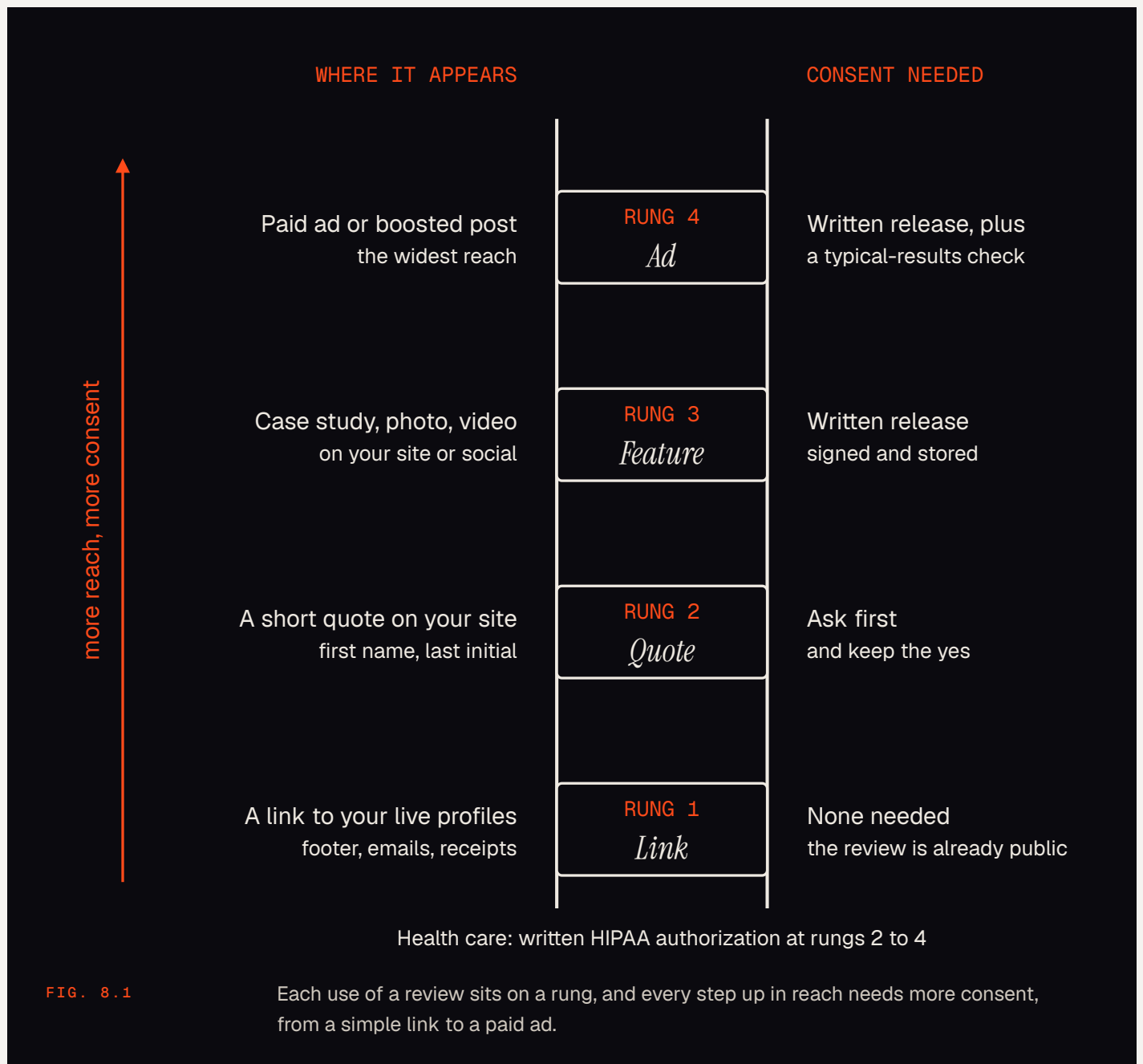
03

Feature. A full story, a photo or a video. Get a signed written release.

04

Ad. Paid use. A written release plus a check that the result is typical, or a line stating what is typical.⁷

In health care, rungs 2 to 4 each need a valid written HIPAA authorization.²⁶ Law firms: check your state bar's advertising rules before using any client testimonial, at any rung above a link.



8.7

Website patterns that work

Link to your live profiles from every page footer. Put one quoted customer, with permission, on each service or project page, next to the work they are talking about. And keep one reviews page built like this:

TABLE 8.1 5 ROWS

PART OF THE PAGE	WHAT GOES THERE
Top	Your rating and review count on each site, the date you checked them, and a link to each profile
Newest reviews	The latest reviews in date order, each with your reply under it
The critical ones	Negative reviews stay, with your reply. Nothing is filtered by rating
Quotes	Exact words, first name and last initial, and “shared with permission” under each
Bottom	A plain line inviting readers to see every review on each profile

EXAMPLE

From closing review to ad

A real estate agent receives a warm review after a closing. For the website, the agent sends the client the short permission request, gets a yes for a two-line quote with first name and last initial on the listings page, and saves the yes in the permission log. That is rung 2.

Months later the agent wants the same story in a paid social ad with the client’s photo. That is rung 4: a signed written release, and a check of the claim. The review says the home sold in nine days (numbers are illustrations), faster than the agent’s usual listing, so the ad adds a line with the agent’s typical time to sell from their own records.

☐ CHECKLIST

7 ITEMS

- ☐ Start a permission log and store it with the release forms.
- ☐ Check every ad testimonial for typical results.
- ☐ Check that every quote on your site matches the original review word for word.
- ☐ Show negative reviews and your replies on your reviews page, not only praise.
- ☐ Remove review markup that was added only to chase stars.
- ☐ Health care: have your privacy officer approve the authorization form. Law: check your state bar's advertising rules.
- ☐ Take down old testimonials that lack permission, or get permission now.

Permission log

One row per review you use anywhere beyond a link. Set a renewal date so old permissions get checked.

CUSTOMER AND REVIEW SOURCE	WHERE WE USE IT, AND RUNG	PERMISSION TYPE AND DATE	PROOF STORED AT	RENEW BY

NOTES

CHAPTER 8 • IN SHORT

“*The further a review travels from where it was written, the more permission it needs.*”

-
- 01 A review in an ad is an endorsement: show typical results.⁷
-
- 02 Quote exactly, and never arrange reviews so the negative ones are hard to find.^{1, 44}
-
- 03 Climb the Permission Ladder: link, quote, feature, ad.
-
- 04 Your own review markup will not earn stars in Google for your business pages.⁴⁵
-

09

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Watching: monitoring and a response time standard

Reputation work fails quietly: a review sits unanswered for a month, a complaint thread grows in a local group, an assistant repeats an old fact. Three named people, a written reply clock and a fixed rhythm keep that from happening.

9.1

What to watch

Every site in your reputation baseline. Your name in search. Tags, comments and local group posts. And the AI answers baseline from Chapter 1. Send every alert to a shared inbox that more than one person reads, so nothing depends on one person's phone.

Google. In your Business Profile, select More, then Notifications, and turn on the alerts for new reviews. Business Profile notifications can arrive by email, in Search or in Maps.⁴⁷ **Yelp and Facebook.** Turn on review alerts in each platform's own notification settings. Their menus change often, so follow each site's current help page rather than a screenshot from last year.

9.2

The response time standard

This is our recommended standard, not a platform rule. Negative and mixed reviews: answered within one business day. Positive reviews: within three business days. Anything that mentions safety, discrimination or a legal claim goes to the owner the same day, before anyone replies. One business day leaves time to look up the job, call the customer and check the privacy rules before you write. Three days keeps positive reviews from piling up without pulling time from the urgent ones.

Yelp advises responding in a reasonable time and personalizing each reply,³⁴ and Google advises short, specific replies.²⁹ A Google reply can take time to appear,³³ so measure from when the review was posted to when you published your reply.

9.3

Roles

Name three people: a responder who writes replies, a backup for days off, and an escalation owner for the same-day cases. In a small shop the owner may be all three; write it down anyway.

9.4

More than one location

Each location has its own profiles and its own reviews, but customers judge the whole business. Five things keep several locations sounding like one:

CHECKLIST

5 ITEMS

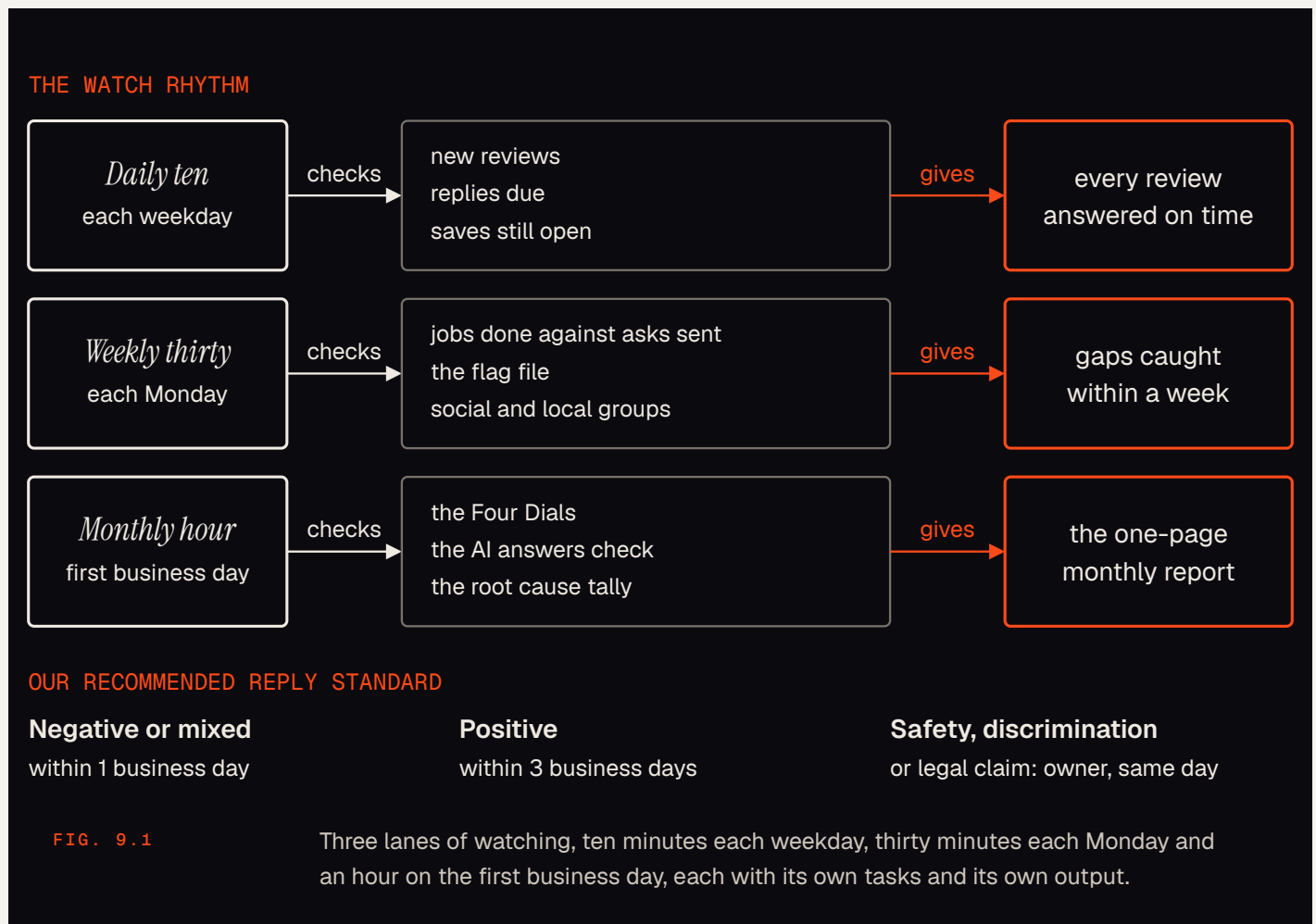
- ☐ A separate review link and QR code for each location, tested on a phone.
- ☐ A location lead for each location, all working from one reply library and one standard.
- ☐ One shared inbox for every location’s alerts, with the location in each subject line.
- ☐ One monthly report with the locations side by side, so the slow one stands out.
- ☐ The same name format, phone, hours and services on every location’s profiles and its page on your website, checked each quarter.

One limit to know: Google’s Gemini tool for drafting review replies works only for an owner or manager of a single verified Business Profile, so a multi location account cannot use it.³⁶

METHOD

The Watch Rhythm

- 01** **Daily ten.** Ten minutes each weekday: new reviews, replies due, saves still open.
- 02** **Weekly thirty.** Thirty minutes each Monday: jobs done against asks sent, the flag file, a scan of social and local groups.
- 03** **Monthly hour.** One hour on the first business day: the Four Dials, the AI answers check, the root cause tally and the monthly report.

**TIP****AI drafts on busy days**

An AI draft can help you hit the standard on a busy day, as long as a person approves every reply. Chapter 5 covers the tool and its limits.

EXAMPLE*Four auto repair shops, one standard*

A four location auto repair group set one standard, one reply library and a location lead for each shop. In the second monthly report (numbers are illustrations), three shops answered negative reviews in under a day on average. The fourth took four days.

CONTINUED

The cause was not effort. That shop’s lead also ran the front counter on Saturdays, when most of its reviews arrived, and the backup did not work weekends. Moving the backup role to a Saturday worker brought the shop in line the next month. Without the side by side report, the owner would have seen four days only as a string of unanswered reviews.

☐ CHECKLIST

6 ITEMS

- ☐ Turn on review notifications for every claimed profile and route them to a shared inbox.
- ☐ Name a responder and a backup for every location.
- ☐ Print the response standard and post it where responders work.
- ☐ Log when each review was posted and when you replied.
- ☐ Run the monthly AI answers check and save the answers with dates.
- ☐ Send the one-page monthly report to the owner.

Response standard card

Fill it in, print it and post it. The first two columns are our recommended standard; change them only to go faster.

REVIEW TYPE	REPLY WITHIN	WHO REPLIES	BACKUP	ESCALATE TO
Negative or mixed	1 business day			
Positive	3 business days			
Safety, discrimination or legal claim	Owner, same day			
Suspected fake or extortion	Chapter 6 first			
Health care, legal or school	Privacy-safe template			

NOTES

The monthly report

One page, sent to the owner on the first business day. With several locations, add a column per location. If it takes more than an hour to fill, it is collecting too much.

METRIC	THIS MONTH	LAST MONTH	NOTE
New reviews by site			
Yield: new reviews ÷ asks sent			
Average reply time: negative and mixed			
Average reply time: positive			
Saves opened and closed			
Flags filed and outcomes			
AI answers check: what changed			
One change for next month			

NOTES

CHAPTER 9 · IN SHORT

“*A standard nobody measures is only a wish, so log every reply time.*”

-
- 01 Watch every site, social and AI answers, with notifications going to a shared inbox.⁴⁷
-
- 02 Our recommended standard: one business day for negative and mixed, three for positive, same day for safety, discrimination or legal claims.
-
- 03 Run the rhythm: daily ten, weekly thirty, monthly hour.
-
- 04 Send the owner one page a month, with locations side by side.
-

10

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When it *breaks*: a reputation crisis plan

In a crisis, many people look at you at once. The first hour is the same for every kind of crisis; the first week is not. Fill in the card at the end of this chapter while things are calm.

10.1

Four kinds of crisis

A real failure: an injury, a data exposure, a serious service failure. **A viral moment:** a video, a post or a news story. **An attack:** a coordinated wave of fake reviews or an extortion attempt. **Staff misconduct:** something an employee did that customers are now talking about. The first hour is the same for all four. The first week is different:

TABLE 10.1 4 ROWS

KIND	FIRST WEEK	DO NOT
A real failure	Fix the cause. Tell affected customers directly before you post anything public.	Let customers learn about it from a review first
A viral moment	One voice. Correct only what is false, once, in your own post.	Argue in the comments
An attack	Build the evidence file, report every review, and file the extortion form if there is a demand.	Pay, or answer the people behind it
Staff misconduct	Act on the facts, involve your lawyer, and say what you changed.	Name the staff member in public

10.2

What platforms do in a spike

TABLE 10.2 5 ROWS

PLATFORM	WHAT TRIGGERS IT	WHAT HAPPENS
Google	A sudden spike in spam reviews	Fake content removed, new reviews paused, the owner alerted and a banner telling customers why ⁶
Google	The business breaks the fake engagement policy	Reviews blocked or unpublished for a set period and a warning shown, after an email to the owner, who can appeal ²³
Google	Fake low reviews followed by a payment demand	A dedicated extortion report form; do not engage or pay ⁴⁰
Yelp	Media attention causes an abnormal spike in reviews (U.S. and Canada)	An Unusual Activity alert, and posting may be disabled for a time ⁵
Yelp	Someone tied to the business is accused of racist or discriminatory behavior and reviews pour in	A Public Attention alert warning readers of the spike ⁵

10.3

Holding statements

Short, human and true: what you know, what you are doing and when you will update. Post it where your customers already look, and use the same words everywhere. Draft these three now and keep them on the crisis card.

A: a real mistake. “On [date] we [one plain sentence on what happened]. We are sorry. We have [action]. If you were affected, please call [name] at [number]. We will update this post by [day].”

B: a viral post. “We have seen the [video or post] from [day]. We are looking into it with the people involved, and we will share what we find and what we are changing by [day].”

C: an attack. “In the last [number] days our page received reviews from people we cannot match to any customer. We have reported them to the platform. If you were our customer, please call [name] at [number]. We answer every review.”

! WARNING

Four moves that make it worse

Don’t argue in replies. Don’t threaten reviewers.^{4, 5} Don’t post fake praise to bury the wave; it breaks the FTC rule and Google’s policy.^{2, 4} And don’t turn off Facebook Recommendations in a panic: it removes your Page’s whole rating and all its reviews, not just the new ones.¹⁴

Privacy rules do not pause in a crisis. A health care practice should still never confirm in a reply who is a patient,²⁵ a law firm still cannot reveal client information,²⁷ and a school still never discusses a student in public.

METHOD

The Crisis Clock

01

First hour. Stop the harm. Name one decision maker and one voice. Screenshot everything, with dates.

02

First day. Post the holding statement. Report fake and off-topic reviews with evidence. File the extortion form if there is a demand.

03

First week. Work the row for your kind of crisis in the table above, publish what changed, and reply to real customers one by one with the Four-Line Reply.

04

First month. Restart the One Ask with real customers, watch the Four Dials for three months, and write down what you learned.



CHECKLIST

6 ITEMS

☐ Write the crisis card and print it before you need it.

☐ Name one decision maker and one spokesperson.

☐ Draft holding statements A, B and C in your own words.

☐ Save every platform report link in one place.

☐ Put your lawyer's number on the card.

☐ Agree the rule now: no replies in anger, no deleting real criticism, no fake praise.

EXAMPLE

A viral video at a Dallas restaurant

A short video of a server and a guest trading sharp words spreads online on a Saturday night. Within the hour, the owner names herself the decision maker and the general manager the only voice, and the team screenshots every post and review with its date.

On day one, holding statement B goes up on the restaurant's own pages. Reviews from people who were never there, reacting only to the video, are reported as off-topic under Google's policy, which asks for content based on an experience at the location.² If Google sees a sudden spike in spam reviews, it may pause new reviews and tell customers why,⁶ and if media attention drives the spike, Yelp may post an alert and pause posting for a while.⁵

In week one, the staff involved are retrained, the restaurant posts what it changed without naming anyone, and every review from a real guest gets its own reply. By month one, the One Ask is back on with every table, and the owner watches the dials until they return to the baseline.

Crisis card

Fill it in during a calm week. Keep a printed copy where the decision maker can reach it, and review it twice a year.

ITEM	YOUR ANSWER
Decision maker	
Spokesperson and backup	
Lawyer's name and number	
Google review report and extortion form links	
Yelp and Facebook report links	
Holding statement A: a real mistake	
Holding statement B: a viral post	
Holding statement C: an attack or extortion	
Update schedule and where updates go	

CHAPTER 10 · IN SHORT

“*Write the crisis card on a calm Tuesday, because you will not write it well on the worst Saturday.*”

-
- 01 The first hour is the same for every crisis: stop the harm, one voice, screenshots. The first week depends on the kind.
-
- 02 Know the platform tools: review pauses, alerts, the extortion form, one appeal.^{5, 6, 38, 40}
-
- 03 Never argue, threaten, fake praise or switch off Facebook Recommendations in a panic.^{4, 14}
-
- 04 Recovery is the One Ask restarted with real customers and three months of watching the dials.
-

TOOL · PLAN

Your 30, 60, 90 day plan

START DATE _____

Work in order. Each block assumes the one before it is done, and the save goes live before the ask so you can catch problems before you send more customers to a review page. Take the scorecard on day 1 and again on day 90.

DAYS 1 TO 30

Clean, claim and prepare

- ☐ Run the Five Rooms Audit and fill in both baselines: sites and AI answers.
- ☐ Claim or verify Google, Apple Business, Bing, Facebook, Nextdoor and your trade's review site.
- ☐ Run the clean ask audit and stop anything that fails a gate.
- ☐ Remove Yelp from every request, and remove every staff-name or keyword prompt.
- ☐ Reply to every unanswered review from the last 90 days with the Four-Line Reply.
- ☐ Write the reply library and the response standard card, and send review notifications to a shared inbox.
- ☐ Start a minimum crisis card: decision maker, spokesperson, your lawyer's number and every report link.

DAYS 31 TO 45

The save

- ☐ Launch the private check-in and the Save Loop, and name the callback owner.
- ☐ Set who can offer what, and train everyone who calls on the five call moves.
- ☐ Start the save log and the flag file, and report only real policy violations.

DAYS 46 TO 60

The ask

- ☐ Launch the One Ask by text and email, with consent checks, a send window and one fixed delay for everyone.
- ☐ Make and test a review link and QR code for each location.
- ☐ Start the Watch Rhythm and send the first monthly report.
- ☐ Rerun the AI answers baseline and note what changed.

DAYS 61 TO 90

Spread, show and protect

- ☐ Add one or two review sites beyond Google where your customers already are, using the second-site rule.
- ☐ Start the permission log, rebuild your website reviews page and remove star-chasing markup.
- ☐ Finish the crisis card with holding statements A, B and C, and run a 20 minute drill with a made-up scenario.
- ☐ Send the second monthly report, compare the Four Dials with day 1, and pick one change for next quarter.

WORKSHEET

FILL IN BY HAND

DATE _____

Who owns the plan

One owner per block, with real dates. A block with no owner does not start.

BLOCK	OWNER	STARTS	DONE BY
Days 1 to 30: clean, claim and prepare			
Days 31 to 45: the save			
Days 46 to 60: the ask			
Days 61 to 90: spread, show and protect			

NOTES

TOOL · SCORE

Score yourself

Give each line 0 if it is not true, 1 if it is partly true and 2 if it is true every time. Be strict. Then add up the column. Your lowest lines point to the chapter to open first.

	STATEMENT	CHAPTER	SCORE		
01	I know my rating, review count and newest review date on every site where customers find me.	1	0	1	2
02	Every request passes the Clean Ask Test: everyone, nothing given, their words, known connection.	2	0	1	2
03	Every customer gets exactly one review request, a fixed time after the job is confirmed done.	3	0	1	2
04	I have recorded consent for every customer I text, and I honor every opt-out.	3	0	1	2
05	A private check-in catches problems, and every fix comes with no conditions about reviews.	4	0	1	2
06	My replies never include private details about patients, clients, students or staff.	5	0	1	2
07	I report only real policy violations, with evidence, and never threaten reviewers.	6	0	1	2
08	I got new reviews every month for the last three months, on more than one site.	7	0	1	2
09	I check AI answers about my business every month and save them with the date.	7	0	1	2
10	I have permission for every testimonial on my site and in my ads, and every quote is word for word.	8	0	1	2
11	I reply to every review within my written standard.	9	0	1	2

STATEMENT	CHAPTER	SCORE
12 I have a written crisis card with holding statements ready.	10	012

Total, out of 24

YOUR TOTAL SAYS

0 to 8.

Start with Chapters 2 and 3 this week. Clean up the asks, then start the flow.

9 to 16.

The system exists but leaks. Find your three lowest lines and open those chapters first.

17 to 24.

Keep the rhythm, spread to more sites, and retake this score every quarter.

YOUR NUMBERS	DAY 1	DAY 90
01 Google rating and review count	012	
02 Days since your newest Google review	012	
03 Average reply time for negative reviews	012	
04 Yield: new reviews ÷ asks sent, last 30 days	012	

WORDS

Glossary

AI Overviews and AI Mode

Google Search features that answer with AI and link to sources. Google says they need no special optimization.¹¹

Ask Maps

A conversational feature in Google Maps for complex questions about places, launched in the U.S. and India in March 2026. Google says it analyzes information about places, including reviews from its contributors.¹⁰

Conflict of interest

A relationship, such as current or former employment, a contract, a competitor or family, that makes a review biased. Google lists these reviews under Rating Manipulation and does not allow them.²

Consumer Alert

A warning Yelp posts on a business page, for example after evidence of paid reviews, legal threats or an unusual spike in reviews.⁵

Fake engagement

Google's term for contributions that do not reflect a genuine experience, including paid reviews and content not based on a real experience.²

Fave

Nextdoor's recommendation from a verified neighbor who hired or chose a business.¹⁶

Holding statement

A short public message that says what you know, what you are doing and when you will update.

Incentivized review

A review given in exchange for a payment, discount, gift, drawing entry or other benefit.

Insider review

A review by an owner, officer, manager, employee or agent of the business. The FTC rule bars undisclosed reviews by officers or managers, and the FTC tells businesses to have any employee who reviews them clearly disclose the connection.^{1, 4}

Prominence

How well known a business is, including how many reviews it has. Google lists it with relevance and distance as a main basis for local results, and its summary now calls it popularity.⁸

Rating manipulation

Google's term for incentivized or biased reviews, including conflict of interest reviews, selective asking and unusual bursts of reviews.²

Recommendation

Facebook's name for a review on a business Page.¹⁴

Review extortion scam

A burst of fake low-star reviews followed by a demand for payment to remove them.⁴⁰

Review gating

Sending the review link only to customers you expect to be happy. Google forbids it, and the FTC says not to do it. See Chapter 2.^{2, 21}

Review score

On Google, the average of all ratings published on Google for the business. It can take up to 2 weeks to update after a new review.⁴²

Review suppression

Stopping or removing reviews through unfounded legal threats, physical threats, intimidation or certain false public accusations, or presenting the reviews on your site as all or most of them when negative ones were held back.⁴

Review velocity

The trade's name for the flow of new reviews over time. This guide calls it flow (Chapter 7).

Selective solicitation

Google's term for asking only for positive reviews.²

Store rating

The star rating Google Ads can show for an online store, built from shopping reviews rather than Business Profile reviews.⁴⁶

Structured data

Code on a web page that labels facts, such as reviews, so search engines can read them. Businesses that control their own reviews, including through an embedded reviews widget, do not get review stars from it on their own pages.⁴⁵

Yield

New reviews on a site divided by asks delivered in the same period. It tells you whether to fix the ask or send more of them (Chapter 7).

EVIDENCE

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