PROPEL GROWTH INSIGHT

Insight Paper | Customer & Reputation

THE SALE WAS DECIDED BEFORE THE PHONE RANG

WHY THE 5% OF BUSINESSES THAT REPLY TO REVIEWS ARE PULLING AHEAD

Before a customer ever calls, emails, or walks in, they've almost certainly already made up their mind. The sales conversation most businesses think they're having has usually already happened, somewhere else, without them in the room.

97%

Of consumers read reviews before choosing a local business

BrightLocal 2026 Local Consumer Review Survey

31%

Will now only use a business rated 4.5 stars or higher

up from 17% in 2025

~5%

Of businesses ever reply to their reviews at all

Upfirst, 2025

THE CONVERSATION HAPPENS WITHOUT YOU IN THE ROOM

Evaluated on a conversation they never joined

The bar for what counts as acceptable is moving fast. 41% of consumers now "always" read reviews before choosing a business, up from just 29% a year earlier, and 68% won't go below 4.0 stars at all. A rating that looked fine two years ago is closer to a liability today.

Despite that, the overwhelming majority of businesses are being evaluated on a conversation they never joined. The sale isn't lost in the pitch. It's decided before the phone even rings, by whether anyone was home.

The revenue case is real, not theoretical

Data from review-management platform Womply, widely cited across the industry, found businesses responding to just a single review earn roughly 4% more revenue on average. Businesses that respond to at least a quarter of their reviews average closer to 35% more. That's consistent with what academic research found independently: a Harvard Business School study by Michael Luca, matching Yelp ratings against actual Washington State revenue data, found a one-star increase drove a 5 to 9% revenue increase for independent businesses.

The mechanism is simple, and it has nothing to do with erasing a bad review. A calm, specific reply, even to something unfair, doesn't change the reviewer's mind. It changes what every future reader concludes: that someone is actually paying attention. Silence does the opposite. It confirms the complaint, whether or not it was ever true.

> A complaint that's visibly been made good on doesn't just get neutralised. It becomes more persuasive than a flawless record with nobody home to answer for it.

What this actually means for your business

This cuts against the instinct most business owners have. The reflex is to want fewer bad reviews, or none at all. But Reevoo found 95% of customers get suspicious of a rating with no negative reviews whatsoever; it reads as curated, not clean. And a Reputation.com survey of 2,000 consumers found that whether a company responds to negative reviews factors into the purchase decision for 85% of them.

Reputation management isn't really about managing what's said. It's about consistency: the same brand voice across every channel, complaints resolved before they fester, missed appointments followed up on rather than quietly written off, feedback that's actually read rather than collected and ignored. Every one of those is a moment where a customer decides whether the business is paying attention, long before the next sale is ever discussed.

WHERE THIS FITS

This is the exact ground Propel Growth's Customer & Reputation capability covers: closing the gap between what a business assumes its reputation says and what's actually sitting there, unanswered, doing the deciding. The Solus Requirements Assessment maps your organisation's real capability gaps, and the Review Response Diagnostic gives you a working start on closing this one today.

READY TO TALK IT THROUGH?

Get in touch for a confidential, no-obligation discussion.

↗ **Book a call** ↗

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BrightLocal, Local Consumer Review Survey (2026); Upfirst, 2025 business review-response research; Womply review-response revenue data; Michael Luca, "Reviews, Reputation, and Revenue: The Case of Yelp.com," Harvard Business School; Reevoo consumer trust research; Reputation.com consumer purchase-decision survey.