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Article

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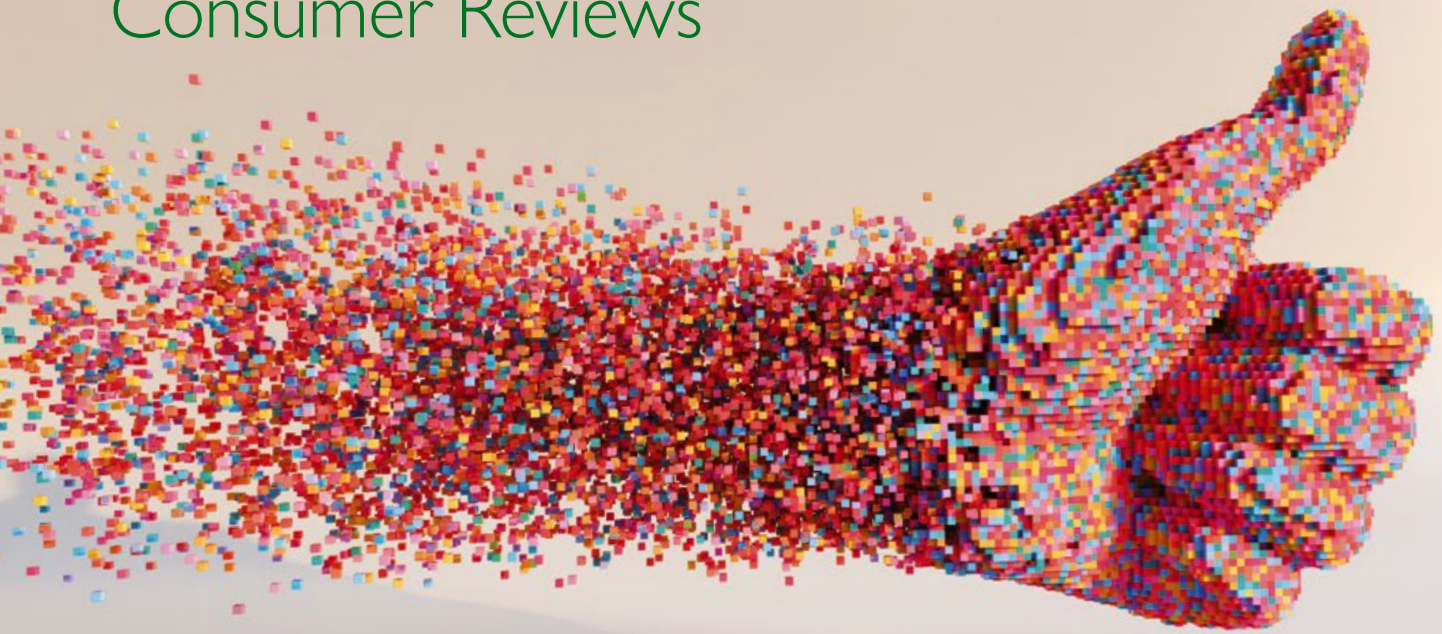
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Marketing Review St.Gallen

Consumer Reviews



Schwerpunkt

Die Stiftung Warentest:
Ein Leuchtturm in der Informationsflut –
Ein Gespräch mit dem CEO
Hubertus Primus

How to Manage Online
Product Reviews Effectively

How to Say Sorry on Social Media –
A Framework for Effective
Corporate Apologies

«Alles nur gefaked» –
Glaubwürdigkeit von Online-
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Marktforschung im Wohnzimmer –
Wie Konsumentinnen und
Konsumenten Produktbewertungen
systematisch erarbeiten

Spektrum

Mut zur Preisanpassung –
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Car Selling Without
Price Negotiations –
Wishful Thinking or the
New Normal?



Managing Online Product Reviews Effectively

Online product reviews are one of the most important sources of information for consumer decisions. As a result, many companies have started to use certain interventions, such as sending review reminders, to manage online reviews for their products. This article presents a four-step approach to help companies get the most out of their review management efforts.

Prof. Dr. Leif Brandes

Online reviews have an influence on product sales. Over the last twenty years, numerous studies have analyzed sales data and online review content and have shown that various review metrics – such as a product’s total number of reviews, average rating scores, and individual review characteristics – have a direct effect on product sales (see Babic Rosario et al., 2016 and Moore & Lafreniere, 2020 for reviews). Consistent with this research, a recent survey found that 98 percent of consumers read online reviews before making a purchase decision (Brightlocal, 2023). More specifically, customers rely on reviews most when products involve considerable risk and uncertainty: in 2020, customers stated that reviews are most important for experiential products such as restaurants, hotels, healthcare, and automotive services (Brightlocal, 2020). As marketers increasingly focus on a product’s experiential benefits for customers even when selling tangible products (Gallo et al., 2019), managing online review content should be part of every company’s marketing plan.

Indeed, many companies today use a variety of online review management tools, ranging from the legal practices of (1) simply asking for a review at the time of purchase (or later via email), (2) offering financial incentives in exchange for reviews, and (3) publicly responding to past consumer reviews, to the illegal practice of posting fake reviews for their own (and competitors’) products. Often, companies engage in one or more of these practices without much scrutiny. However, as will become clear in this article, this is a dangerous approach that can result in unintended side effects for a company’s online reputation.

The goal of this article is thus to help practitioners make an informed decision about which online review management intervention to use in a particular context. To this end, an integrated, systematic management approach is presented that combines the following four steps: assessing the status quo of your reviews, setting the goal for your review management, evaluating the available review management interventions, and implementing and monitoring the interventions (figure 1). For each step, two (extreme) cases are distinguished: (1) the company sells its products through a third party (e.g., a retailer) and has access to reviews only on the third-party website, and (2) the company sells its product directly to consumers and has access to reviews on its own website.

An Integrated Approach

To illustrate the value of an integrated approach to online review management, figure 2 presents the (hypothetical) review situations of two different products. The figure shows that both products have an identical number of reviews and a very similar average rating score around 3 out of 5. The main difference is



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that the product on the left follows a so-called ‘extreme’ distribution, whereas the distribution on the right is more uniform. Extreme distributions, where extreme opinions (1s and 5s) occur more frequently than moderate opinions (2s, 3s, 4s), and where the highest rating score (5) is the most frequent one, are common in many product categories (Schoenmüller et al., 2020). The following discussion will demonstrate that applying the same review management intervention can lead to very different results, depending on the original distribution of reviews.

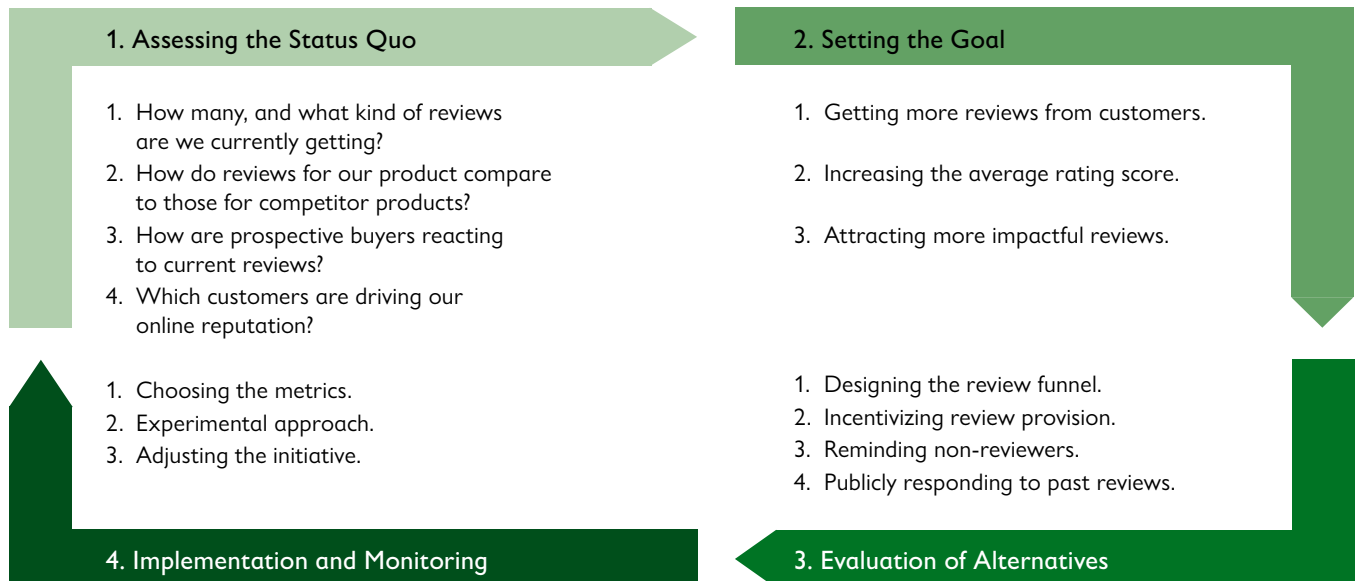
Step 1: Assessing the Status Quo

In a first step, the company should try to find answers to at least four key questions: (1) how many and what kind of reviews are we currently getting, (2) how does our review content compare to that of competitor products, (3) how are prospective buyers reacting to our current content, and (4) who are the customers that are currently driving our online reputation? A company’s ability to answer all of these questions depends, among other aspects, on its distribution strategy: does the company sell directly to customers and host online reviews on its own website, or does it sell through a third party that also hosts the resulting reviews?

Indirect Sales

Similar to the distributions in figure 2, most retailer websites with online reviews prominently display aggregate information from all reviews (e.g., total number of reviews, average rating score, overall rating score distribution), followed by detailed individual reviews; all of this content has been found

Figure 1: A Four-Step Approach to Online Review Management



Source: Own illustration.

to correlate with product sales and is thus potentially relevant to online review management.

Depending on a company's existing relationship with the third party, accessing the data may involve more or less effort. If the third party is willing to provide the data directly, then ana-

lyzing the various review dimensions (review volume, rating scores, and review text) to answer the first question is relatively straightforward, even though analyzing review texts may be a bit more involved for many companies (see Humphreys & Wang, 2018 for an overview of automated text analysis). If, however, the retailer is not willing to share the reviews, it may be necessary to first obtain the data using a 'web scraper'. In simple terms, a web scraper is a program that receives a URL address from the user and then automatically scans a website's HTML, CSS and Javascript code to download the required data.

Analyzing one's own reviews can provide the company with several important insights. First, it reveals what customers are talking about most frequently (e.g., price, product functionality, service quality). According to one study, customers mention product functionality more often than other aspects in their reviews (Zhu et al., 2017), which provides the company with new ideas for improving product usage and performance. Second, it shows what kind of language reviewers use – which is an important driver of the impact of reviews on others (e.g., Ludwig et al., 2013; Packard & Berger, 2017), and a basis for identifying fake reviews (Kronrod et al., 2023). Third, review texts may even provide information about the current market structure; if customers recommend alternative products in their reviews of your products, this tells you who your fiercest competitor is (Netzer et al., 2012).

Management Summary

Integrating research from various disciplines, this article presents a systematic approach to online reputation management that consists of four steps: assessing the status quo; setting goals; evaluating possible interventions; implementing and monitoring the interventions. For each step, several activities are discussed, and a distinction is made between whether the company hosts reviews on its own website or a third-party website. Two different online review contexts are used to illustrate how the presented approach can help increase the effectiveness of management efforts while avoiding unintended negative consequences.

However, analyzing one's own reviews is not enough to understand current customer behavior. A recent article shows that the impact of one's own review content on sales also depends on the review content of competitor products – especially if one charges a higher price than the competition (Cho et al., 2023). As the competitors' reviews are publicly displayed, the third party may be willing to share this data with the company; if not, the data needs to be scraped to answer the second question.

Answering the third question ("How are prospective customers reacting to our current review content?") is often impossible when distribution occurs through a third party, because the company does not have access to a customer's search patterns and behavior (so-called 'clickstream' data) on the third-party website. Without such data, it is impossible to know how many prospective buyers considered one's products, which reviews they looked at, and after which review they decided to buy or leave.

Similarly, for the last question ("Who are the customers behind our reviews?"), while it is often possible to identify the characteristics of reviewers (e.g., age, location, gender) from reviews, it may not be possible to compare these to the characteristics of all buyers. Thus, it is possible that 50% of your buyers are males between the ages of 40 and 50, but only 20% of your reviewers are in this cohort. Such a situation may be problematic to the extent that the opinions expressed by reviewers are not representative of the needs of most buyers: besides making it harder for prospective buyers to find the right product, such dissimilarity between buyers and reviewers can also undermine buyers' trust in the available reviews (e.g., Packard et al., 2016).

Direct Sales

If a company sells directly to customers online, it should – in principle – have access to all the relevant review, sales, and clickstream data and be able to answer questions (1), (3), and (4). However, it may be more difficult to learn about substitute products because reviewers may be reluctant to mention competitor products on the focal product's website than on a third-party website (that sells those competitor products).

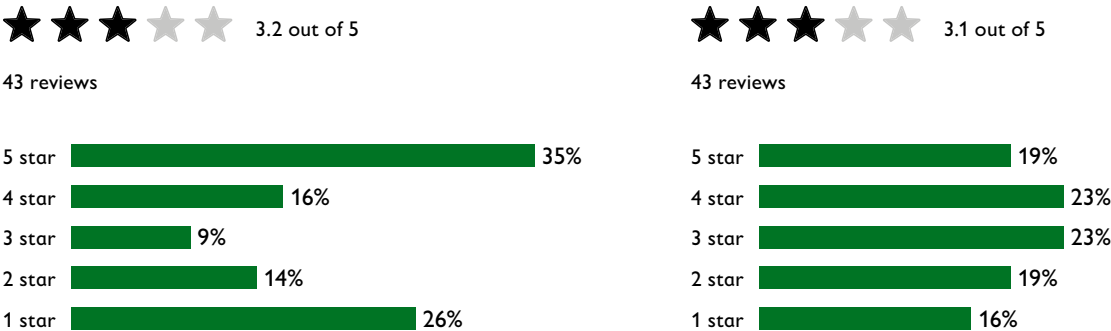
Step 2: Setting the Goal

Armed with an understanding of the current review situation, the company can now decide how it wants its review content to change. In practice, the three most frequent goals are either (1) to get more reviews from customers, (2) to increase one's average rating score (relative to the competition), and (3) to attract more impactful reviews. Which goals a particular company pursues is often a reflection of both its business model and the data availability in Step 1.

Indirect Sales

Online platforms such as Amazon, Expedia, or Booking.com are often more interested in review volume (1) than in the average rating of a particular product. The reason for this is that review volume is what drives consumers to their website: all else being equal, a platform becomes more attractive to consumers if it offers more reviews for the products on its website than its competitors – this is what enables prospective

Figure 2: Two Hypothetical Review Contexts for Review Management



Source: Own illustration.

buyers to find a better match for their product preferences. In contrast, a platform cares less about whether customers rate a particular product better than another; as long as the customer buys any product on the website, the platform makes money.

For individual companies, however, the average rating score (2) is often the focus of their review solicitation efforts – especially relative to the competition. Some companies go so far as to tell customers, “If you enjoyed your shopping experience today, please review us on Google; if you did not enjoy the experience, don’t waste your time writing a review”. This example shows that some companies want only positive reviews, even if the total number of reviews is lower. However, this approach comes at a significant cost: by collecting only positive reviews, a company simultaneously reduces the perceived authenticity – that is, trustworthiness – of its review content for future buyers (Doh & Hwang, 2009).

A company that posts reviews on its own website has to focus more on trust building than a third-party website.

In contrast to this dichotomy, platforms and individual companies share an interest in attracting more impactful reviews, although the exact nature of what makes a review more impactful varies by product type (e.g., figurative language is more impactful for hedonic goods, and literal language is more impactful for utilitarian products, Kronrod & Danziger, 2013).

Direct Sales

If the company was able to integrate clickstream, review, and sales data into its analysis in Step 1, it may have found that many prospective buyers are abandoning the site and that the reasons are (i) low-quality review content, (ii) the fact that current reviewers are not representative of the needs of prospective buyers, or both. All these aspects suggest that the current review content is not having the right impact on prospective buyers. However, these problems need to be addressed in different ways. Low-quality content may be lacking in persuasiveness and trustworthiness for buyers, and thus one way forward may be to encourage all customers to provide (a) longer and more detailed reviews, (b) reviews with pictures, (c) reviews with fewer uses of ‘I’ or ‘me’, or (d) reviews with more engaging narratives – all aspects that increase the perceived helpfulness of reviews (Ceylan et al., 2023; Filieri, 2015; Hong et al., 2017; Van Laer et al., 2019). In contrast, the non-representativeness of reviews requires a targeted approach to solicit more representative customers.

Importantly, the improved data availability from owning the review website comes at a substantial cost: customers understand that there is a conflict of interest between sellers and buyers and may question the trustworthiness of the review content (Moore & Lafreniere, 2020). Thus, a company that posts reviews on its own website has to focus more on trust building than a third-party website.

Step 3: Evaluation of Interventions

Companies may try to influence the content of online reviews for their products in several ways, including (1) designing the review funnel (i.e., how customers submit their evaluations and how reviews are displayed on the website), (2) incentivizing review provision for all customers (e.g., by offering discounts in exchange for a review), (3) reminding non-reviewers to write a review after a while (e.g., via email), or (4) signaling through public responses to past reviews that the company listens to feedback. While other interventions might be considered, these are the ones that have been empirically studied.

Indirect Sales

Changing the process by which customers write an online review, or how those reviews are displayed on the website, is only feasible if reviews are displayed on one’s own website. Similarly, incentivizing customers to write a review on a particular platform is only feasible if one has access to these customers. Often, however, there are ways to make this possible. For instance, several authors have offered Amazon gift cards to individuals who agreed to buy and review the book on Amazon; the value of these cards was often equal to the purchasing costs of the book (including shipping). In effect, these authors were giving away their book for free in exchange for a review.

But how do such financial incentives affect the content of online reviews? Burtch et al. (2018) show that purely financial rewards may be a double-edged sword for companies: while paying for reviews increases review volume, the acquired reviews are not particularly long and detailed. Thus, paying customers to review only leads to more low-quality reviews. Importantly, this negative effect is mitigated when financial rewards are paired with social norm incentives (“last month, 3456 customers submitted a review”). Fradkin et al. (2018) show that financial vouchers disproportionately attract moderate reviews because they increase the motivation to post any kind of review while those with ex-

tremely negative or positive opinions still post in the absence of financial incentives. Thus, financial incentives can either increase or decrease a product's average rating, depending on whether the current distribution is skewed toward extremely positive reviews (in which case the additional moderate opinions reduce the average rating, see figure 2, left), or to extremely negative reviews. For uniform rating distributions, the effect is often negligible.

If buyers learn that people were paid to write a review, they may trust the reviews less. Companies therefore need to think about ways to reduce such negative effects, and past research suggests two potential avenues for companies. First, paid reviews are viewed positively if they include stories that explain who the reviewers are, and if they adhere to community norms (see the discussion in Moore & Lafreniere, 2020). Companies that offer financial incentives for reviews thus need to carefully instruct reviewers. Second, companies may achieve considerable volume effects with non-incentivized email reminders: In a field experiment with a travel platform, Brandes et al. (2022) found that such reminders (a) increase the number of reviews provided, (b) lead to more moderate reviews, and (c) result in substantially shorter reviews.

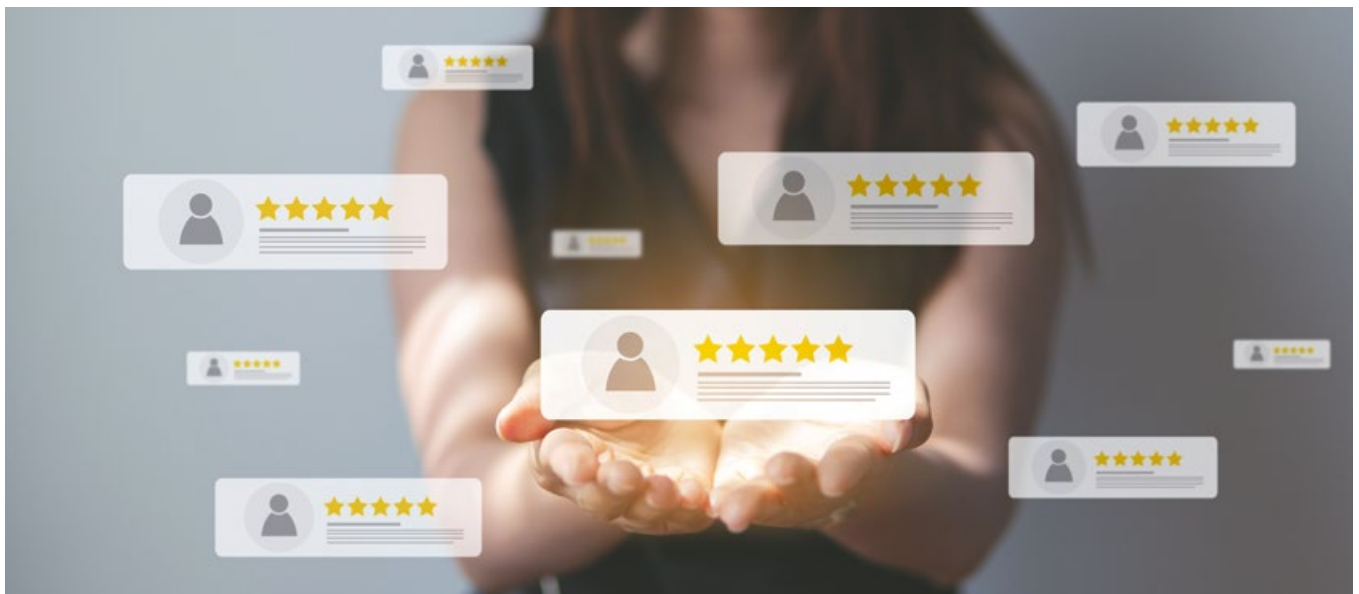
Finally, a company may consider responding publicly to past reviews, which can help to build trust with prospective buyers. In particular, both excuses and apologies have been found to positively affect a seller's trustworthiness – if accepted by buyers. However, the specific conditions under which acceptance occurs are not yet fully understood (Moore & Lafreniere, 2020).

Main Propositions

- 1 Companies can learn a great deal about their product reputation, competitors, and customers by analyzing customer reviews and sales data.
- 2 With a better understanding of the status quo, companies can make an informed decision about their online review management goals.
- 3 There is often no 'single best' review management intervention for a given goal, as what is most effective in one context (e.g., hedonic products) may be ineffective in another (e.g., utilitarian products).
- 4 Overall, a company's review management approach needs to be aligned with (a) its business model, (b) its review data source, and (c) its current review situation.

Direct Sales

If a company has direct control over the review funnel on its website, it can do even more. For instance, research has found that longer rating scales (e.g., 1–10 vs. 1–5) reduce the prevalence of extreme ratings (Schoenmüller et al., 2020). Be-



Source: © iStockphoto.

Lessons Learned

- 1 Do not copy the review management interventions of other companies, as they may have different goals from yours; analyze your current situation, set appropriate goals, and then choose your own intervention.
- 2 Consider the implications of a review management intervention beyond its direct impact on your goal; an intervention that increases the volume may reduce the quality of the reviews you are getting.
- 3 If possible, try to directly measure the impact of review content on product sales; this will allow you to choose between interventions with pros and cons.
- 4 Don't go 'all in' on your chosen intervention immediately; instead, use an experimental approach to implementation; this way, you can assess whether the intervention is truly effective before scaling it.

sides influencing how customers write a review, companies may also modify the user interface for displaying reviews. For instance, if a company receives many reviews written on mobile devices, it may want to disclose where a review was written (mobile vs. desktop) because consumers trust reviews written on mobile devices more (Grewal & Stephen, 2019). Similarly, recent research has shown that consumer preferences for products are sensitive to the shape of product rating distributions (Jia et al., 2023). In addition, a company that identifies fraudulent reviews on its website and wants to build customer trust should preserve and identify these reviews rather than quietly deleting them (Ananthakrishnan et al., 2020). These are a few empirically tested ways to increase the persuasiveness of reviews without altering their actual content. However, more work is needed to study how other changes to the review funnel and rating display styles affect the different review metrics.

Step 4: Implementation and Monitoring

Once the company has carefully weighed the pros and cons of each possible alternative against the chosen goal, it is time to make a decision. But how do you decide when you know that

an action has both pros and cons? And what is the best way to finally implement the action?

Indirect Sales

If you face a trade-off, for example, between higher review volume but less persuasive review content, and you lack clickstream data, your best approach may be to use historical sales data and then model them as a function of past review dimensions, such as volume, average rating, and persuasiveness at the time of purchase. This analysis should also include some brand-related measures, because a company's brand influences both the content and sales impact of reviews (e.g., Ho-Dac et al., 2013). While this approach will give you some indication as to which review dimension matters most for sales, your inferences and estimates will necessarily be noisy because you do not know exactly what each customer saw before purchasing. Nevertheless, having some indication of the net effect of the intervention provides an upper bound on the investment and prevents overspending on the intervention.

Direct Sales

When companies publish reviews on their own website, the knowledge gained from the clickstream data makes it easier to decide on a particular intervention and to identify the trade-offs between various review dimensions more precisely.

Guiding Principles

Regardless of where you access reviews, a general guiding principle for implementation is to adopt an experimental mindset: randomly apply the new intervention to some customers only. This allows you to measure the actual effect of the intervention in both groups and is superior to simply comparing reviews from before and after implementation. The reason for this superiority is that the review content for a product is known to change over time, even in the absence of a company's intervention; for example, rating scores frequently move downward because early adopters have different preferences than subsequent customers (Li & Hitt, 2008).

Finally, companies need to track and evaluate suitable success metrics for their intervention. As the above discussion suggests, it is always good to look at more metrics than just the one you are trying to influence, as your intervention may have unintentionally changed other review metrics. This is particularly likely for review management interventions that have not yet been subjected to rigorous empirical research. If this happens, you should regard the situation as the new status

quo, re-evaluate it, and then revise your intervention according to the steps of the approach outlined in this article.

Conclusion

The goal of this article was to present an integrated, systematic approach to online review management as it concerns a product's online reputation. Particular emphasis was placed on providing a broad overview of the different steps involved in the approach. At the same time, it was emphasized that each company's choice of review management goals and interventions needs to be aligned with (a) its business model (e.g., product categories, product types), (b) the source of review data (third-party or proprietary website), and (c) the current review situation (e.g., uniform or extreme distribution of rating scores). ■

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