



# **Soliciting and Paying for Online Reviews:** A Guide for Marketers





Businesses and consumers both rely on online reviews. Companies may need good ones to attract customers, while consumers often use them to decide what to buy or who to hire. People should be able to trust that reviews reflect the honest opinions of customers or experts who actually used a product or service. Some businesses abuse that trust by writing or procuring fake reviews or by paying supposedly independent websites for good rankings. This kind of deception and manipulation harms both consumers and honest companies.

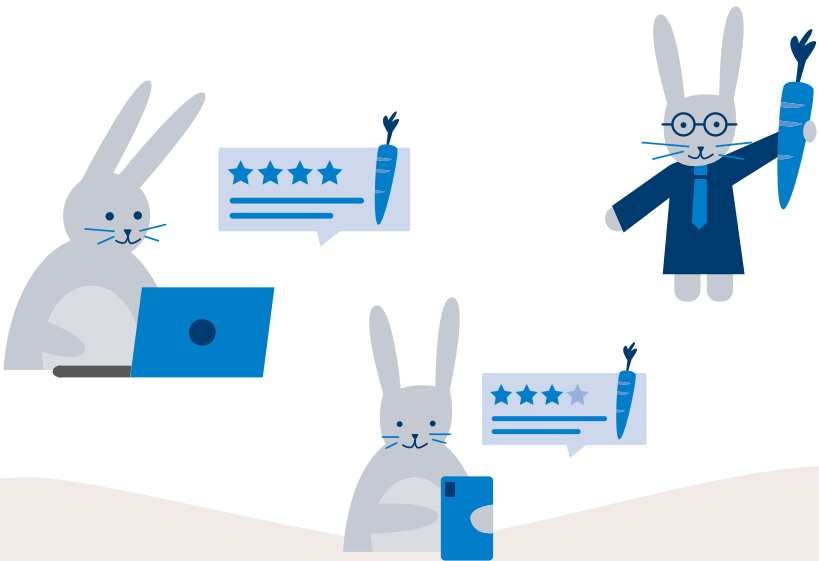
Even if you have no customer reviews on your own website, the health of your business may depend in part on consumers finding robust customer or expert reviews elsewhere, like on review platforms and comparison websites. How you go about getting these reviews is important because it affects whether consumers get a true and accurate picture of what others think about your business and its products or services. When soliciting reviews or paying others to improve your online reputation, consider the tips below to avoid potentially deceptive conduct that may violate the FTC Act.

If your business *does* operate a website that features online customer reviews, see the FTC’s guidance, *Featuring Online Customer Reviews: A Guide for Platforms* at [ftc.gov/reviews](https://www.ftc.gov/reviews), which gives key principles for collecting, moderating, and publishing reviews in ways that don’t mislead consumers.

# Soliciting reviews

Before you ask people for reviews, know the rules of the platforms and websites on which those reviews may appear.

- ▶ Some platforms and websites prohibit reviews from people with personal or financial connections to the seller, or who got an incentive for the reviews – even if the reviews disclose that connection or incentive.
- ▶ Others may allow incentivized reviews with an appropriate disclosure.



# Soliciting reviews *(continued)*

Even if a platform or website has none of these prohibitions or conditions, here are some rules of thumb:

- ▶ Don't ask for reviews from people who haven't used or experienced the product or service.
- ▶ Don't ask your staff to write reviews of your business, at least not without ensuring that they disclose in their review that you employ them and asked them to write it.
- ▶ Don't ask for reviews only from customers you think will leave positive ones.
- ▶ Don't ask family and friends for reviews, at least not without ensuring that they disclose their personal connection in the reviews.
- ▶ If you offer an *incentive* for a review, don't condition it, explicitly or implicitly, on the review being positive. Even without that condition, the review should disclose the incentive, because its offer may introduce bias or change the weight and credibility that readers give the review.



# Working with other companies

- ▶ Some **comparison websites** claim to give consumers unbiased, expert reviews of businesses and products. Behind the scenes, though, some of these websites are running pay-to-play operations, offering better ratings, reviews, and placement in exchange for a fee. Don't participate in this kind of deceptive advertising.
- ▶ Similarly, some **review platforms** – websites that display consumer reviews of other companies' products and services – may offer to collect customer reviews for you and improve your company's reputation and visibility. If you pay the platform for this kind of benefit, make sure that it clearly discloses its commercial relationship with you.
- ▶ Many review platforms have **reporting mechanisms** that allow businesses to flag for the platform when a review may be fake, defamatory, or otherwise in violation of the platform's terms of service. Don't misuse this option to get rid of honest, negative reviews.
- ▶ Some **SEO and reputation management** companies say they can boost your customer reviews and ratings. Make sure you know what they're really doing. They may not say explicitly that they get results by writing fake positive reviews of your business or fake negative reviews of your competitors. But you can be held responsible for what they do on your behalf, and review platforms could suspend or remove your accounts and listings.





Improving your company's online reputation and visibility is, of course, an appropriate goal. And getting more honest and unbiased reviews from customers and experts can be crucial. But just like with any other kind of marketing effort, you can't mislead people about your products and services. Businesses that are tempted to use fake reviews or manipulated rankings should also consider the serious damage to their brand image if the public learns of that breach of trust.







**FEDERAL TRADE  
COMMISSION**

[business.ftc.gov](https://business.ftc.gov)  
January 2022