

HGEM

GOOGLE 2026 POLICY UPDATE

Review-Proof Your Venues

What the 292 million review removals mean for your Google ratings – and what to do about it.

292M+
Reviews removed in 2025

2026
Policy update operators need to understand

4
Signals Google's AI is looking for

01

The situation

WHAT CHANGED, AND WHY IT MATTERS FOR MULTI-SITE OPERATORS

Google removed or blocked more than **292 million reviews** in 2025. That figure is not a one-off enforcement sweep. It reflects a structural shift in how Google polices review content – and it has direct implications for any hospitality operator running a structured review programme.

The enforcement is now proactive, AI-driven, and retroactive. Reviews posted years ago are being deleted without notification. A venue's rating can drop overnight with no warning and no appeal route that reliably works. That changes how every operator needs to build and protect their Google presence.

> **Reviews are no longer durable assets.** A 4.6 rating built over three years is not guaranteed to stay. The work you did in 2023 can be undone by a policy Google updated in 2026.

Google's 2026 review policy **explicitly bans** practices that were, until recently, standard across the industry:

- × Staff review quotas and performance targets tied to review volume
- × Asking guests to name specific team members in their reviews
- × Guided scripts or suggested wording given to guests before they post
- × On-site kiosk solicitation or prompting guests to review before they leave

How enforcement has evolved

2023

Reactive removal

Obvious fakes and flagged content only

2025

AI-driven sweeps at scale

Proactive pattern detection. 292M+ reviews removed.

2026

Policy codified

Common solicitation practices explicitly banned

02

The four triggers

WHAT GOOGLE'S AI IS TRAINED TO DETECT – AND WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

Google's AI enforcement is not looking for obviously fake reviews. It is looking for patterns that indicate coordinated or incentivised solicitation. **Four specific behaviours** account for the majority of legitimate review deletions across hospitality review profiles.

Volume spikes

Operators run a "review push" after a busy weekend or campaign

Google's AI sees: Coordinated manipulation. Sudden spikes in volume from a single venue or group trigger algorithmic review.

DO INSTEAD

Spread reviews steadily – target 2–3 per week per venue as a sustainable baseline, not a campaign goal.

On-site posting

Operators encourage guests to post a review before leaving the venue

Google's AI sees: Suspicious location-based pattern. Multiple reviews from the same geographic point at similar times signals on-site solicitation.

DO INSTEAD

Ask via follow-up channel – receipt, post-visit email, or SMS – after the guest has left the venue.

Staff name mentions

"Ask them to mention you by name – it really helps us"

Google's AI sees: Direct solicitation signal. Reviews naming staff at scale indicate coordinated prompting, not organic experience.

DO INSTEAD

Ask guests to describe their experience – the dish, the atmosphere, a specific feature – not to name individuals.

Phrasing similarity

Operators give staff a script or suggested wording to share with guests

Google's AI sees: Coordinated campaign signal. Reviews with structurally similar phrasing look automated, regardless of their origin.

DO INSTEAD

No scripts. Encourage guests to use their own words. Varied phrasing is a signal of authenticity.

The patterns that signal "we care about feedback" to you look like "coordinated solicitation" to Google's AI. **The distinction matters more now than at any point in the past five years.**

03

The strategy shift

FROM INTENSITY TO CONSISTENCY

The answer is not to stop encouraging reviews; operators who go quiet will simply fall behind competitors who find the right approach. It is to **change how reviews are requested**, and to treat review generation as a steady operational habit rather than a periodic campaign.

THE OLD APPROACH	THE NEW APPROACH
✕ Campaigns and "review pushes"	✓ Steady, consistent volume week on week
✕ Staff quotas and targets	✓ Experience-led asks, not name-led
✕ Staff name requests	✓ Post-visit follow-up by email or SMS
✕ On-site prompting at the table or till	✓ No scripts – guests' own words only
✕ Scripts and suggested wording	✓ Feature-specific prompts (menu, atmosphere)
✕ Immediate asks before guests leave	✓ Review generation as habit, not event

The ask – what changes

The goal is not to find a better script. It is to **remove the script entirely**. Here is what that shift looks like.

BEFORE – AT RISK OF TRIGGERING GOOGLE'S AI FILTERS

"Hi, we really appreciate your support. Could you leave us a Google review and mention [staff name] if they looked after you well today? It really helps us out."

AFTER – THE SHIFT IN APPROACH

The ask moves away from the venue and onto the guest. No script. No prompts about what to mention, who to name, or when to post. The invitation is to share their own experience – in their own words, after the visit, in whatever way feels natural.

04

The Gemini opportunity

THE UPSIDE MOST OPERATORS ARE NOT YET USING

The same policy shift that threatens legacy review programmes creates **a genuine opportunity** for operators who get ahead of it. Google Gemini now generates AI-powered local venue cards – pulling specific phrases from reviews to describe what a venue is like to prospective guests searching nearby.

This is not a future feature; **it is live in search results now**, and the venues being surfaced are the ones whose reviews describe specific features rather than name individual staff.

> The ask shift serves two purposes. It keeps you policy-compliant with Google's 2026 review standards, and it improves your visibility in AI-powered local search. The same change that protects your existing ratings helps build your future discoverability.

Google Business Profile checklist

Gemini pulls from your full GBP profile, not just reviews. Make sure the profile itself is doing the work.

☐ **Business description:**	Write your description to explicitly name your venue features – family-friendly, vegan menu, rooftop, terrace, private dining. Use the language guests actually search for. This text feeds directly into how Gemini describes your venue in AI-powered local search, so specificity matters.
☐ **Photos:**	Upload fresh photos regularly – at minimum monthly. Show the venue interior and exterior, food, drinks, and seasonal atmosphere. Google's algorithm prioritises profiles with recent, varied imagery, and Gemini uses photos when building local venue cards in search results.
☐ **Opening hours:**	Keep hours accurate at all times, including seasonal variations, bank holidays, and temporary closures. Incorrect hours damage guest trust, generate avoidable negative reviews, and reduce your Google ranking.

☐ **GBP posts:**	Publish at least fortnightly per venue. A GBP post is a short update – similar to a social media post – that appears directly on your Google listing when guests search for you. Posts about seasonal menus, upcoming events, and offers signal to Google that your profile is actively managed. This supports both your ranking and your visibility in Gemini-powered search results.
☐ **Respond to all reviews:**	Google measures your response rate and uses it as a ranking signal. Gemini is more likely to surface profiles that show consistent, active engagement. For positive reviews, a brief acknowledgement builds goodwill. For negative reviews: acknowledge the experience, stay professional, and invite the guest to continue the conversation offline. A well-handled negative review is often more reassuring to prospective guests than an unchallenged string of five-stars.
☐ **Attributes:**	Set all relevant GBP attributes accurately – wheelchair accessible, dog-friendly, outdoor seating, accepts reservations, outdoor heaters, private hire available. These structured fields are separate from your written description and are one of the primary ways Gemini matches your venue to conversational search queries such as “dog-friendly pub with outdoor seating near me.”
☐ **Q&A:**	Check and answer questions in your GBP Q&A section promptly. If you leave questions unanswered, other Google users can answer them on your behalf – potentially inaccurately. Answered Q&As also feed into Gemini’s venue descriptions for common search queries, so keeping this section up to date directly supports your AI search visibility.

Do this consistently and **Gemini visibility follows.** The operators who win are building the signal now, before it becomes a recognised KPI.

05

Audit your current programme

RUN THIS AGAINST YOUR EXISTING APPROACH TO ASKING FOR REVIEWS

Many operators have likely not revisited their review programme in the last few years. The 10 questions below surface the specific practices most likely to trigger Google's AI enforcement. **The point is to find the risk before Google does.**

01	☐	Do we set staff review targets or quotas – either individually or by venue?
02	☐	Do we ask guests to mention specific team members by name in their reviews?
03	☐	Do we give staff a script or suggested wording to share with guests when asking for a review?
04	☐	Do we prompt guests to review while still on-site – at the table, at the till, or via an in-venue kiosk?
05	☐	Do we run periodic "review campaigns" that generate noticeable spikes in volume?
06	☐	Have we seen unexplained drops in our review count or rating in the past 12 months?
07	☐	Do our reviews across venues share similar phrasing, structure, or recurring phrases?
08	☐	Do we track review volume as a KPI for venue managers or area managers?
09	☐	Do we encourage guests to post immediately, rather than via a follow-up after they have left?
10	☐	Are our venue teams continuing to run review activity without an up-to-date briefing on what Google's 2026 policy explicitly prohibits?

Every question describes a practice Google's 2026 policy now treats as solicitation or manipulation, and its AI enforcement is trained to detect. **The more you recognise here, the more exposed your ratings are to removal.**

> **Scoring note:** If you answered yes to 3 or more questions, your current programme is at risk of triggering Google's AI filters. Questions 1 to 5 represent the highest-risk practices – a single yes to any of those is a clear signal to review your programme.

06

How operators are adapting

THIS IS NOT ABOUT DOING LESS. IT IS ABOUT DOING IT RIGHT.

The results below come from operators who shifted their approach before the 2026 policy codified what Google's AI had already been detecting.

> *Our review volume has increased, response rates are up by 60%, and our rating has improved from 4.4 to 4.8.*
>
> NICOLÒ PORTUNATO, DIRECTOR – PLATFORM SHOREDITCH

> *Response rate doubled since launch – the consistency of the programme has been the difference.*
>
> BASILIO OCHEN, DIGITAL MARKETING COORDINATOR – BREAD AHEAD

What both operators share is a move away from campaign-based generation toward **a steady, ongoing programme** – supported by a system built to keep it that way.

HGEM's **review management** platform monitors volume patterns and flags anomalies that could trigger Google's filters before they become a problem. **AI-generated responses** are varied across every venue in a group, so the phrasing similarity that gets responses flagged is built out of the system by default.

Consistency beats intensity. The brands that win on reviews over the next 12 months will be the ones building steady, policy-clean volume – not the ones running the loudest campaigns.



LET'S TALK

Want to talk through your **review strategy?**

Book a 30-minute call with our team. We'll audit your current programme, flag any risk areas, and show you what a policy-clean approach looks like in practice.

Book a 30-minute call

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