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MARKETING FOR CONTRACTORS

SOURCED & FACT-CHECKED COMPLIANCE GUIDE

Google Review & GBP Policy in 2026: What's Real, What's Risky, and What's a Myth

Google tightened review enforcement and the FTC can now fine you for fake or gated reviews. We read the actual Google policy pages and the federal rules line by line, then checked every claim going around. This is the plain-English version.

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For local businesses & home-service contractors
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12 CLAIMS
GRADED

The 7 corrections that matter

The version most people are repeating is directionally right but sloppy on the details, and the details are where compliance decisions get made. Here is what to fix.

- 1** **"Staff mention ban" is misleading.** Google bans *merchants directing staff* to solicit reviews with specific content, including content that identifies a staff member. A customer voluntarily writing "Sarah was helpful" is a different thing.

- 2** **The April 17, 2026 policy change is real.** New staff-quota and staff-identity clauses appeared in Google's Rating Manipulation policy. The official Help page is the source of truth.

- 3** **Google's 2025 enforcement numbers are real:** 292M+ reviews removed, 79M edits blocked, 782K+ accounts restricted, 13M+ fake profiles removed.

- 4** **"Gemini removed 292M reviews" is overstated.** Google ties Gemini specifically to catching fake or unhelpful *edits* faster. Review enforcement is described as AI systems plus human analysts.

- 5** **The "600% increase" is third-party data,** not an official Google statistic. It is useful as a signal, but it is not a Google-confirmed number.

- 6** **"30+ days dormant = lost visibility" is unsupported** as a hard rule. Google rewards accurate, active profiles, but publishes no 30-day penalty.

- 7** **The \$53,088-per-violation FTC fine is real,** and the legal standard is broader than "actual knowledge." It includes knowledge *fairly implied from objective circumstances*.

What Google actually changed in 2025–2026

Three real shifts are driving all of this.

1. Q&A is becoming AI “Ask.”

Google discontinued the My Business Q&A API on November 3, 2025, and has been moving the old customer-facing Q&A toward an AI-powered “Ask” experience. Its March 2026 “Ask Maps” announcement confirms Maps now answers conversational questions using place data and reviews. The takeaway: accurate, consistent info across your profile, website, and reviews increasingly feeds those AI answers. That is not a license to stuff keywords into reviews.

2. The Rating Manipulation policy got teeth.

Around April 17, 2026, Google added explicit language about staff review quotas and reviews that identify staff members. This is the controlling document for almost every “is this allowed?” question.

3. Enforcement went industrial.

In its April 16, 2026 Maps safety post, Google said that in 2025 it blocked or removed 292M+ policy-violating reviews, blocked 79M bad edits, restricted 782K+ accounts, and removed 13M+ fake Business Profiles. The scale is the point. Manual, scripted review schemes are getting caught.

BY THE NUMBERS – GOOGLE, 2025

292M+

reviews blocked
or removed

79M

bad edits
blocked

782K+

accounts
restricted

13M+

fake profiles
removed

The claims, fact-checked

Each row pairs the claim going around with what the actual Google or FTC source says.

CLAIM	VERDICT	THE REALITY
Google replaced GBP Q&A with an AI "Ask" button	MOSTLY CONFIRMED	Q&A API ended Nov 3, 2025; Ask Maps confirmed by Google.
The Dec 2025 Core Update caused review removals	UNSUPPORTED	Core updates are a Search system. No tie to Maps review removal.
FTC sent its first review-rule warning letters Dec 22, 2025	CONFIRMED	Letters to 10 companies; 5-business-day response demanded.
Review deletions up 600%, still 400% above normal	PARTIAL	Third-party (GMBapi) monitoring, not a Google statistic.
Customers cannot mention employees by name	MISLEADING	It targets merchant solicitation, not voluntary mentions.
Review quotas are banned	CONFIRMED	Asking staff to get a set number of reviews is prohibited.
Incentivized reviews are banned	CONFIRMED	Google and the FTC prohibit incentives tied to reviews.
292M reviews / 13M fake profiles removed in 2025	CONFIRMED	Straight from Google's April 2026 Maps post.
Those 292M actions were "using Gemini AI"	MISLEADING	Gemini is credited for edits; reviews = AI + analysts.
Real photos only; no AI-generated images at all	PARTIAL	Real media favored, but Google offers its own AI image tools.
Dormant 30+ days = lost visibility; post weekly	UNSUPPORTED	No such rule in Google's ranking guidance.
FTC penalties up to \$53,088 per violation	CONFIRMED	16 CFR § 1.98 current adjustment.

STOP DOING THESE

What's now clearly risky or banned

Google's Rating Manipulation policy says merchants should **not**:

- Offer payment, discounts, free goods or services, or any incentive for posting, changing, or removing a review.
- Discourage or prohibit negative reviews.
- **Selectively solicit positive reviews.** This is review gating, and it is no longer allowed.
- Require or pressure customers to review **while they are on the premises** (this is why front-desk kiosks and shared tablets are a problem).
- Ask for **specific content** to be included in a review.
- Ask staff to solicit a **certain number** of reviews (quotas).
- Ask staff to solicit reviews that **identify a staff member**.

What is still fine: asking *every* eligible customer for an honest review, neutrally, with no incentive and no script. The line is manipulation: shaping what they write, who you ask, when you ask, or whether they get rewarded for it.

THE PART MOST BUSINESSES UNDERESTIMATE

The FTC angle: \$53,088 per violation

The FTC's Consumer Review Rule has been fully effective since October 21, 2024, and on December 22, 2025 the FTC sent warning letters to 10 companies. Civil penalties can reach **\$53,088 per violation** (16 CFR § 1.98).

The "they have to prove we knew" defense is shakier than it sounds. The standard is actual knowledge **or knowledge fairly implied on the basis of objective circumstances**. The rule targets fake reviews, sentiment-conditioned incentives, undisclosed insider reviews, fake "independent" review sites, and certain review suppression. Treat this as a legal-risk issue, not only an SEO one, and have counsel review your final policy language.

STOP REPEATING THESE

Three myths to retire

Myth 1: “Gemini removed 292 million reviews.”

The number is real; the attribution is not. Google credits AI systems and human analysts for review enforcement, and names Gemini specifically for catching bad *edits* faster.

Myth 2: “Deletions are up exactly 600%.”

That comes from a third-party monitor (GMBapi) tracking how many *locations* saw at least one deletion in a week, a figure that rose more than sixfold in early 2025. It is a real signal, but it is not a Google-wide deletion rate.

Myth 3: “Post every 30 days or lose ranking.”

No official Google source supports a 30-day dormancy penalty or a weekly-posting rule. Local ranking is relevance, distance, and prominence. Keep your profile current because it converts better, not because of a penalty that does not exist.

THE SAFE PLAYBOOK

What to actually do

If you change nothing else, change these.

- **Ask every eligible customer** the same neutral way. Do not filter by sentiment.
- **Stop scripting reviews.** No star-rating requests, no keywords, no staff names, and no “mention me.”
- **Kill quotas and contests** tied to review count, rating, or staff mentions.
- **No incentives** for leaving, changing, or removing a review.
- **Stop collecting reviews on store-owned tablets or kiosks**, or while standing over the customer. Send a neutral link by text or email after the visit.
- **Use real photos** and keep your profile accurate and current.

A SAFE REQUEST LOOKS LIKE THIS

“Thank you for choosing us. We value honest feedback from all customers. You can leave a Google review here: [link].”

That is it. Real customers, neutral asks, no incentives, no gating, no scripts, real photos, accurate info. None of these principles are new. What changed is the enforcement behind them, which is now more automated, more visible, and far more expensive to get wrong.

Want us to handle this for you?

Adapt Digital Solutions builds review systems and Google Business Profiles for contractors that stay inside the lines and still win the map. See where you rank against local competitors at contractors.adaptdigitalsolutions.com.

This guide is informational and not legal advice. For FTC or regulatory exposure, have counsel review your final policy and customer-communication language before rollout. Figures and policy references reflect Google and FTC sources current as of June 2026.