# Bad Reviews Don’t Need to End Badly

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**As a business owner, imagine this scenario: one of your customers leaves a negative review on** [**Google**](https://support.google.com/business/answer/3474122?hl=en) **or posts a complaint on** [**BBB**](https://www.bbb.org/)**.** What’s your next move? Should you respond immediately, or let it sit and hope it fades away? Many business owners dread receiving complaints, and while they’re often avoidable, even the most attentive companies slip up or encounter an exceptionally demanding customer now and then. When it happens, you're on the clock—it's time to take action quickly and set things right. Here’s how and why timely response can prevent a cascade of negative outcomes.

## The First 24 Hours: The Clock Has Started

This is the window to acknowledge a customer's concern and reassure them you're on the case. Even something as simple as, “Thanks for letting us know – we’re working on it!” can prevent a negative situation from getting worse. If possible, aim to reply to comments, reviews, and complaints within an hour. When writing your reply, do your best to not get defensive and to stay calm and polite, even if the customer isn’t. Also, ask questions to get more details and demonstrate to the customer that you are taking the situation seriously.

## 1-7 Days: Chain Reactions

If a response doesn’t come quickly, ripple effects can start to unfold, impacting far more than just the initial customer. Here’s a common sequence:

* **First**: The customer feels ignored.
* **Then**: They leave another negative review.
* **So**: They vent on social media.
* **When this happens**: Other potential customers see the negative feedback.
* **And the dissatisfied customer…** tells others about their poor experience. Studies show [unhappy customers tell 9-20 people](https://www.customerthermometer.com/customer-satisfaction/unhappy-customer/) about a bad experience.
* **As a result**: The negative word-of-mouth starts to build.
* **Which leads to**: Competitors noticing the dissatisfaction, potentially swooping in to win over disillusioned customers.
* **And ultimately**: Employees become aware, which can affect morale and productivity.

Did I paint a worst-case scenario here to make a point? Sure. But have I seen this type of situation unfold in real life? Absolutely. The point is that without a timely response, issues start to accumulate. While quick fixes—like a refund, discount, or sincere apology—might still be effective in this timeframe, gaining the customer’s trust becomes increasingly difficult with each passing day.

## After One Week: Damage Control

Leaving a complaint unaddressed for too long can lead to a lasting “digital stain” on your brand. Here’s how things can unravel:

* **The complaint sits unresolved** — impacting your long-term reputation as potential customers come across it online.
* **Then loyal customers notice the inaction** — causing them to ask questions about your brand, lose trust, and potentially move their business elsewhere.
* **So your network of trust weakens** — making it harder to attract new business.
* **Causing costs increase** — as you invest more time, money, and effort to fix the situation than you would have initially.
* **And to top it all off, legal risks arise** — if the disgruntled customer escalates by filing a formal complaint or lawsuit, leading to possible fees, fines, or damage to your professional licensing, accreditations, and association memberships.

The possible ripple effects are significant, and avoiding them is simpler and more cost-effective than waiting. By addressing complaints early, you free up resources for training, development, and other proactive measures instead of costly damage control.

Still, if a situation does spiral, BBB has tools to help. Accredited Businesses can access [BBB Mediation or BBB Arbitration](https://www.bbb.org/all/bbb-dispute-handling-and-resolution)—a neutral, cost-saving resolution method that’s often quicker and less invasive than legal action. If your business is not affiliated with BBB, you can still take advantage of these services at a low cost – there are also several non-BBB-related dispute resolution options that you can learn about on the [American Arbitration Association’s](https://www.adr.org/Mediation) website.

## Final Thoughts

Customer loyalty takes hard work to build but can be weakened in an instant. Ignored complaints don’t just cost you one customer—they create a cascade of negative publicity that can impact your entire business.

Here’s the good news: complaints don’t have to spell disaster. Addressing issues promptly and transparently can turn a potentially negative experience into an opportunity for growth.