# Online Reviews Bolster Referrals

## Reputations need to be tended or the unhappy few will do it for you.

By Scott Harris

Photo illustration by Dennis Wunsch

Pose this question to any mortgage originator: “What is your primary method for acquiring new business?” The No. 1 answer is always referrals. Simply put, they do such a good job, their clients recommend them to friends and family.

Internal data from SocialSurvey supports the idea that most originators are delighting their clients. A survey of more than 600,000 borrowers found less than 1 percent are reporting an “unpleasant experience” and more than 96 percent report having a “great experience.”

If so many mortgage clients are having a great experience, then why do Google and Yelp often tell a different story?

Santa Ana, California, mortgage company  is a great example: it ranked highly in both volume and client satisfaction Before the company could implement a plan to collect and share the true voices of their clients, however, Google reported 48 total reviews with only a 1.7-star average.

All this, while reporting roughly 900,000 loans closed since 2001 on their website. Not to worry, the mortgage company figured it out and is now sending requests to all retail customers with closed loans. They have seen a 56 percent response rate and are averaging 4.9 stars across nearly 8,000 reviews and counting.

The story points out an important fact: If you’re not managing your online reputation, your unhappy clients will do it for you.

### Need for reviews

While many mortgage originators are W-2 employees, they are still the primary route to the market for most mortgage companies. This means the originator’s online reputation can be just as important as the company’s. Here’s the reason this is so important: If most loan originators still rely on referrals, what do you think today’s borrower is doing after someone refers you? Looking you up online.

According to a local consumer-review survey by online search company BrightLocal, 85 percent of people trust online reviews as much as recommendations from friends

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or family. Although their primary reason for choosing you may be the referral, they will validate that referral with a Google search before they call. What happens when someone refers you? Google your name and find out.

Google dominates online search — 63.5 percent of all U.S. desktop-computer search queries, to be exact. The good news is they are all about local searches. Think about it like this: If someone in Newport Beach, California, is looking for a Mexican restaurant, Google doesn't show them one in Macon, Georgia. It shows one nearby.

Focus on the Google local three-pack, a group of three local businesses that show up in any search on the search engine. You want to win the three-pack when people are looking on Google for a mortgage in your area. Assuming listing data, photos and hours of business are all accurate, what makes companies that land in the three-pack different from hundreds of others that gives them an advantage on a Google search? Clearly, an important factor is volume and frequency of local reviews. It makes sense if you think about it.

Google wants to give the best possible answer. First, it wants to make sure it has found a verified business with a real physical address. Next, it relies on signals such as local people waving the "this is the best answer" flag by writing reviews after visiting the business.

## Impact of story

If the true voice of the client was present online, the average mortgage originator and company would have lots of reviews everywhere (Google, Zillow, Facebook, Better Business Bureau, Yelp) averaging more than 4.8 stars (out of a possible five). Reviews are the natural evolution of referrals from the past. Instead of simply relying on your clients to tell their friends, digitize their voice and amplify it.

The average Facebook user now has about 338 friends. And those friends have an average of 338 friends. That's 114,244 friends of friends. According to a report from GlobalWebIndex, the average person now has 7.6 active social media accounts, with 98 percent of people having at least one social network account.

SocialSurvey conducted a recent survey of several thousand users who shared their reviews on at least one social channel. The internal data shows an average of 13.7 percent in new business creation from this sharing activity.

In the mortgage industry, you are impacting lives in a big way. You are creating stories and every story is a unique one worth telling. My favorite example involved a U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) loan in early 2017. A woman was married to an active-duty military man who was deployed overseas. She reported that her husband had always handled these types of things and she could not have closed the loan without the mortgage originator going above and beyond at every turn.

Think about the impact this review had in creating new business. Every military family would love to have this experience. User stories can be business-creating gold if shared properly.

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In the mortgage industry, your other "customers" and best sources for new future business are the real estate agents involved in the transaction. Sometimes the client was referred to you by the buyer's agent. Other times, you might be working with a real estate agent for the first time.

In any case, giving them a great experience is often the key to getting more business from them in the future. You can even use great agent reviews to win another agent in the same office. ■