BuildUp BOOKINGS

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BONUS 10 OF 11 · MASTERING VACATION RENTAL MARKETING

Collecting Google Reviews

A companion resource to the 2nd edition

WHAT YOU'LL HAVE WHEN YOU FINISH

A review collection system that runs on every direct-booked stay, compliant scripts for asking and responding, and a clear understanding of the one line you must not cross.

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Facts checked November 2026
buildupbookings.com/book-bonuses

PART 1

Do this now

Start here. Each one works on its own.

1 **Stop filtering who gets asked.**

A review tactic that is still common in this industry — surveying guests and sending the review link only to the happy ones — is called review gating, and Google's policy bans it outright. Google removes reviews collected that way, and can also stop a profile from receiving new reviews, unpublish its existing ones, and show shoppers a warning that fake reviews were removed. If your current process does this, stop today.

2 **Get your direct review link.**

Google Business Profile gives you a link that opens the review box directly. In your profile, select Read reviews, then Get more reviews, then Copy. You also get a QR code there, though only from a computer browser. Every extra tap between the guest and the box costs you reviews.

3 **Never offer anything in exchange for a review.**

Not a discount, not a free upgrade, not a gift card, not an entry into a drawing. Incentivizing reviews violates Google's policy, and it applies to positive reviews, revisions, and removals alike.

4 **Ask every direct-booking guest.**

Same message, same link, same timing, regardless of what you think they will say. This is both the compliant approach and — for reasons below — the one that produces a better rating over time. Not Airbnb guests: for reservations booked on or after November 20, 2026, Airbnb bars hosts from asking guests to review the stay on another website, Google included. Those guests review on Airbnb.

5 **Automate the send.**

A request that depends on someone remembering will not fire on every stay. Put it in your PMS or ESP as a triggered message.

6 **Respond to every review, including the bad ones.**

Especially the bad ones. Response templates are below.

7 **Do service recovery before checkout, for its own sake.**

Catching a problem while the guest is still there is good hospitality and it will genuinely improve your reviews. What you may not do is use what you learn to decide who gets asked.

PART 2

The depth

The full method.

The line: review gating

Review gating is filtering guests by sentiment before deciding who gets a review request. The familiar version: send a survey, and route the 4s and 5s to Google while the 1s and 2s go to a private internal feedback form.

Google's policy is explicit. You may not selectively solicit positive reviews. You may not discourage or prohibit negative reviews. **Whether you ask can never depend on what you expect someone to say.** In April 2026 Google tightened the same section of its policy, adding bans on staff review quotas and on asking for reviews that name staff members.

Here is an instruction that still circulates in this industry's review scripts, worth quoting because the reasoning is so common:

> *"Pay attention to their feedback and respond to any complaints they may have had to avoid being put in a review."*

The first half of that is good hospitality. The second half is the violation. The moment "avoid being put in a review" becomes the purpose, you are managing which guests reach Google, and that is the practice Google prohibits.

What the penalty looks like: reviews collected through a non-compliant channel can be removed, new reviews can be blocked, and Google can put a public warning on the profile. Losing your review corpus is a genuinely bad outcome — it is often the single strongest asset a local business has, and it is not quickly rebuilt.

What you are still completely free to do

The compliant version of this is not weaker. It is stronger.

Do service recovery, aggressively, before checkout. Call or message every guest before they leave. Ask what could have been better. Fix what you can while they are still in the property. Do this because a guest whose problem got solved has a genuinely better experience — not as a filter.

Then ask every direct-booking guest. Same request, same link, same timing.

Who gets the Google request: direct-booking guests

For Airbnb reservations booked on or after November 20, 2026, Airbnb bars hosts from asking guests to review the stay or fill out a survey on a separate website (hotel listings excepted), and from asking for their phone number or email. Google is a separate website. So every request in this document goes to guests who booked with you directly. Airbnb guests get Airbnb's own review prompt, and their pre-checkout check-in happens in the Airbnb message thread.

This is not gating. Gating decides who gets asked by what you expect them to say. Where someone booked says nothing about how their stay went. Vrbo bars links meant to redirect guests away from Vrbo, and we found no published Vrbo or Booking.com rule on review requests either way. Until your partner terms say otherwise, treat their guests like Airbnb's. The direct guest is the one you can send to Google.

Here is why this produces a better rating rather than a worse one: a guest whose broken dishwasher was fixed within two hours often writes a *better* review than a guest with no problems at all, because you gave them a story about how you handle things. The gating instinct assumes an unhappy guest is a lost cause. Usually they are a recovered guest, and recovered guests are your most persuasive reviewers.

The operators with the best ratings in any market are not the ones filtering hardest. They are the ones solving problems fastest and asking most consistently.

Volume matters as much as rating

A 5.0 from nine reviews is weaker than a 4.7 from two hundred. Guests discount a tiny sample, and so do the systems ranking you.

The book's benchmark for a Middleweight business is **50+ reviews**. If you are short of that, the problem is almost never that guests refuse — it is that nobody asks consistently. A single automated request on every direct stay closes that gap faster than any other change available to you.

A perfect 5.0 also reads as suspicious past a certain volume. A handful of imperfect reviews with good responses underneath them builds more trust than an unblemished wall, because it proves the reviews are real.

Your reviews are now part of your AI visibility

This is new since the first edition and it changes the priority of this work.

Reviews and user-generated content are among the sources conversational AI tools cite when answering travel questions. When someone asks an AI tool who they should book with in your market, your review corpus is among the things it is reading — the volume, the recency, the substance, and how you respond.

The practical consequence: **your review strategy is now part of your search strategy.** Recency matters more than it used to, which argues for a steady trickle rather than occasional pushes. A business with 200 reviews, none from the last year, looks different to these systems than one with 120 reviews and eight from last month.

Timing

WHEN	WHAT	WHY
Day before checkout	Service recovery call or message	Fix what is fixable while they are still there
2–24 hours after checkout	The review request	They are still in the glow, and the trip is fresh
3 days after, if no review	One reminder, then stop	One nudge is useful. More reads as pressure.

Never ask twice after the reminder. And never offer anything to change or remove a review: Google bans it. Fix the problem, answer publicly, and leave the review where it is.

The book's version of the pre-checkout call happens one hour before departure. We moved it to the day before so there is still time to fix what you hear.

Getting the mechanics right

Your profile has to be complete first. An abandoned Google Business Profile with no hours, no photos, and no description is not a good destination for the traffic these reviews earn you. Fill in categories, service areas, hours, a real description, and current photography.

Use the short review link, not a link to your profile. Every tap costs you completions.

Send it where they will see it. If a direct guest gave you a mobile number and agreed to texts, text it. Email is the fallback.

One link, one ask. Do not bundle the review request with a rebooking offer, a newsletter signup and a social follow. Each additional ask lowers completion on all of them.

The scripts

Written for compliance. The pre-checkout conversation is kept separate from the review request entirely, and that separation is the point.

1. Pre-checkout service recovery *(a call or message the day before departure)*

> "Hi [First name], it's [Your name] from [Company]. Hope the week's been good. I'm checking in before you head off tomorrow — is there anything that hasn't been right, or anything we could have done better?
>
> *[Listen. Fix what can be fixed today. Be specific about what you are doing and when.]*
>
> Thanks for telling me — I'd rather hear it now than not at all. [What you are doing about it, and by when.]"

What this is for: solving problems. Nothing else. You will learn how the stay went, and that information does not change who you ask for a review. The script doesn't mention reviews, deliberately. Google says not to pressure customers to review while they are still on the premises, and keeping the two apart means nothing you hear can change who gets asked. The book's roadmap mentions the review on the call. That works too, as long as every direct guest hears it the same way.

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2. The review request *(2–24 hours after checkout — sent to every direct-booking guest)*

> "Hi [First name], thanks again for staying with us at [property name].
>
> If you have a minute, we'd really appreciate an honest review — it genuinely helps other travelers decide, and it helps us.
>
> [direct review link]
>
> Either way, it was good having you. Come see us again.
>
> [Your name], [Company]"

Note the word "honest." That is not a legal fig leaf, it is the actual instruction, and it is what distinguishes a compliant request from a solicitation. You are asking for their experience, not for a rating.

Nothing in this message is conditional on how the stay went. Every direct-booking guest gets it.

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3. The single reminder *(3 days later, only if no review)*

> "Hi [First name] — just once more in case it got buried. A quick review of your stay at [property name] would mean a lot.
>
> [direct review link]
>
> And if something wasn't right, reply to me directly and I'll sort it out.
>
> [Your name]"

That last line matters: you are offering to fix a problem *and* leaving the public path open. You are not offering to fix it *instead of* a review.

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4. Responding to a positive review

> "Thanks [First name] — glad [specific thing they mentioned] worked out. [One local detail or recommendation for next time.] Come see us again."

Reference something specific from their review. A copy-pasted thank-you across forty reviews is visible to every future reader and does you no favors.

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5. Responding to a critical review — when they are right

> "You're right, and I'm sorry. [What went wrong, stated plainly.] We've since [the specific fix]. That shouldn't have been your experience, and if you're ever back I'd like the chance to do it properly."

Three parts: acknowledge, state the fix, invite them back. Every future guest reading this learns that when something goes wrong here, it gets handled. That is worth more than the star.

Do not argue. Do not explain at length. Do not mention policy.

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6. Responding to a critical review — when they are wrong or unfair

> “Thanks for the feedback, [First name]. Our records show [neutral, factual correction], and the listing does note [the relevant detail]. I’m sorry it didn’t match your expectations. Happy to talk it through directly — [phone or email].”

Correct the record once, factually, without heat, then move the conversation offline. You are writing for the next fifty readers, not for the reviewer. Restraint reads as confidence; a long defensive reply reads as guilt regardless of who was right.

If a review genuinely violates Google’s content policies — it is fake, it posts someone’s personal information without consent, it is about a different business, it contains harassment — report it through your profile. But do not report reviews simply for being negative. That does not work and it wastes your time.

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7. Sharing a review on social

> “This is the kind of note that makes the job worth it. [Screenshot or quote.] Thanks [First name] — the [specific detail] is our favorite part too.”

Ask permission before using a guest’s full name or photo. Quoting a public review is fine; making someone the subject of a marketing post is a courtesy question. End the post with where to book: “Book direct at [site].”

What never happens

- **No incentives.** No discount, gift card, upgrade, or prize draw in exchange for a review.
- **No sentiment filtering.** No survey deciding who receives the link.
- **No offering anything for a removal or revision** of a review.
- **No writing your own reviews**, and none from staff, family, or anyone who did not stay.
- **No buying reviews.** Ever. This is the fastest route to losing your whole corpus.
- **No asking only your favorite guests.** That is gating with extra steps. Limiting the ask to direct bookings is different: it turns on where they booked, not on what they will say.
- **No review quotas for staff, and no bonus that works like one.** Google bans asking staff to collect a set number of reviews, or reviews that mention a particular person.
- **No incentive that depends on the review being positive.** Since October 21, 2024 the FTC's review rule (16 CFR Part 465) also bans that, and bans quietly dropping negative reviews from a page you present as your reviews. Google's incentive ban is broader; follow Google's.

PART 3

Worked example

One example, all the way through.

Ridgeline Cabin Co. — fictional company, 40 mountain cabins, the running example across these bonuses.

What they were doing

An automated post-stay survey asking guests to rate the stay 1–5. Fours and fives received a follow-up with the Google link. Ones through threes received a message from the owner asking how they could make it right, and no link.

It felt responsible. Their rating was 4.9 across 61 reviews. Every review collection tool they had looked at offered this as a feature.

It was review gating, and their entire review corpus was collected through a non-compliant channel.

What they changed

BEFORE	AFTER
Survey determines who gets the link	Every direct-booking guest gets the link, no survey involved
Off-Airbnb survey sent to Airbnb guests	Removed. Airbnb guests review on Airbnb.
Service recovery only for low scorers	Pre-checkout check-in for **every** stay, day before departure (in the Airbnb thread for Airbnb guests)
Review request mentions "if you enjoyed your stay"	Request asks for an "honest review"
Email only	Text first, email fallback
Link to profile page	Direct review link
Two follow-up nudges	One reminder at day 3, then stop

What happened to the rating

It fell — from 4.9 to 4.7 over the following six months, because critical reviews now reached Google instead of being diverted.

Over the same period their review count went from 61 to 178, because they were asking every direct guest instead of only the roughly two-thirds who scored highly.

4.7 from 178 is a stronger asset than 4.9 from 61, for three reasons: it clears the book's 50+ benchmark comfortably, the sample is large enough that guests trust it, and it is a compliant corpus that cannot be removed. They also found that the eleven critical reviews with thoughtful responses underneath them were doing real persuasive work — several guests mentioned them at booking.

The pre-checkout call turned out to be the highest-value change on the list, and not for review reasons. They caught and fixed problems on roughly one stay in seven that they had previously only heard about afterwards, if at all.

One response they are proud of

Guest, 2 stars: "Wifi was down our whole stay and nobody warned us. We both work remotely and lost two days."

Response: "You're right, and I'm sorry — the outage was on our end and we knew about it before you arrived. We should have called you. We've since added a backup connection at that cabin and a rule that any outage gets a call before check-in, not after. That was a real cost to your week and I understand why you're frustrated. If you're ever back, reach out to me directly."

That two-star review now does real work, because remote workers reading it learn exactly how this company behaves when something breaks.

PART 4

Your turn

Your worksheet. Print it and fill it in.

Compliance audit

Answer honestly. Any “yes” in the first four rows needs fixing this week.

CHECK	YES / NO
Does a guest’s expected rating decide whether they get a request?	
Do only some direct-booking guests receive a review request?	
Do we offer anything at all in exchange for a review?	
Have we ever asked a guest to remove or change a review?	
Does every direct-booking guest get the same request, same link, same timing?	
Are Airbnb guests (booked from Nov 20, 2026) kept out of the Google request and any off-Airbnb survey?	
Do we respond to critical reviews as well as positive ones?	

Your setup

Direct review link: _____

Google Business Profile complete? ☐ categories ☐ hours ☐ description ☐ current photos ☐ service area

Current review count: _____ **Current rating:** _____

Reviews in the last 90 days: _____ *(recency is now part of the picture)*

Your system

STEP	WHEN	CHANNEL	AUTOMATED?	OWNER
Pre-checkout service recovery	Day before departure			
Review request	2–24h after checkout			
Single reminder	Day 3, if no review			
Response to new reviews	Within 48h			

Your scripts, in your voice

Pre-checkout check-in:

Review request:

Response — they are right:

Response — they are wrong:

Targets

Reviews now: _____ → **90-day target:** _____ → **12-month target:** _____

The book's Middleweight benchmark is 50+. If you are below it, consistency of the ask is almost certainly the gap.

PART 5

How you'll know it worked

What to check, and when.

Within two weeks — the system either fires on every direct-booked stay or it does not. Take three recent checkouts and trace them: did the pre-checkout contact happen, did the request send, did the reminder send? If any step depends on someone remembering, it is not a system yet.

Within 90 days — review *volume*, and the share of stays that produce a review. That rate is the number to manage, because it is the one you control. Rating is an output; ask-rate is an input.

Expect your rating to dip if you were gating. That is not the system failing, it is the previous number having been filtered. Judge the trend from the new baseline, not against the old figure.

Within six months — volume, recency, and whether critical reviews have good responses beneath them. Also watch branded search and direct traffic: a strong, current review corpus tends to lift both, and it is now part of what AI tools read when recommending companies in your market.

The signal that matters most and gets watched least: how many direct stays produce a review, month over month. Track it from the day you start, and a broken ask shows up as a falling ratio long before it shows up in your rating.

What genuine failure looks like: consistent asking, and still almost no reviews. That usually means the link is broken, the message is going to a channel guests do not read, or you are asking too late. Trace one guest end to end before changing the copy.

PART 6

Where this lives in the book

Where to read more in the book.

Sections: *The 5-star guest review roadmap* (Lightweight) — the call, the ask and the text this document scripts, and the page in the book that sends you here. *Boost your bookings with higher-level Search Marketing tactics* (Middleweight) — the 50+ review benchmark. *Google Review Check-in* (Heavyweight) — auditing against the book's 4.75-star target.

Read the AI Search chapter — *The Ground Moved Under You* — alongside this one. Reviews and user-generated content are among the sources conversational AI tools cite for travel questions, which means your review program is no longer just reputation work. The **AI Search & GEO** bonus covers the rest of that picture.

If you are rebuilding your guest communication flow to accommodate this, the **Guest Guidebook** bonus covers where the review ask sits relative to everything else you send a guest.

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Want help putting this to work?

We've worked with more than 300 vacation rental companies on direct bookings, homeowner acquisition, SEO, paid media and AI search. If you'd rather not do this alone, book a free call at **buildupbookings.com**.

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