



Yelp Trust & Safety Report 2021

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Prioritizing Content Quality in 2021

Introduction

Yelp's mission is to connect people with great local businesses. Providing consumers with reliable and useful information to help inform their spending decisions is critical to that mission, which is why we take industry-leading measures to maintain the integrity and quality of content on our platform.

In this report, we outline the extensive [content moderation](#) practices Yelp implemented to protect the community in 2021. Yelp content moderators rapidly responded to and mitigated numerous "review bombing" attempts on business pages related to people's reactions on everything from COVID-19 health precautions, to alleged incidents of racism and discrimination, and the Capitol insurrection.

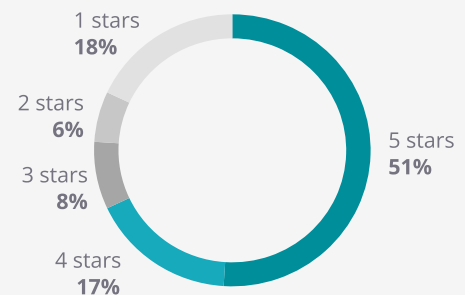
As pandemic-related health and safety protocols continued to shift throughout 2021, Yelp removed more than **15,500** reviews for violating our [COVID-19 content guidelines](#)[‡], which protect businesses from reputational harm due to pandemic-related circumstances beyond their control, such as criticisms of mask requirements. After introducing these guidelines in late March 2020, we've seen a **161%** increase in the removal of these reviews comparing only April through December, year-over-year.

We believe reviewers have a First Amendment right to honestly share their experiences, so when we receive legal demands for personal information about our users, we do not simply turn over the requested information. In 2021, we resolved legal demands** relating to more than **1,350** user accounts, and ultimately disclosed users' personal account information in response to less than **17%** of the demands. We avoided sharing personal information for **97%** of user accounts that were the subject of legal demands in 2021[‡].

244M+
reviews contributed
to the Yelp platform as of December 31, 2021 since our inception in 2004*§

Star Rating Distribution

since Yelp's inception, as of December 31, 2021*

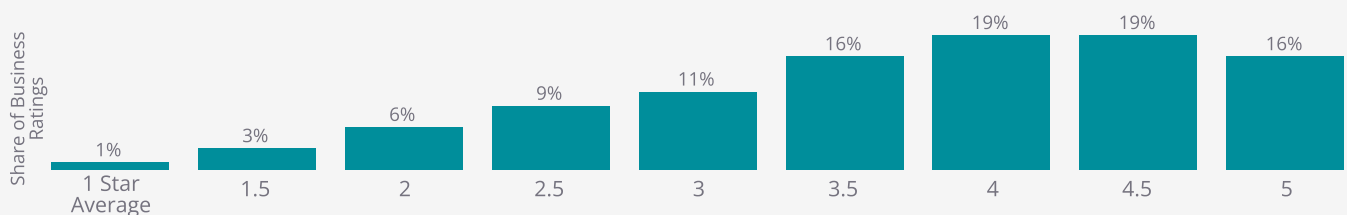


According to a [survey conducted by Kelton](#), a Material Company, **59%** of respondents who read reviews believe that a rating without review text should not be considered a review at all, yet, platforms like Google incorporate large numbers of ratings with no text into a business's overall review count.

A star rating without review text is less reliable and useful to consumers, which is why Yelp has always required ratings to be accompanied by actual reviews. In fact, in 2021 the average length of reviews contributed to Yelp was more than **500** characters.

Distribution of Average Business Ratings

as of December 31, 2021 for U.S. businesses across all categories on Yelp with five or more reviews[‡]. Yelp only uses recommended reviews to calculate the average rating of a business.



On the Yelp platform, the distribution of average star ratings for businesses tends to have a [normal distribution](#), meaning it's similar to what the typical consumer experiences with businesses in the real world. Not every experience is 5 stars or 1 star — most are in between.

* Data is sourced globally.

‡ Data is sourced from the U.S. only.

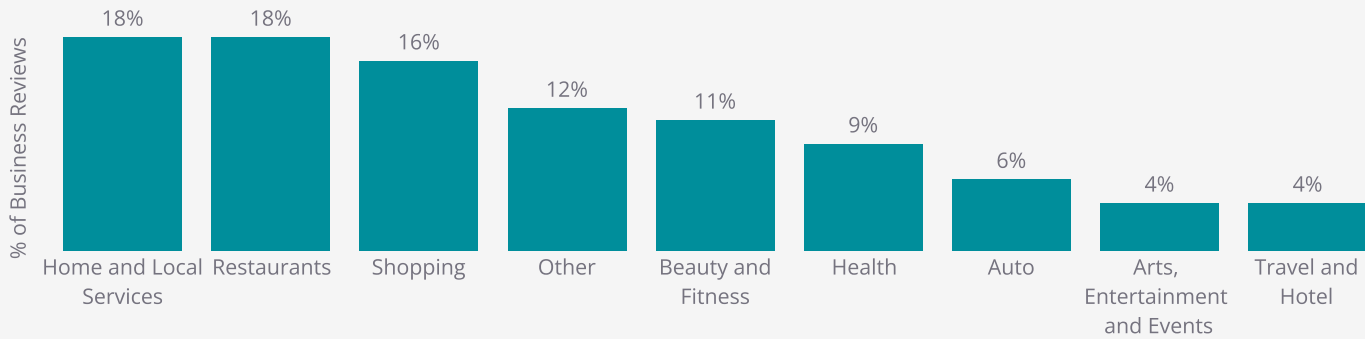
** Legal demands include subpoenas, warrants, and other legal requests from law enforcement, government entities, and private parties in litigation.

§ This includes reviews that are currently recommended, not recommended, or that have been removed.



Share of Business Reviews by Category

since Yelp's inception in 2004, for operating businesses as of December 31, 2021^{*§}



How Yelp Maintains Content Integrity

At Yelp, we invest in both technology and human moderation to address and mitigate misinformation on our platform. The measures we have in place help us maintain the integrity and quality of the content on our site, while leveling the playing field for business owners. In fact, [studies](#), [industry experts](#), [the media](#), and [regulators](#) have shown that Yelp is one of the most aggressive and successful at identifying and weeding out unreliable reviews.

1 We use automated software systems as our first line of defense. We've developed Trust and Safety software systems that analyze hundreds of signals — from reviews, businesses, and reviewers — in an effort to recommend the most reliable and useful reviews contributed to our platform. Our automated [recommendation software](#) detects and does not recommend less reliable activity, enabling us to mitigate misinformation at scale. Another proprietary automated system alerts us of unusual spikes in user activity on a business's Yelp page that might be driven by a recent public event or media story.

2 We empower our community to serve as an additional layer of oversight. We provide easy ways for our community of users and business owners to flag content that they believe violates our guidelines, respond to reviews and suggest updates to business information.

3 Our teams of human moderators investigate content and platform activity. When content is reported to be in violation of our policies, our team manually investigates each complaint and takes appropriate action in response. We also publish [Consumer Alerts](#) on business pages to warn consumers when we detect abnormal activity or learn about egregious attempts to manipulate ratings and reviews. To help us proactively moderate content, we have systems in place to help signal if something is amiss on the Yelp platform and we also conduct regular investigations to stop attempts at fraudulent activity.

4 We encourage authentic content from the start of the user experience. For example, we encourage users to complete public profiles to share information about themselves, and have developed the [Yelp Elite Squad](#) to provide recognition to users who are active in the Yelp community and consistently contribute high quality content. Yelp has always been a community-driven review platform — not a place for one-off rants.

"Yelp's strength is definitely that they combat fake reviews (and filter them) better than any other platform, in my experience."
— Joy Hawkins, owner of Local Search Forum, Local U and Sterling Sky, for [Search Engine Land](#), 2021

^{*} Data is sourced globally.

[§] This includes reviews that are currently recommended, not recommended, or that have been removed.



Prioritizing Trust & Safety: 2021 by the Numbers

All metrics calculated between January 1, 2021 through December 31, 2021 unless otherwise noted

Yelp's Automated Recommendation Software

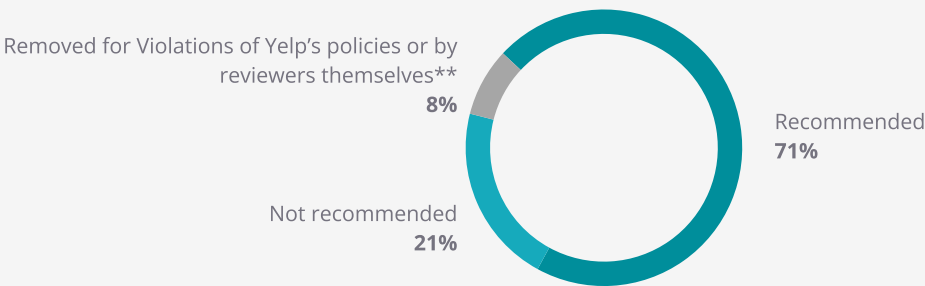
Serving as our first line of defense, Yelp's automated recommendation software enables us to mitigate misinformation at scale on our platform. We engineered the recommendation software in an effort to provide consumers with the most helpful and reliable reviews, and level the playing field for all businesses. The software analyzes billions of data points from all reviews, reviewers and businesses to evaluate the usefulness and reliability of each review.

The software applies uniform criteria in determining which reviews to recommend, and filters out reviews it suspects may be solicited or unfairly biased, as well as reviews written by users we just don't know enough about. We take extensive measures to protect the integrity of the content on Yelp, to provide consumers with the most reliable information we have and to protect hardworking businesses who rightfully earn their great reputation on Yelp from those who might try to "game the system." As a result, we currently [only recommend about 70% of the reviews](#) that have been submitted. Learn more [here](#).

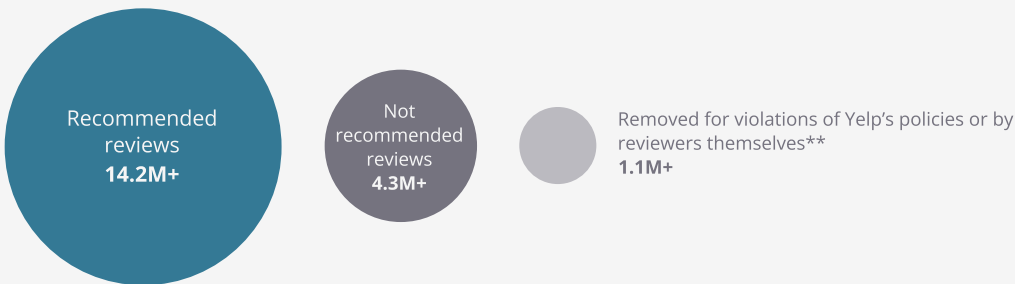
19.6M+
reviews
were contributed to Yelp in 2021†

Recommended Review Distribution

All reviews since Yelp's inception, as of December 31, 2021*



Breakdown of Contributed Reviews in 2021†



* Data is sourced globally and reflects all reviews since Yelp's inception.

** Yelp users can remove their own reviews on the platform, either individually or by closing their accounts.

† Data is sourced globally and reflects reviews from Jan. 1, 2021–Dec. 31, 2021.



Content Moderation at Yelp

Yelp's User Operations team is on the frontlines of protecting data quality, investigating potential fraud, and moderating content. They continuously identify, investigate, and stop deceptive activity through a variety of techniques, including removing bad actors from the Yelp platform.

Reasons for Review Removal on Yelp

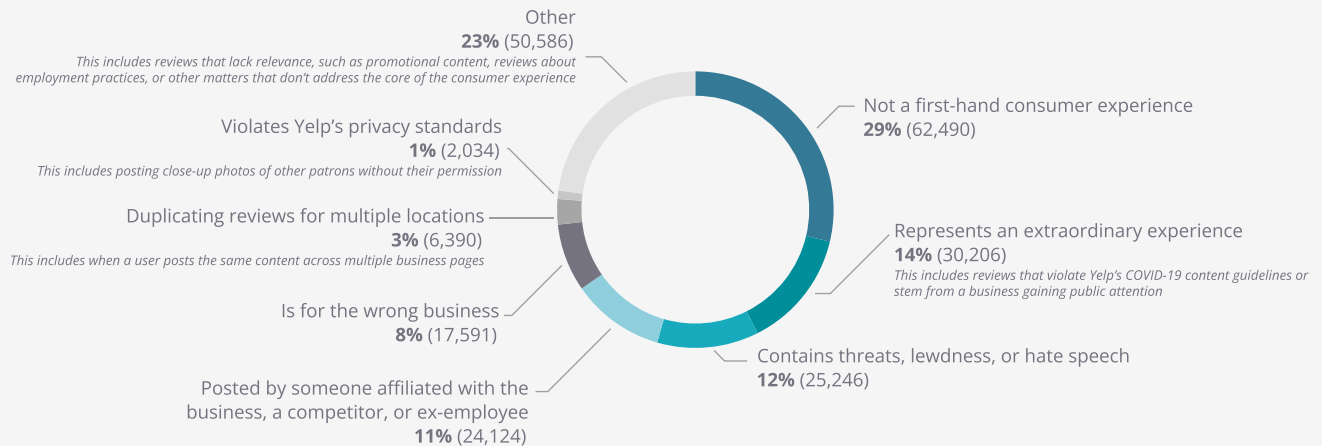
We rely on consumers and business owners to report reviews that they believe violate our [Terms of Service](#) and [Content Guidelines](#). Our User Operations team investigates all flagged content, and if it's found to be in violation of our policies, may remove it from the site.

218,600+
reported reviews
removed

by Yelp's User Operations team in
2021[‡]

Distribution of Reported Reviews Removed by Reason in 2021[‡]

218.6K+ reviews that were reported by users were removed by Yelp's moderators



Removing Potentially Harmful Content From Yelp

- **2,700+ business pages removed** from Yelp for violating our policies, all of which were associated with lead generators[†]. Up **88%** from 2020.
 - **"Lead generators"** create fake business pages and take the leads generated and auction them to others, including unlicensed contractors, who may then trick consumers into paying exorbitant amounts for their services. We occasionally see this deceptive behavior in business categories like HVAC and electricians, where consumers may be most vulnerable because they must allow entry into their home.
- **1,000+ reports made by Yelp to other online platforms** to warn them of content from nearly **950** suspicious groups, posts or individuals we found on their sites*. We regularly monitor content on social media or marketplace sites that offer to sell Yelp reviews or buy Yelp reviews from users — activities that violate our policies. The number of reports we issued in 2021 was up **374%** from 2020.
 - We coordinate **fraud investigations** to monitor online groups that may be trading or paying for reviews, practices that unfairly mislead consumers and hurt businesses both on and off our platform. We regularly reach out to other platforms when we detect suspicious behavior originating from their communities.

25,200+
reviews removed

for threats, lewdness, hate speech, or
other potentially harmful content in
2021[‡]

85,400+
user accounts closed

due to potentially fraudulent or
abusive behavior*

* Data is sourced globally.

† Data is sourced from the U.S. and Canada.

‡ Data is sourced from the U.S. only.

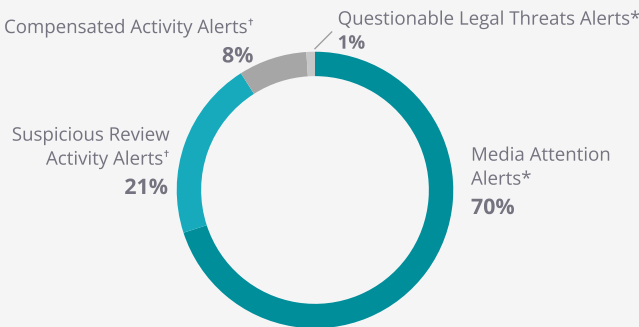


Consumer Alerts

Yelp’s Consumer Alerts program helps fight the spread of misinformation on Yelp. A Consumer Alert is a pop up disclosure that is placed on a business page to warn users when we’ve detected abnormal activity or attempts to mislead them. We always conduct a thorough investigation and will provide the evidence that supports the Consumer Alert whenever possible. Learn more about Yelp’s Consumer Alerts program [here](#).

Distribution of Consumer Alerts on Yelp

between January 1, 2021 and December 31, 2021



Incidents We Alerted Consumers About

Media Attention Alerts

When a business gains public attention, consumers often come to Yelp to express their views on the news through reviews — also known as “review bombing.” However, for Yelp to remain a useful resource to the community, reviews must be based on genuine, first-hand experiences. These reviews can artificially inflate or deflate a business’s star rating, misleading consumers and hurting businesses, so we may temporarily disable the ability to post reviews (even if we might agree with the points of view expressed). As activity on the page decreases or stops, our moderators will remove the alert and clean up the page.

To help us better catch review bombing incidents, in 2020, we implemented a new system that automatically signals to our content moderators if a business page is seeing an unusual increase in activity. This has helped reduce the number of reviews we removed for violating our content policies by **34%** because we’re able to identify these incidents earlier and take steps to prevent misuse in the first place*.

70,200+
reviews removed

associated with all review bombing activity*, down **34%*** from 2020 due to a new system that automatically flags this behavior to our content moderators faster

Unusual Activity Alerts

We place these alerts when a business, after gaining public attention, receives an influx of Yelp reviews that do not reflect first-hand experiences.

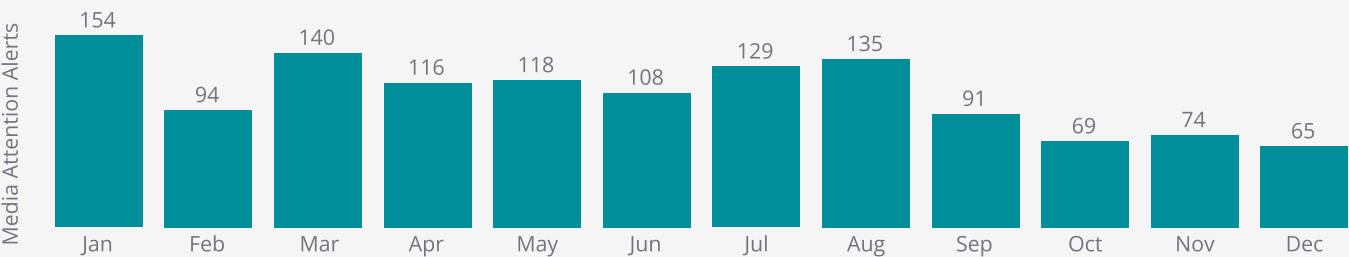
- **940+ Unusual Activity Alerts** placed on business pages in 2021*, up **10%** from 2020
- **46,900+ reviews removed** that were associated with Unusual Activity Alerts*

Public Attention Alerts

We place these alerts to inform consumers when a business receives an influx of Yelp reviews related to the business gaining public attention for either being accused of, or the target of, racist behavior.

- **350 Public Attention Alerts** placed on business pages in 2021*
- **23,300+ reviews removed** that were associated with Public Attention Alerts*

Distribution of All Media Attention Alerts by Month in 2021*



* Data is sourced from the U.S. only.

† Data is sourced globally.



Notable Media Attention Alert Moments in 2021

Throughout 2021, businesses had to quickly adapt to new safety measures as pandemic guidelines evolved — to protect both their customers and employees. Some businesses had an Unusual Activity Alert placed on their Yelp page after choosing to ignore mask mandates, such as [Apple Bistro](#) in Placerville, CA. Yelp also placed these alerts on other businesses that were on the receiving end of backlash when they implemented vaccine requirements for customers, including [Bar Max](#) in Denver, and [Mother's Ruin](#) in New York City.

After the [violent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol](#) in January 2021, people left reviews on Yelp to share their views on the situation as insurrectionists were identified and alleged to be business owners or have associations with businesses on Yelp. Yelp's moderators removed reviews that focused on the events that occurred at the U.S. Capitol as opposed to first-hand consumer experiences with the business.

Some business owners also found themselves at the center of racially-charged incidents and accusations. In May 2021, [Graffiti Pizza](#), a restaurant in Oakland, CA, faced criticism from [people questioning the business's claim of being Black-owned](#) after placing a Black-owned sign on their storefront. The business owner is biracial and the influx of reviews led to Yelp placing a Public Attention Alert to protect Graffiti Pizza's Yelp page from additional reviews that weren't first-hand and relevant to the core consumer experience.

210+ businesses

received an Unusual Activity Alert in 2021, resulting in the removal of more than **8,900** reviews*, for review incidents related to the pandemic

80+ businesses

received an Unusual Activity Alert in 2021, resulting in the removal of more than **2,800** reviews*, for review incidents related to the Capitol Insurrection

420+ businesses

received an Unusual Activity Alert or Public Attention Alert in 2021, resulting in the removal of more than **29,300** reviews*, for review incidents related to alleged discrimination (including racism, anti-Semitism, anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment, ableism, etc.)

Celebrity Reach

Incidents involving celebrities can be a major catalyst for media-fueled reviews on Yelp business pages.

After visiting [The Bigg Chill Frozen Yogurt](#) in Los Angeles, singer [Demi Lovato slammed the business](#) over their sugar-free options. People rushed to the business's Yelp page to leave five-star reviews in defense of the dessert shop.

Even businesses that have been closed for years can be affected. In May 2021, at the height of the Free Britney movement, we placed an Unusual Activity Alert for the defunct [FAO Cafe](#) after users condemned the business for its alleged [participation](#) in the media harassment of Britney Spears in 2006.

After being eliminated from the 18th season of The Bachelorette, contestant [Peter Izzo](#) faced a wide spectrum of reviews from viewers on the Yelp page of his restaurant, [Peter's Pizzeria](#), based in Port St. Joe, FL.

The TikTok Effect

In recent years, TikTok videos and trends have quickly become a source for review bombing on Yelp. In 2020, a [Buffalo Wild Wings](#) in San Jose [first fell victim to a YouTube prank](#), which resurfaced on TikTok at different times in 2021. As a result, Yelp has repeatedly placed Unusual Activity Alerts on the business's page (in February, April and October) and removed nearly **150** reviews for not describing first-hand consumer experiences*.

90+ Media Attention Alerts stemmed from TikTok* in 2021

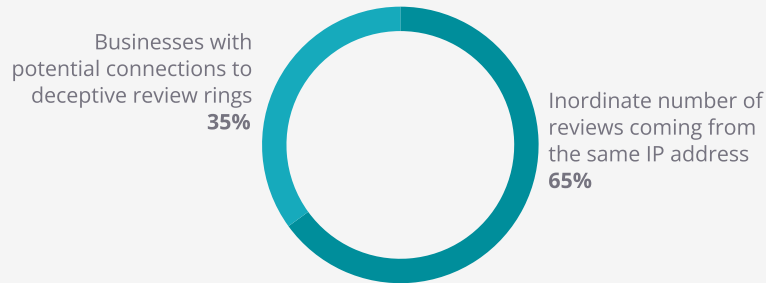
* Data is sourced from the U.S. only.



Suspicious Review Activity Alerts

When our system detects questionable activity on a business page, we conduct a thorough investigation of the incident and, if warranted, display a Suspicious Review Activity Alert. This activity can include large numbers of reviews coming from a single IP address, or reviews from users who may be connected to a group that coordinates fake or otherwise deceptive reviews. In 2021, these tactics were more often seen in Home and Local Services, Restaurants and Shopping categories.

Suspicious Review Activity Alerts, 2021*



397
Suspicious Review Activity Alerts

placed on business pages in 2021*

760+
user accounts closed
for being associated with review rings in 2021*

Compensated Activity Alerts

When we have evidence that someone has offered cash or other incentives in connection with a review, we may display a Compensated Activity Alert on the page. Offering or receiving compensation in connection with reviews artificially inflates ratings and misleads consumers. Not only is this deceptive conduct unhelpful for people trying to find reliable information about businesses, but it is also unfair to honest businesses that work hard to earn their ratings and reviews. In 2021, these tactics were more often seen in Home and Local Services, Real Estate, Shopping and Restaurants categories.

According to a [survey conducted by Kelton](#), 7 in 10 respondents who write reviews would still write a review if the business offered them a discount, gift or other incentive. This demonstrates that there's still more work to do on educating consumers about the harm caused by deceptive testimonials.

143
Compensated Activity Alerts
placed on business pages in 2021*

* Data is sourced globally.



Questionable Legal Threats Alerts

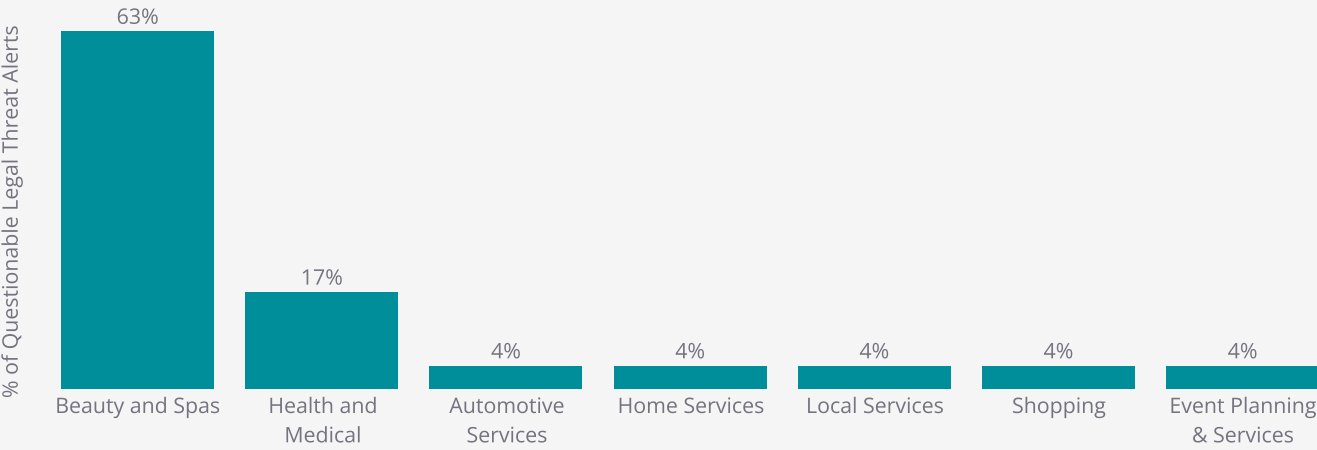
When we have evidence that a business may be abusing the legal system to intimidate or silence a reviewer, we may display a Questionable Legal Threats Alert. For example, we provide evidence when a business makes baseless threats to file a defamation lawsuit over a critical review, or uses contracts to keep people from publishing feedback online about their consumer experiences.

Our 2021 data shows a majority of our Questionable Legal Threat Alerts stemmed from beauty and health categories — businesses consumers often turn to when making critical life decisions or that can otherwise be sensitive in nature. Reviewers have a First Amendment right to honestly describe their experiences with local businesses, and we believe consumers should know when a business tries to deny them that right.

24 Questionable Legal Threat Alerts

placed on business pages in 2021†

Most Common Business Categories on Yelp that Received Questionable Legal Threat Alerts, 2021†



Deep Dive: Manipulating Online Reputation by Silencing Critical Reviews

In 2019, Yelp learned that the medical practice of Dr. Leonard Hochstein, a Miami plastic surgeon, had sued [multiple clients](#) over their critical reviews. After investigating this claim and receiving evidence of a gag clause used in the practice’s patient contracts, Yelp placed a Questionable Legal Threats Alert on the business’s Yelp page. This alert warned consumers that the business may be attempting to abuse the legal system in order to stifle free speech.

You can learn more in this recent [Mashable story](#) from 2021.

† Data is sourced from the U.S. only.



Responding to Legal Demands for Consumers' Information

We believe reviewers who share their opinions, whether positive or negative, have a First Amendment right to do so. Because legal demands can be used to silence consumers, we look out for our users by often objecting to legal proceedings that seek personal information about user accounts. We resolved **91** legal demands we received in 2021 from law enforcement, government agencies and private parties to produce personal user account data*.

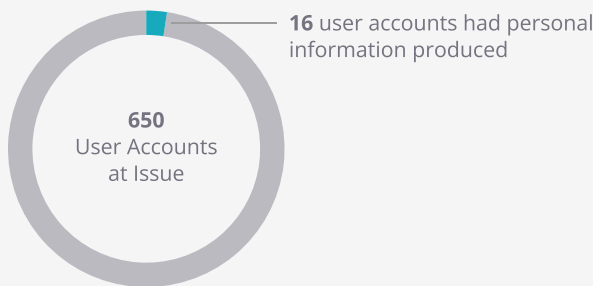
First, we make sure that we have received a valid subpoena, warrant, or other legal demand — [there have been instances](#) where we've received fabricated court documents. We then analyze each individual request within that demand to determine whether it is legitimate and legally sound. Occasionally, we will even [go to court](#) to protect users' personal information from litigious business owners. In circumstances where Yelp may be required by law to disclose user account information, we notify users of the legal demands beforehand, unless Yelp is prohibited by law or in exceptional circumstances.

For more information, we detail our rigorous approach to requests for user information and our efforts to protect our users' personal data in our blog post [here](#).

- **About 84% of resolved legal demands resulted in no production of personal user account information** by Yelp, which kept personal information associated with **1,350+** user accounts from law enforcement, government agencies and private parties*. This represents **97%** of the user accounts that were the subject of legal demands in 2021.
- **Yelp successfully resisted 77% of civil legal demands for personal user account information** from private parties, avoiding disclosure of non-public user account information to business owners and others*

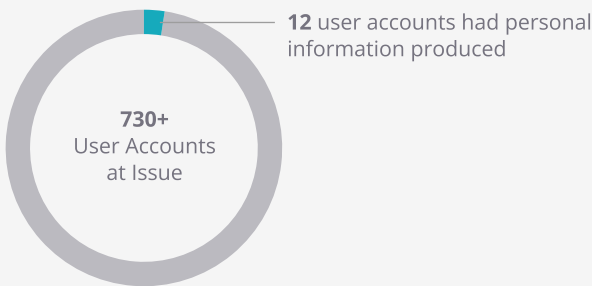
Yelp Resolved 38 Legal Demands

from law enforcement and government agencies in 2021*



Yelp Resolved 53 Legal Demands

from private parties in 2021*



Deep Dive: A Doctor Using His Resources to Silence Consumers

In 2021, a plastic surgeon leveraged the legal system in an attempt to obtain information about Yelp reviewers critical of his practice. This doctor also has a history of taking [legal action against reviewers](#). In August 2021, after Yelp opposed his subpoena, a federal court in New York rejected the attempt of the plastic surgeon. A few months later in October 2021, the doctor was [disciplined by the New Jersey State Board of Medical Examiners](#) and had his medical license temporarily suspended for subjecting patients to "medically inappropriate procedures," according to Acting Attorney General Andrew J. Bruck, including activities that were complained about in the previously targeted Yelp reviews.

"I understand that it sucks to get negative reviews online. And, that not all online reviews are truthful. But that does not mean you get to automatically uncloak anonymous critics, nor does it mean you get to sue them for defamation ...kudos to Yelp for fighting for the rights of its reviewers, rather than just rolling over and handing out the info like lots of sites might do."

— [TechDirt](#), 2021

* Data is sourced from the U.S. only.



Protecting Businesses and Maintaining our Content Standards

Human Moderation

At Yelp, our User Operations team is dedicated to protecting the integrity of the content our community posts on the platform. When a community member, business owner, or our automated systems alert our team about a potential issue, a human moderator reviews the case.

258,400+
reported contributions removed**

by Yelp's User Operations team in 2021 for violating our policies†

Reviews Reported on Yelp, 2021†

41% of reported reviews were removed for violating Yelp's content policies



1.7M+
additional contributions§ removed to further mitigate spam and abuse

by Yelp's User Operations team in 2021†. Further analysis of content reported by our users led to the discovery of additional spam or abuse.

Yelp's COVID-19 Content Guidelines

In March 2020, we implemented [special COVID-19 content guidelines](#) to protect local businesses from reputational harm related to extraordinary circumstances that are outside of their control.

15,500+
reviews removed

by Yelp's User Operations team for violating our COVID-19 content guidelines in 2021†. Up **161%** from 2020 (comparing data from April 1 through December 31 year-over-year).

New Systems to Identify Inappropriate Photos on Yelp

Malicious actors are constantly finding new ways to circumvent platforms' policies and game their systems. During the start of the pandemic in 2020, with a rise in travel cancellations, we noticed an increase of images being uploaded with text to promote fake customer support numbers and other spam in apparent efforts to defraud consumers.

"...Yelp's new system augments, not replaces, its team of human moderators. The goal is to prioritize the items that moderation teams — who have the power to restore falsely flagged content — review rather than take down spam proactively."

— [VentureBeat](#), 2021

To quickly mitigate this issue and automate a solution at scale, [Yelp engineers built a custom, proprietary system](#) using machine learning algorithms to analyze hundreds of thousands of photo uploads per day — helping better detect inappropriate and fraudulent photos that attempt to scam consumers.

† Data is sourced globally.

‡ Data is sourced from the U.S. only.

** Reported contributions removed include reviews, photos, tips, community Q&As, Connect posts, events, business comments, direct messages, messages to a business, and user profiles.

§ Other contributions removed include reviews, photos, tips, user votes on reviews, compliments, and community Q&As.



Proactive Moderation for Businesses on Yelp

Identity Attributes

Since the summer of 2020, we've introduced four new identity attributes to make it even easier for consumers to find and support [Asian](#), [Black](#), [Latinx](#), and [LGBTQ-owned](#) businesses. When a business owner adds these identity attributes to their Yelp page, we have measures in place to proactively protect them from hateful, racist or other potentially harmful content that violates our policies.

200+
reviews proactively
removed

from business pages with an identity attribute(s) for containing potentially harmful content in 2021[‡]

Reviews Proactively Removed for Hateful, Racist or Other Potentially Harmful Content[‡]

as of December 31, 2021



Vaccination Attributes

In August 2021, we [introduced two searchable attributes](#) — “Proof of vaccination required” and “All staff fully vaccinated” — to help consumers understand businesses’ vaccination policies as pandemic guidelines continued to evolve.

To help protect businesses that add these vaccination attributes on their Yelp page from experiencing backlash, we proactively monitor and put protective measures in place to safeguard businesses from reviews that primarily criticize their COVID-19 health and safety measures.

103,500+
business pages

show “Proof of vaccination required” and/or “All staff fully vaccinated” on their Yelp page as of December 31, 2021[‡]

150
reviews proactively
removed

from business pages with a vaccination policy attribute for criticizing the business’s vaccine policies in 2021[‡]

[‡] Data is sourced from the U.S. only.



Conclusion

In today's world, online reviews are everywhere, but it's important that consumers have access to review platforms that go the extra mile to provide reliable and trustworthy information. In fact, according to a [survey conducted by Kelton*](#), a Material Company, 3 in 4 respondents say they are reading more online reviews now than they ever have in the past. Additionally, 70% of respondents who read online reviews say it's rare for them to go to a business they're not familiar with without reading the online reviews first.

Millions of people come to Yelp every day because they trust that the reviews and ratings are generally good predictors of their own experiences with local businesses. This is why we take significant measures to maintain the integrity and quality of the content on our site and level the playing field for business owners who rightfully earn their great reputation on Yelp. It's also why we've spent over a decade developing technology and policies to surface and cultivate useful and reliable content on our platform.

* Sample: This survey was fielded among 1,500 people aged 18+ in the United States. The survey was conducted online during the period of October 13–20, 2021 and has a margin of error of +/- 2.5%.

Methodology: Results of any sample are subject to sampling variation. The magnitude of the variation is measurable and is affected by the number of interviews and the level of the percentages expressing the results



Trust & Safety Report 2021

For media inquiries, email press@yelp.com.