

## Reviews Featuring Social and Environmental Initiatives Score Higher

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A few months back I [reported on a study](#) that showed how online reviews of top eco-hotels on TripAdvisor contained keys to how properties can better communicate sustainability initiatives. Another study recently came out showing a correlation between customers who mention social or environmental initiatives in online reviews and how they rate hotels.<sup>1</sup> If you are in a business that lives and dies by word of mouth and online ratings, this is worth paying attention to.

### Bonus points for sustainability

Comparing reviews that mention sustainability (implicitly or explicitly) to those that do not, the researchers found:

- The average review with *no* mention of sustainability was 4.17
- The average review with *implicit* mention of sustainability was 4.32
- The average review with *explicit* mention of sustainability was 4.75

That's more than half a point gain for making sustainability noticeable and appealing to customers!

Wondering which initiatives get noticed? The researchers reported

- 66.3% of explicit and 20.4% of implicit mentions of *sustainable management* (reflected in comments like "this is an eco-friendly hotel")
- 41.4% of explicit and 28.6% of implicit mentions of *education*
- 39.6% of explicit and 58.4% of implicit mentions of *biodiversity* and 22.5% explicit mentions of *wildlife conservation* (the study focused on hotels in Costa Rica – the same study in an urban business center would likely yield different results here)
- 38.5% explicit mentions of *sustainable products*

### Room to Grow

While these results are promising and do support the business case to pursue sustainability initiatives, the number of reviews that factor in socially or environmentally responsible practices might be considered low. The implicit mention occurred in 31.7% of reviews and the explicit in 6.8% of reviews.

It's worth noting that all the hotels in the study had a sustainability certification. The researchers explored the relationship between the level of certification and the number of reviews mentioning sustainability and the overall rating. Many green certifications have levels, such as 1 through 5, or bronze, silver, gold, and platinum.

We can glean more insight on the difference certification makes when we break down that explicit percentage (6.8%). Level 1 received 2.1% and Level 3 received 1.7%, but Level 5 received 18.6%. Properties with higher and more broadly integrated levels of sustainability are more likely to leave an impression on the guests with

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<sup>1</sup> Brazytė, et al. Sustainability Management of Hotels: How Do Customers Respond in Online Reviews? *JOURNAL OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HOSPITALITY & TOURISM* 2017, VOL. 18, NO. 3, 282–307 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1528008X.2016.1230033>

these efforts. Hotels with lower levels of certification will have fewer qualifying initiatives and their efforts may not be as obvious or authentic in the guests' eyes.

Keep in mind that certification is but one method of demonstrating evidence of sustainability. An official recognition is not required for integrated sustainability. Guests will see for themselves when a property's leadership is truly committed to social and environmental stewardship. Indeed, the guest may not even recognize the certification logo, but they will know authentic sustainability when they see it.

### **The business case**

If you look at the results from this study, you can see a business case for investing in sustainability certification. It's not that the certification in and of itself drives positive word of mouth reviews (although it might – let me know if you're aware of such a study); however, it is the process and intention that comes with certification that yields benefits. By achieving a higher-level certification, you inevitably implement sustainability throughout your organization and operations. With some creative and clever marketing added in, customers are sure to notice and spread the word.