



“Why You Should Be Wary of Online Reviews”

André Larabie

Shopping on the Internet has become a viable, low-cost alternative to shopping locally. One advantage of cyber shopping is that you can do it from home, and it is much easier to compare products when you can type the name in the computer and get a screen of prices in response. Many websites are tailored to do exactly this: take a product name and return a list of vendors that offer it for sale, sorted in various ways, including lowest price first. Many sites also provide product reviews for a product, so you can read what others have to say about the product.

These reviews come in two forms:

- Made by verified purchasers, and
- Made by anyone who claims to know something about your product.

There is a caveat here. Some product reviews are “planted” by the manufacturer of a product, or by companies hired by the manufacturer. Online businesses have sprung up that offer the service of surfing around on the Internet and inserting positive product reviews. For example, suppose that you manufacture and sell a particular hearing amplification device. You sell several hundred thousand per year. If you want, you can just let the consumers judge your product and enter their own reviews into the many product review sites on the Internet. If you receive good reviews, then excellent, your sales will go up because people will read them and see that you have a good product.

But one day, you are surfing around, reading the reviews of your product and you discover that there are many bad reviews of your product; in



fact, many are outright lies about your product. After doing some research, you determine that just as there are Internet companies that you can hire to enter positive reviews for your product, there are also companies (often the same ones) that you can hire to enter negative reviews about your competitors, and you suspect that this is what has occurred in the case of the bad reviews of your product.

How can they do this? Isn't this type of thing illegal?

Actually, no. Many just consider it a new (and rapidly evolving) form of advertising. So in order to stay competitive, you decide to hire a company that will place positive reviews about your own product and negative reviews about your competitor's product in strategic places throughout the Internet.

I am not saying that all reviews are bogus; rather, I am just trying to illustrate one of the pitfalls of shopping on the Internet. Yes, you can find tremendous deals, but it is a different way to shop. I tell you this story so that you will read these reviews with caution. Sometimes you can find the email address of a product reviewer and you can send them an email with questions about the product.

An advantage of Internet shopping is that you can easily buy products from vendors that would normally be inaccessible. Some vendors have highly unique products and before the Internet was available, you could not easily browse through their inventory. Some of them did print and mail catalogs, but shopping on the Internet is much more interactive and far cheaper than shopping via bulky printed catalogs. Some websites allow you view a 3-D rendered product from all sides and even zoom in for a detailed view.