

Bogus web review blitz

Community-based hotel review websites are taking measures to weed out dishonest reviews

The Internet gives consumers the power to research hotels and destinations on their own for trip planning purposes, but some of the community-oriented websites, from TripAdvisor to IgoUgo and Yahoo Travel, face a credibility problem.

One of the alluring features of these websites is that they enable consumers to write their own hotel reviews. But it turns out that some of the authors have a vested interest in the reviews.

In the UK, *The Sunday Times* recently ran an exposé with the headline, "Hotel review websites: a five-star scam".

A team of reporters found that fake hotel reviews, written by guests who have never stayed at the property or people affiliated with the hotels, can "boost or depress" property ratings.

The investigation also found that "some establishments attempt to damage the reputation of rivals".

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The first paragraph of the story focused on TripAdvisor, a unit of Expedia, that claims to be the world's largest travel community on the web with 20 million unique visitors a month.

One of those website visitors was David Bremner, who has visited and stayed at the Drumnadrochit Hotel in Drumnadrochit, Scotland, more than a few times.

The review he wrote about the hotel said: "Well done to the staff, who were really charming ... Have no hesitation in booking ... the food is outstanding ... Believe me you'll love it."

But, it turned out, Bremner owns the hotel, and failed to identify this little detail when he wrote the review.

This kind of bogus review shows up online more than the operators of community websites would like and they have been taking steps to flush out the dishonest reviewers. These axe-to-grind reviews hit at their credibility and value proposition, and will hurt their economics too if consumers decide to shun their websites and advertisers.

Brian Payea, the trade relations manager at TripAdvisor, said *The Sunday Times* was disingenuous regarding the way it played Bremner's review because TripAdvisor itself flushed out the fake and alerted the newspaper's reporters to it.

But, if it seems like a daunting task for community websites to turn themselves into the hotel review police, then that's what some like TripAdvisor are attempting to do.

Payea wouldn't give me the recipe for the "secret sauce" TripAdvisor uses to identify bogus reviews. But, he said that TripAdvisor has a team of people who read every one of the more than five million reviews and opinions that TripAdvisor publishes.

And although users can write reviews using just their screen names, they have to register for the website before being allowed to post reviews, and this helps TripAdvisor weed out glowing reviews from hotel employees or never-stay-there critiques from competing properties. And hotel managers can write replies, which are displayed prominently near negative reviews.

One solution to the problem of phoney reviews rests in the community or social networking nature of the sites. Users usually can click on the screen names of reviewers and find other reviews they've written to see if there are any patterns in the rants or raves. And, one rave review won't have much weight if 20 other reviews pan the hotel.

The best of these community-oriented websites integrate user reviews with articles from major travel guide publications so travellers can balance advice from professionals with the likes and dislikes of fellow consumers.

Now, if these community sites - and some are starting to do this - would integrate user reviews and guide book articles with advice from travel agent specialists, then travellers would really have something to go on.

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