

Fake vs fact: Don't assume all customer reviews are legit

Research shows that 97% of shoppers rely on customer reviews to inform their purchases but caution is advised



SAT, 01 MAY, 2021 - 12:00

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When you're buying online, how do you know that the product you're ordering is any good? Checking the reviews is the obvious thing to do.

A survey from consumer organisation *Which?* a few years ago found that 97% of shoppers rely on customer reviews to inform their purchases.

The only problem is that fake reviews are rampant on the internet.

A new *Which?* investigation has revealed a thriving industry of review manipulation that targets Amazon and other online markets, misleading customers and influencing billions of euros of transactions.

Which? posed as one of the many sellers that use Amazon to showcase their goods and signed up with 10 different sites that offered "review manipulation services". These included sites that offer consumers free or discounted products in exchange for reviews.

In the course of the *Which?* investigation, the organisation found that five review businesses had no fewer than 702,000 product reviewers on their books.

Refunds for reviews

One site said it had processed \$8.9m (€7.3m) worth of “refunds for reviews” on Amazon.

Let’s take one company, the German-based AMZTigers. It offered “review campaigns” that would “help your products become best sellers”. The company has an army of 62,000 reviewers.

Despite the fact that Amazon specifically prohibits sellers from paying third parties for reviews — and promises to ban those that do — this is exactly the service that AMZTigers offers.

These reviews are not cheap.

Which? reports: “For Amazon marketplace sellers that just want reviews, AMZTigers sells them individually for around £13 [€15], or in bulk packages starting at £620 for 50 reviews, going up to an eye-watering £8,000 for 1,000 reviews — showing how seriously sellers take reviews, and the investment they’re willing to make.”



The company can even help sellers get an “Amazon’s Choice” endorsement — and in less than a fortnight too.

As *Which?* reports, the Amazon’s Choice badge is still trusted in the market place.

In an earlier poll, 44% of Amazon customers had said that they believed that it meant that a product had been quality checked by Amazon.

Which? reports: “But it’s clearly being gamed by sellers, and it’s not the first time we’ve raised concerns. Previous investigations have found poor-quality Amazon’s Choice products that appeared to have been artificially boosted by incentivised and fake reviews.”

Sellers can also get reviews of their products on the site in exchange for free or heavily discounted products. This is called “review incentivisation” and is also against Amazon’s terms and conditions.

Earlier *Which?* investigations uncovered a range of fake review sites designed to link sellers with potential reviewers.

Some of these even offered payments in addition to free or discounted products.

These sites all offer advice on how to write authentic-seeming reviews, and many had criteria that the reviewer had to meet in order to qualify for rewards.

The big question, of course, is how to tell the real from the fake.

Red flags

Which? says that the red flags it spotted included unusually high numbers of positive reviews, high review frequency, tell-tale repetition of phrases, and photos and videos uploaded alongside the reviews themselves.

Don’t rely on star ratings alone.

Look at the comments about the product and ask yourself the following questions:

Is the reviewer being over the top about the product?

Is the review too long or too short?

Does it include specifics about the product?

Does it repeat similar information and phrases?

In the same vein, watch out for suspicious language. If the review reads like an infomercial, it's probably a fake one. Look out too for reviews written all in capitals, with odd formatting or no punctuation.

Huge numbers of five-star reviews are also a sign that something's not right.

Always check the dates. If a lot of the reviews were posted at the same time, the seller might have done a big drive on Facebook groups or other platforms to drum up feedback.

You can also check the reviewer's other product reviews. If they've reviewed lots of other items, then it's likely their praise has been bought.

Similarly, if they've given everything they've ever bought five stars, they're probably not reliable.

If they've bought the same thing a number of times, this could also be an indication that they're a member of a review group and not the helpful consumer they're pretending to be.

Three- or four-star reviews are worth paying attention to, as they're more likely to be honest than those at the extreme end of the spectrum.

Look for a pattern

Always look out for patterns. If a seller gets a bad review followed by a flurry of positive reviews, it's likely they're trying to bury the bad one and bring their average score back up.

Having said that, it's not unheard of for competitors to write scathing, one-star reviews on another company's product to drag their average scores down.

Earlier this month, Facebook promised to suspend or ban users who set up groups and profiles that facilitated bogus or misleading reviews across Facebook and Instagram.

This comes following an investigation by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) in the United Kingdom, which found evidence of misleading content.

The CMA asked the social media giant to take action to prevent material of this nature from ending up on its platforms.

If you spot a review that you think is fake, you should be able to report it to the marketplace.

If you think you were misled when you bought from a retailer online, you are entitled to cancel and return the order.

You can exercise your right to cancel at any time, from the moment you placed the order and up to 14 days after taking ownership of the goods.

You then have a further 14 days from the date you notified the seller of your intention to cancel and return.