



eModeration

# White paper: A Guide to Managing and Moderating Customer Review Sites

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## A guide to managing and moderating customer review sites

Sites like TripAdvisor have changed the way we buy. Thanks to review sites, we can now see behind a brand's sales promotion messages to learn how real people have rated their purchases, and

make an informed decision before we buy. Review sites are routinely used by consumers to find, check and rate their experiences, whether that's of a hotel stay, a product purchase, or a utility company's customer service. Shopping has become an altogether more social experience.

It follows that review sites aren't always plain sailing for brands. The [planned class action](#) by US hoteliers against TripAdvisor (and, conversely, the decision by other travel companies [such as Accor](#) to include TripAdvisor ratings on their sites) shows the power of such sites to influence a company's reputation and sales, and the responsibility that they have to protect users from fraudulent reviews.

The transparency that social media - and review sites in particular - gives to brands can be daunting. But review sites aren't going to go away, and the result is a [shift in brand behaviour](#): away from strictly controlled 'spin', towards a culture that listens to and learns from what customers really think.

***"Increasingly, consumers are turning to other consumers for recommendations."***

Used well, reviews can inform product development and sales strategy, whether you're a retailer (such as [Amazon](#) or [Carphone Warehouse](#)) using reviews to rate a number of different brands selling through your site, or a brand selling direct (such as [Dell](#)).

Inviting user-generated reviews onto a brand's site is a bold move, and an indication of belief in the brand's product or service. But managing both the reviews and the reviewers also requires some thought. This paper sets out to address the following questions. What do you do with your reviews once they're in place? How do you manage your community of reviewers? How do you deal with negative reviews? And how should you approach moderation?

## **Why have a review site at all?**

First, let's consider the impact of including user reviews on a brand's site. eConsultancy's 2010 report [How We Shop in 2010: Habits and Motivations of Consumers](#), by Stefan Tornquist and Jake Hird, states that 13 per cent of consumers have made an 'unintended' purchase as a result of a positive online review. According to social media tech company, BazaarVoice, shoppers who read reviews are almost three times [more likely to buy](#) than those who don't. So, reviews can increase sales. Retailers including [Argos](#) and [Amazon](#) use consumer reviews as a way of promoting their most popular products. For a retailer to understand not just which products are selling, but why, can be extremely useful in developing new product ranges or marketing and customer service strategies.

Increasingly, consumers are turning to other consumers for recommendations. "Reviews are... an important part of creating conversation with and between your customers," writes Melissa M Kellogg on [Retailer eProfits](#). eConsultancy's Meghan Keane [reports a survey by Brand Reputation](#) which shows that 84 per cent of consumers are more likely to look for online product reviews than they were just a year ago; and those who have had a negative experience are five times more likely to tell their friends. According to [Bazaarvoice](#), brands that give customers the option to read product reviews can see a decrease in returns ([20 per cent](#), in a case study cited by the company).

[The Camping and Caravanning Club](#), which has 520,000 members, is starting to include reviews on its site to encourage Club members to discuss their experiences. Evleen Price, eBusiness Marketing Manager for the Camping and Caravanning Club, says: "There are many positives to be gained by including reviews of the campsites on our website, from the obvious: to encourage visitors to our sites to share their experiences with others who might benefit; to the more subtle: to engage with our members online."

She continues: "We see these reviews as just the start of what promises to be an exciting introduction to user-generated content for our members to enjoy and participate in. We like to hear what they have to say, what they'd like to see and how they want to make the most of their Club."

But reviews can also help brands improve products - even those that are doing well. From Bazaarvoice, [a case study](#) from children's furniture maker, Land of Nod, whereby the brand learned from reviewers that one of its tables - very popular with customers and scoring well in reviews - had a surface that scratched easily. Detailed reviews

helped the company identify a product improvement, which resulted in increased customer loyalty.



In the travel sector, reviews sell holidays. [According to Holiday Rentals](#): “A property advert with 3 Reviews receives on average 23% more enquiries; a property advert with 5 Reviews receives on average 33% more enquiries”.

But it's not just about selling holidays. Venessa Paech, Community Manager for [Lonely Planet](#), explains why reviews on the brand's [Thorn Tree forum](#) (which has 800,000 members) are so important: “Travel is inherently social and our brand has been forged with community DNA. From the start, our founders solicited and included traveller feedback, corrections, recommendation and reviews (in hard copy letters at the time) into their guidebooks.”

## Setting up review sites: before you jump in

The TripAdvisor action has highlighted the importance of having clear guidelines for users, to lay out clearly what is and what isn't acceptable for users. [Google's guidelines](#) on ratings and reviews are worth looking at; they lay out the ground rules very clearly and in language that is straightforward and accessible. Of course, all reviews should be moderated, and you should make it very clear that the usual rules of posting apply: no spam or promotional links; no off-topic posts; no abusive or hate language, nor personal attacks. But there are other pitfalls you can avoid by writing comprehensive guidelines. Our tip list is below; we'd love to hear from you if you have others to share.

**Be positive, and set the tone.** Google [starts its guidelines](#) with a series of 'tips for writing great reviews', which includes sections on: *be informative and insightful, keep it real, be respectful, and write in style* (use good grammar, make it readable and so on). This keeps the tone of the review site positive and upbeat, rather than censorial or punitive. As Evleen Price says: "All we ever expect from contributors is that they are polite, respectful and they remember we are the Friendly Club at all times."

**Be very clear why you won't post some reviews.** If you state up front that any reviews breaking the terms of the site won't be published, you should deter some fraudsters from posting in the first place. If a fake reviewer knows their comments are going to be moderated against the site's terms, they're less likely to post.

**Avoid anonymous reviews:** Allowing people to post anonymous reviews increases the chance of fake posts (by someone with a grudge, or a competitive product, for

example). It is acceptable to state that you don't accept anonymous reviews, if you explain that this is to help ensure all contributions are genuine, and so that the brand has a chance to respond direct to any complaints.

**Be clear that you won't accept fraudulent reviews, and have a clear procedure for reporting suspected fraudulent reviews.** UK company, Kwickchex, [says it is taking action](#) against TripAdvisor (acting on behalf of hoteliers and restaurants who have suffered at the hands of reviewers suspected of posting fake reviews). Despite this, [TripAdvisor's review guidelines](#) are worth looking at (the action appears to focus on how the company qualifies reviews, and how they act in the case of a complaint, rather than on the quality of its guidelines).

If you suspect a review to be fake, have a clear procedure in place to ascertain whether the review is genuine. For example, you might ask for travel dates, in the case of a hotel review; or a product number, purchase date or store reference for a bought product. See below for more guidance on how to spot a fake review.

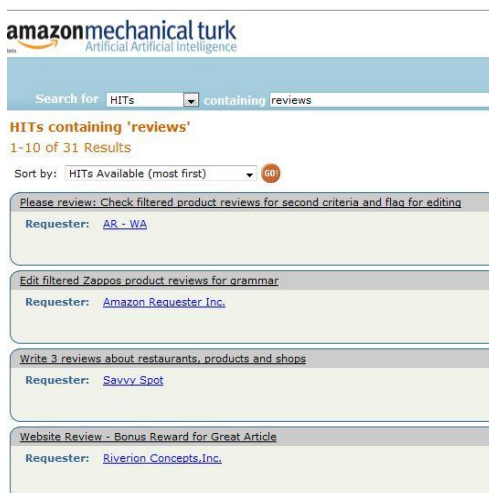
**Consider referring the review to the brand concerned for a response, if appropriate.** If a review complains about (for example) bad service or poor product quality, reserve the right to forward the review to the service provider or manufacturer for a response before the review is published.

Many brands, such as '[Hungry House](#)' (a UK food delivery service that at least one of the eModeration team admits to using far too much) use a star rating system. In the case of Hungry House, if a user posts a review below a certain threshold, they are sent a

message saying the review is in a queue and will be put to the food delivery company to respond. The review is posted within 48 hours whether the food company replies or not, but the point is they have a chance to respond to criticism (and put the problem right).

**Give clear guidelines for what constitutes a fair review.** You could choose not to accept general 'brand hate' comments - those that don't cite any specific examples, such as: 'Never buy anything from XX brand, they're rubbish, avoid them'. To avoid censorship, send the post back to the reviewer, explaining why the review has been rejected, and suggesting ways to improve it (for example, ask them to be more specific). The idea here is to encourage users to post constructive reviews - whether they're positive or negative - rather than very generic 'grudge' comments.

## Spotting a fake review



By 'fake review', we mean a review that has been posted by someone with a vested interest in promoting or damaging the reviewed product (as opposed to spam that conceals a promoted link in the text). For example: a PR company posting glowing reviews on behalf of its client; a hotel reviewing its own property; a competitor posting a negative review; or someone who has a personal vendetta against a company or an employee of that company, from a disgruntled employee to a spurned ex-lover.

How can you tell? Truth be told, sometimes you can't. Often it's based on gut feel by experienced community managers. Moderators who run review sites across a number of brands tend to get a feel for the posts that are fake - something in the way it's written, or in the amount of insider information revealed. Warning signs might include:

- Over enthusiastic opinions, or a review that sounds like a corporate advert
- Non-specific information (*"everything you ever buy from XX falls apart, don't ever go into their shops"*)
- A number of posts close together, posted anonymously
- A 'conversation' between a number of first-time contributors, recommending or being negative about a particular product. For example:

*Anon 1: "Has anyone used XX product? I can't find out whether it's worth buying."*

*Anon 2: "I have, I don't recommend it, I'd buy YY product instead from [link]"*

- Multiple posts using similar language, tone or of similar length
- Opinions from first time reviewers that go against what some of the site's most trusted contributors have said. If a product has 500 one-star reviews, and just a couple of five-star reviews, look at those five-star reviews carefully. One [US PR firm's glowing reviews](#) of a client's iPhone app stood out like a sore thumb and uncovered what the US Federal Trade Commission termed 'deceptive advertising'. Not great for the firm or its client
- Reviews that just seem unlikely (readers in the UK should see the [spoofed series of reviews on Amazon](#) for a certain celebrity ex-couple's album of cover songs, one 'glowing' review for which ends: *"We still use it in the Accident and Emergency ward at work as an alternative anaesthetic; it's cheap, and it renders the unsuspecting patient motionless and numbed."*)

- Evidence that a company is encouraging its employees to post positive reviews about its products, as in the case of Lifestyle Life, a US cosmetics company which, [according to the New York Times](#) (reported on Reputationmanagementfor.com), encouraged employees in an email to “devote the day to doing more postings on the Web as a satisfied client.”



Make sure users know that fraudulent reviews won't be accepted. If you have an engaged community of reviewers, you may well find that they help police the community for you. Equally, they may help counter false accusations of fake reviews, [as seen in this discussion thread](#) on PC Advisor's forum, where the community defends Argos against accusations of 'planted' reviews.

## Managing the reviewer community

If you're starting out with the review segment of your site, get the community involved from the off. Ask them to post reviews when they've looked at an item, or when they've purchased from the site. Melissa Kellogg, [writing for Retailer Profits](#), suggests giving reviewers an incentive by offering a regular draw, or even inviting customers to review the product next time they come into your store, by offering them a discount, free gift, or a cup of coffee. Her message here is to 'get creative' about asking your customers for reviews.

It is often passion for a shared experience that gets community members involved, as Evleen Price of the Camping and Caravanning Club explains: *“Our Club members have a great sense of community and are likely to take each other's opinions and advice on board with added confidence. The main unifying factor here is everyone's passion for camping and caravanning.”*



Allowing your reviewers to interact with and give feedback to each other creates a culture of openness and trust. Lonely Planet's Venessa Paech says: *“It's important to us that we give travellers a way to publicly and immediately (read: digitally) give feedback on our authors' opinions and experiences. We like it best when we're challenged, and we believe that collaboration is the most compelling route to the heart of a destination.”*

Reward your star reviewers. Amazon runs the [‘Amazon Vine’](#) system, sending new or pre-release merchandise in return for reviews to trusted reviewers in the community. Bazaarvoice includes [a ‘badge’ system](#) to highlight star reviewers to the community. Both these systems have community at their core: it is the community, not the brand, who decides who these star reviewers are, through a ‘rate this’ system.

JP De Clerk's report: [Using Customer and Peer Reviews Efficiently for Cross-Channel Marketing Purposes](#), published by [Focus](#), cites a travel company that rewards reviewers by offering them loyalty points, which they can put toward their next holiday. And, of

course, this kind of interaction with customers who are so engaged with your brand that they're prepared to tell others about their experiences, is priceless.

As your review site grows, you may choose to include professional reviewers - such as journalists, or product analysts, or other experts - as a feature of the site. James Gurd, an ecommerce and marketing consultant [writing for eConsultancy](#), considers how [ElectricPig.co.uk](#), a UK-based tech review site, uses professional, paid (but still product-independent) reviewers. (Note: this is a very different practice from paying people to post reviews with a particular bias, something of which [Belkin was accused](#) in 2009. The key here is transparency and honesty.) Including professional writers does have the advantage, as Gurd points out, of ensuring that posts are well-written, readable and easy to understand; and he suggests that retailers could benefit from adding material from professional reviewers to their user-generated review content.

## Listening to (and acting on) feedback - even when it's negative

***"Not all that your users have to say will be positive, and sometimes that can be difficult for a brand to hear."***

An important part of engaging with the reviewer community is listening to what each contributor has to say, and responding in the most appropriate way. Listening effectively can be harder than it seems. Not all that your users have to say will be positive, and sometimes that can be difficult for a brand to hear. But even negative reviews can be turned into a positive.

Testing products and getting early product reviews can inform a brand's product development strategy, and avoid costly mistakes; or can alert a brand to a product issue early, and so allow them to take action to resolve it. Monitoring reviews efficiently,

and having a clear escalation process so that the most serious issues are dealt with quickly is very important, and can help to avert a crisis. (You can read more about effective listening in our blog post '[what to listen for in social media](#)'.)

Equally, positive feedback can show you what you're doing really well, so you can do more of it; and it can help you identify who are your brand advocates. If a number of your reviewers are raving about a particular line of clothes, you have a great opportunity to trial your next line with them first. You get trusted feedback before you launch the product and your community members get to try your new products ahead of the market. Or, if you get particularly good feedback about your post-sales service (or someone who handled a customer call really efficiently), you can identify and reward that employee, which will encourage others to do well, too.

Listening to how customers use your products can help you market them more effectively, and to a more highly targeted audience. A search on Google (at the time of writing) for 'review of entry-level SLR cameras' [returns a list of entry level SLR recommendations](#) from the CNET review site, ranked both by CNET writers and readers.

But of course, listening is only part of the story. You need to act, too. As Michael Brito says, in his blog post '[social media, listening is only half the battle](#)':

*Listening and responding are only half the battle when engaging with consumers online. The other half of the formula is acting. It's like being in a relationship. If my wife is upset that I leave my dirty socks on the living room floor every night; and I listen to what she is saying but continue to leave my*

*socks there ... well, you catch my drift. There will be hell to pay if I don't "act" on her politely spoken "recommendations".*

There will inevitably be negative feedback, and businesses do have to be prepared to listen, respond to and act on criticism from the community. Caroline O'Donoghue, social media research analysis for iCrossing, [talks on eConsultancy](#) about the importance of 'embracing' negative reviews, and of responding honestly:

*"Whilst it may be disheartening to see negative reviews appearing in your search, remember that it is the open honesty of reviews which makes them so valuable to and popular with consumers. Companies, like people, all have bad days and responding to negative reviews with honest answers is what people will respect the most. This may seem like a radical approach to some companies, but it can ultimately lead to the defining of a brand's reputation online."*

[She also talks](#) about understanding when a consumer just wants to rant, rather than engage in positive discussion to put a problem right. In this case, there may be no benefit in trying to start a conversation with the user:

*"Before responding to a review, consider why the customer has written it. If they have provided a negative comment without constructive criticism, it may be that they simply want to "rant" and are not interested in entering into a constructive conversation around their complaint. In these situations it is more beneficial just to listen.*

*“Remember that most readers will not find such comments useful and will often see them more as a reflection on the reviewer than the brand. Instead, they are likely to pay more attention to reviews which clearly and objectively set out what they have and have not liked about a product. These are the reviews you should focus your attentions on.”*

Lonely Planet's Venessa Paech says that users will often spot and distrust sites that censor negative reviews: *“Our users are sophisticated and will aggregate information from all over the web (and of course, Lonely Planet guidebook content), before making their choices. [...]Members openly discuss their suspicions about other user review sites which they believe censor critique or moderate with a heavy hand.”*

So, it follows that there is an argument to say that negative reviews give review sites credibility, as people are more inclined to believe they are genuine. The [BBC news website](#) quotes Rochelle Turner, Head of Research for the Which? Holiday magazine, as saying that *“bad reviews actually help legitimise the site, unlike early efforts by travel companies which removed unfavourable reviews.”*

Garry Przyklenk, Online Marketing and Lead Generation Manager at Marketwire, [goes a step further](#), saying: *“negative feedback is perhaps the single most underrated opportunity for reputation management the social web has to offer.”* If you act quickly, and are seen to respond to negative feedback, you could earn the trust of your community. You could even ask the reviewer to post a follow-up review to show that the issue has been resolved.

## Moderating reviews

TripAdvisor's experience has shown how important moderating reviews and managing the review community can be. There are still users exploiting review sites for their own personal gain - whether through fake reviews or through spam marketing techniques - and having a clear moderation (and escalation) process can help to spot and neutralise the trouble-makers.



Of course, the usual rules for moderation apply. Posts that should be deleted out-of-hand include: off-topic reviews, spam and spam links, abusive posts, expletives and hate language. However the moderation process is managed, no brand wants to be associated with any of these things and suffer the resulting reputational damage. Defamation also comes into this category and should be prohibited by the terms of the site. If you experience an incidence of defamation, deal with it swiftly. Venessa Paech explains Lonely Planet's approach:

*“Actual incidences of defamation are very low in relation to posting volumes. Defamation is prohibited by our terms and community guidelines. If it has legitimately occurred - a determination our moderation team will make after reviewing the content in context - the review would be removed from the website and the business complaining of defamation would be notified this had occurred. We do not tolerate unchecked libel. If we are made aware of a problem, we take action diligently and swiftly. If defamation has been alleged but has not occurred, our moderation team (or more senior staff if required)*

*would correspond with the business explaining this, and the review content will stand. We are willing to discuss our position and obligations around such decisions if a business feels unjustly treated."*

(For more information on specific moderation techniques, see our series of white papers on the subject, [here](#).)

But we're talking about moderation here, not censorship. It can be very tempting to delete negative reviews under the guise of moderation, but this will just exacerbate the situation, and create more negative feeling than leaving the review up and addressing the issues in it.

***"We're talking about moderation here, not censorship."***

Venessa Paech goes a step further, and argues that to allow businesses to respond publicly to reviews can stifle the community:

*"Currently we do not permit commercial entities of any kind to post on Thorn Tree, and our new review platform does not yet feature a right of reply mechanism. The Thorn Tree is preserved as a space for individual travellers to interact free of commercial solicitation. We believe there is value in this approach. Just as anonymity is important for some, so too the freedom to share your opinion without fear of being lambasted for it. Our members have shared over the years that they sometimes feel intimidated by websites or communities where a business could target them for public rebuttal. While there is a strong*

*argument that right of reply encourages more honest, less hyperbolic reviews from users, there's another that suggests users are less likely to tell the truth about less than perfect experiences. The Lonely Planet mandate is to tell it like it is without fear or favour, and we extend this to our community. We believe that allowing businesses to interject undermines that mandate."*

### In summary

As with all communities, engaging with and managing a community of reviewers requires a brand to open itself up to users - taking both positive and negative feedback on board - to an extent that many find goes against the grain of corporate messaging and content control. But managed well, reviews can be a fantastic way to develop a real understanding of what customers love or hate about a product, and should inform future product and marketing strategies. They are an opportunity to listen to feedback and do more of what people value, and to put right customer issues.



We'd love to hear from our readers about their experiences in managing, using or moderating review sites. Talk to us on our [blog](#); on [Twitter](#), or by email: [tia@emoderation.com](mailto:tia@emoderation.com).

Our thanks go to all contributors to this white paper: Venessa Peach (Community Manager [Lonely Planet](#)); Evleen Price (eBusiness Marketing Manager [The Camping and Caravanning Club](#) - disclaimer: Client of eModeration); and of course, the community management team at eModeration.

## About eModeration

**Founded in 2002**, eModeration Limited is an international, specialist user-generated content moderation company. It provides multilingual community management and content moderation to clients in the entertainment and digital publishing industry and major corporate clients hosting online communities and consumer-driven ad campaigns.

eModeration's team of moderators and staff are the key to eModeration's success and excellent client list. eModeration draws on the **expertise of carefully recruited** and trained moderators located mainly in the US and Europe with specialist editorial and community moderation skills, which are matched uniquely to the client. The company can moderate 24/7 and provides cover for over 50 languages. All its moderators are managed online from eModeration's headquarters in London, United Kingdom.

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