

Fake reviews: How to combat a growing online problem



30-second summary:

- Reviews are critical for both merchants and consumers. That's especially true right now, as holiday shoppers look to reviews to help make decisions about which TVs, wireless earbuds, home security systems or air fryers to buy.
- Many consumers will probably encounter inauthentic or illegitimate reviews without knowing it. Fake reviews exist on all the major platforms; it's really just a question of degree. And it's a growing problem.
- Trafficking in fake reviews is a bad idea for many reasons, including platform suspensions and blacklisting. But consumer trust is arguably the most important reason to not try and game the system.
- Assuming the business is not generating fake reviews for itself, recognizing and removing them can be a challenge. Sophisticated reputation management software tools can help spot fake reviews or monitor incoming reviews in real-time for easier detection.
- Online reputation is a long game. Reviews aren't just about rankings. They can help businesses improve

products, services, and operations. Businesses that listen to their customers (and care) will have greater loyalty and better referrals over the long term.

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But many consumers will probably encounter inauthentic or illegitimate reviews without knowing it. Fake reviews exist on all the major platforms, it's really just a question of degree. And it's a growing problem.

In this article, I'll discuss what's at stake with fake reviews, the types of inauthentic reviews, how to recognize them, and how to get them removed.

The scale of the problem

Google, Facebook, Yelp, TripAdvisor, and Amazon take different approaches to content moderation and review fraud. Yelp has probably been the most aggressive of the major sites in keeping review fraud down. But Google, Amazon, and the others frequently say they're actively addressing the problem as well – with varying degrees of success.

Review fraud is an especially big problem on Amazon. Separate studies performed by Objection.co, Fakespot, and The Washington Post have determined that a majority of reviews in certain product categories are deceptive or inauthentic. Objection.co has indicated, for example, that the vast majority of Bluetooth-enabled products in the electronics category are fake in some way. And Fakespot found that reviews for 63% of products in the beauty category on Amazon are illegitimate.

Amazon disputes these findings and contends it's dealing with

the problem. Fake reviews are also a problem on Google, where thousands of Local Guide profiles are controlled by “review farms,” according to Objection.co’s findings.

Review fraud is something of a cat and mouse game, in which shady but increasingly sophisticated fraudsters try to stay one step ahead of platform algorithms. The reasons fake reviews are proliferating are obvious. Reviews impact rankings on Google and Amazon and more than 90% of consumers rely on them to make purchase decisions.

Yet more consumers are starting to notice fake reviews online. According to a 2019 survey, 82% of respondents said they had read at least one fake review in the past year. (Consumers often don’t recognize them.) And the same study found consumers are increasingly turning to multiple review sites before making a buying decision, as a kind of hedge against review fraud.

Types of fake reviews

We often speak about fake reviews as a uniform phenomenon. Yet there’s a spectrum and multiple categories of inauthentic or fake reviews:

- Business owners who generate reviews for themselves, directly or indirectly
- Employees who write positive reviews for their employers and ex-employees that write retaliatory reviews of a former employer
- Customers who lie or exaggerate a bad experience to get a refund or some other compensation
- Friends and family who write positive or negative reviews on behalf of a business
- Businesses that pay for reviews or offer some sort of quid pro quo in exchange
- Global vendors that sell positive and negative reviews to businesses around the world

Many fake review vendors operate offshore in China, India, Bangladesh, or the Philippines. However, according to Objection. co, the most common kind of review fraud is perpetrated by a business owner using a fake profile to write positive reviews about themselves or negative reviews of a competitor.

Trafficking in fake reviews is a bad idea for many reasons, including platform suspensions and blacklisting. But consumer trust is arguably the most important reason to not try and game the system. According to a global consumer survey released earlier this year by Bazaarvoice, fake reviews can cause a loss of trust in the brand or merchant. A majority of consumers (54%) say they won't buy the product if they suspect reviews are fake.

Being called out by the platforms – Yelp in particular – can also be harsh. The company's consumer alerts can remain on business profiles for months, depending on the infraction. That can be the kiss of death for a local business.

Recognizing and removing fake reviews

Assuming the business is not generating fake reviews for itself, recognizing and removing them can be a challenge. Sophisticated reputation management software tools can help spot fake reviews or monitor incoming reviews in real-time for easier detection.

Manual fake-review spotting is more challenging. But some of the things to look for include reviewers not present in the customer database, profiles or names that seem fake, geographically distributed reviews, references that indicate the review is aimed at the wrong business, review content that is "generic" or without much detail, and stars without comments (on Google). There are other signals as well.

Each of the platforms has somewhat different procedures to address questionable reviews and request removal:

Following these procedures doesn't always work, however. On Google, in particular, the review(s) in question must violate one of its content policies, which include "spam and fake content." In addition, Google will remove reviews if they're written by a non-customer, if they're directed at the wrong business, or if the review is not based on an actual customer experience (for example, political objection to the business).

It's generally best to respond to the review publicly and point out the mistake or error (for example, wrong business location) without emotion. If it's a competitor writing a negative review, politely point out that you don't recall them as a customer. Then you need to locate and flag the review as "inappropriate" in the Google My Business dashboard. Local SEOs also recommend notifying @GoogleMyBiz on Twitter.

In the best-case scenario, it can take several days for reviews to be removed by Google if they agree the review was inappropriate. However, there are also instances where it can take much longer, 20 days in one example.

Online reputation is a long game. Reviews aren't just about rankings. They can help businesses improve products, services, and operations. Businesses that listen to their customers (and care) will have greater loyalty and better referrals over the long term. It doesn't pay to try and game the system by generating or buying fake reviews.

If the business has an active review management program in place and regular reviews coming in, any isolated review spam probably won't have a meaningful impact. And any demonstrably fake reviews should be easily identified – and ultimately removed.

Norman Rohr is SVP Marketing & Communications at Uberall.

More about:

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