

Fake reviews problem is much worse than people know

Fake reviews are a growing problem for consumers and the local and product-search sites they rely on to make purchase decisions. We know from multiple studies that roughly 90% of internet users consult online reviews before buying.

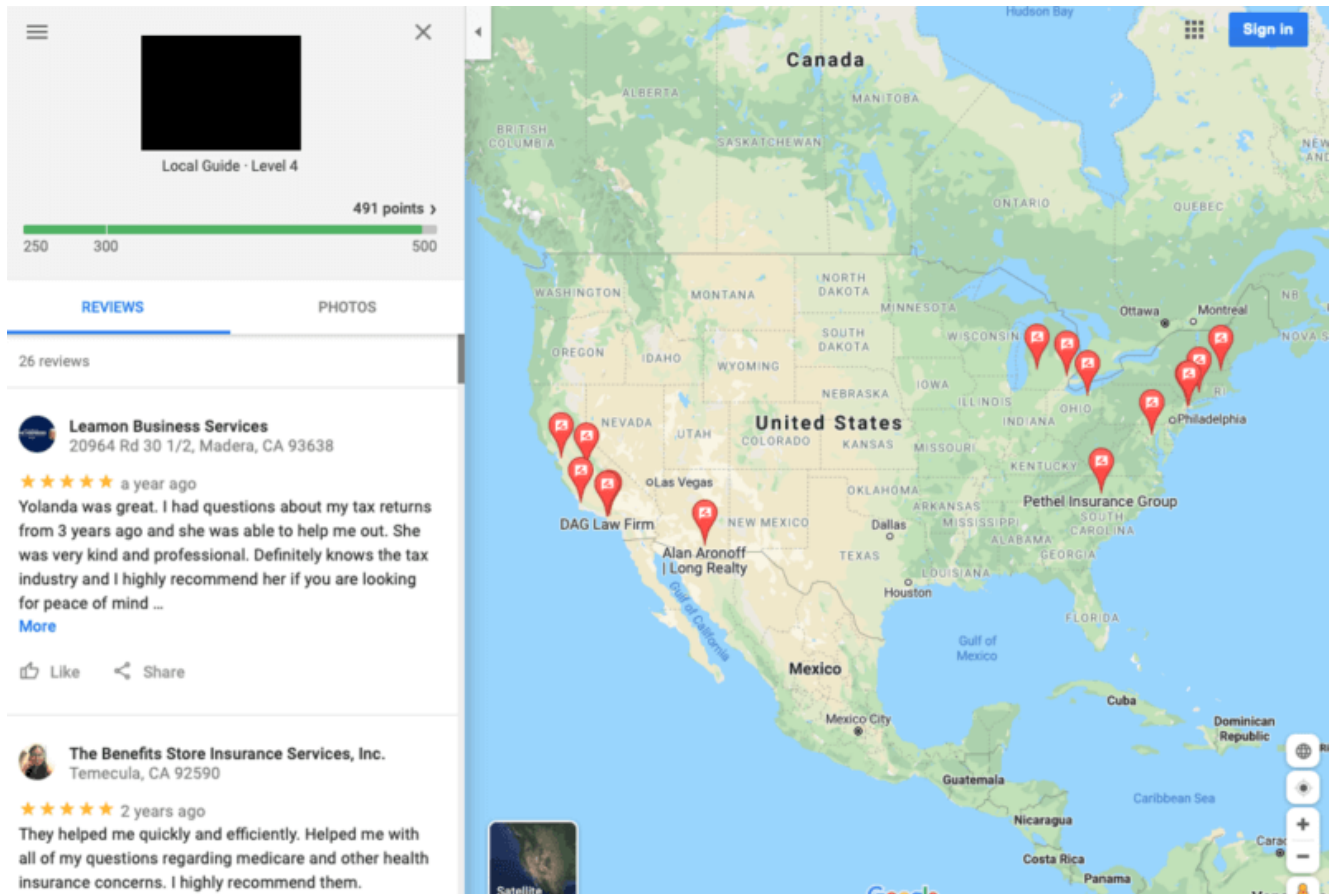
The scale of the fake reviews problem is not precisely documented, but it's "in the millions" across sites, according to Curtis Boyd, whose company [Objection.co](#) helps businesses identify and remove fraudulent online reviews.

Fake Review Types

According to Boyd, there are five primary sources or types of fake reviews that his company sees:

- **Vendors** that sell both positive and negative online reviews.
- **Business owners** directly or indirectly generating fake reviews for themselves (through fake profiles or vendors).
- **Current employees** writing positive reviews on behalf of an employer.
- **Ex-employees** writing negative reviews in retaliation for being terminated or laid off.
- **Customers lying** about or exaggerating a negative experience to obtain a refund or some other benefit (e.g., discount).
- **Review clusters** (e.g., friends and family) writing positive or negative reviews within a short period of one another.

Fake Google Local Guide review profile



The most common kind of inauthentic review is from a business owner, using a fake profile. After that, according to Boyd, it's reviews generated by fake review vendors, typically operating offshore in China, India, Bangladesh or the Philippines.

Yelp, TripAdvisor More Effective at Moderating

Boyd explained that Yelp and TripAdvisor generally are much better at moderating content and minimizing fake reviews, compared to Google or Amazon, but they still make it through. "There's no review website that doesn't have fake reviews," Boyd explains. "The problem is everywhere and there are varying levels of sophistication."

"There are tens of thousands of [Google] Local Guide profiles owned by review farms; they've done a good job of bypassing Google's detection systems." A large percentage of these

profiles are not real people and they generate huge volumes of fraudulent reviews. The screenshot above reflects a fake profile (Local Guide Level 4) which is part of a “review pod,” according to Boyd.

Sophisticated Cat and Mouse Game

Objection.co uses a range of AI and machine-learning techniques to identify fake reviews, including looking at the geographic location of reviewers, review patterns and time frames, relationships between review profiles, review syntax, character count and lexical diversity among other methods. Boyd also buys fake review content and profiles en masse from vendors – who willingly sell out their content and writers. “These are mostly small companies in developing countries and they just want the money.”

Boyd has thus been able to buy 280,000 fraudulent profiles and millions of fake reviews and compared them with real profiles and reviews, to train his systems on patterns and data relationships.

We also discussed the cost of fake reviews and Boyd quickly ticked off some prices:

- \$50 for fake Yelp review “that sticks.”
- \$5 for a fake review on Google.
- \$10-15 for TripAdvisor.

Boyd observes that, “When [business owners] start purchasing fake reviews they can get addicted.” It’s often true, in these cases, that “more than 50% of their reviews are fake.”

Amazon’s ‘Very Bad’ Problem

Boyd says the problem is particularly bad on Amazon. “Amazon as a whole is suffering from a fake review profile problem that’s very bad.” He points out, for example, that about 90%

of Bluetooth-enabled products in the electronics category on Amazon are fake. “Books is another bad one,” with self-published authors generating fake reviews for themselves.

A partial list of other Amazon product categories overrun with inauthentic reviews include:

- Weight-loss products.
- Home fitness.
- Kitchen products (for off-brand products).

Other third parties have identified additional Amazon categories replete with fake reviews. Boyd further describes a disturbing situation on Amazon where legitimate brands are losing position and market share because of fake reviews. “Some products are losing their bestseller status to fake-review products.”

While Amazon has periodically taken action against fake reviews, Boyd speculates the company is unmotivated to become too aggressive, because reviews (real or fake) sell products and Amazon continues to benefit directly and indirectly from these reviews.

Consumers Just Starting to Wake Up

Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the fake reviews problem, though they don’t understand its full extent. They’re unhappy about potentially being deceived and are looking to publishers to institute tougher standards and penalties against review fraud.

According to Jebbit’s Consumer Trust Data Index, out of 100 companies Amazon is the brand most trusted by U.S. consumers. If they were fully aware of the fake reviews problem on the site, Amazon’s credibility might suffer accordingly.

It’s also possible that if Google, Amazon and other sites don’t more vigorously crack down on review fraud consumers may

gradually return to more traditional methods of finding business and product recommendations: word of mouth and expert reviews.

About The Author



Greg Sterling is a Contributing Editor to Search Engine Land, a member of the programming team for SMX events and the VP, Market Insights at Uberall.

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