



Online Reviews: The Consumer's Verdict

In today's digital age, the Internet has evolved into the ultimate source of information, and playing a crucial role are online review sites that strive to present the real picture.

BY PRIYANKA TILVE

If you're planning a vacation and need to book a hotel, you will find plenty of information on several websites, but very few will show you the real picture. That's when you go to sites like Tripadvisor, where you will find hotel reviews written by the people who've stayed there. This information is crucial as it comes straight from the people who've stayed there and used its facilities, which may paint a different picture than what you saw on the hotel's website. Similarly, if you want to find a good restaurant, then you can check out sites like Burrp!

Zomanto. Sites like MouthShut.com provide reviews across categories, right from restaurants and hotels to electronic appliances and movies.

These sites have pioneered the concept of user reviews and perfected it over the years. The phenomenon of online review sites is not new, but what has changed now is the perception of people; the consumers as well as the brands and service providers. While some may argue that these reviews are often paid for by the brands themselves, that's not the case. These online review sites are an ecosystem that works like

a community. If one user was to upload a review for a restaurant, it will then be rated by other users for its usefulness. If they have had similar experiences, they would echo his/her sentiments, but if not, they will voice their opinions. Thus, you will be presented with both sides of the story and have an unbiased overview.

What Makes Them Popular?

Faisal Farooqui, founder of Mouthshut, which was amongst the first online review sites to go live in India in 2000, is of the opinion that real buying happens

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when people consult other people, and not necessarily through the medium of advertising. He says, "When I returned from the US, I didn't see anything even similar to Mouthshut. There were no independent review sites, so I went ahead and built a platform, which slowly started growing. Our goal was to provide an opportunity for Internet users in India to share their opinions of products and services. It's a basic human need to talk to somebody before they buy something, especially in India. We are a little averse to risk and not a very impulsive buying society. We tend to do a lot of homework and a lot of research before buying. Even women, who may be impulsive shoppers in India, haggle to try and get the best deal. I think Indians spend their money very consciously, and so sites like Mouthshut play a crucial role in helping them decide."

Antoine Lewis, Editor of Burrp!, feels that people favor online reviews, as unlike print media, they are a permanent repository with fresh reviews added by the minute. He says, "Whether it's for a product or a business, I'd say people take online reviews a lot more seriously than ever before, particularly when it's a non-mainstream media platform and there are multiple opinions available. I think people are looking for honest, unbiased reviews from people like themselves, who may not be experts on the subject (they actually don't value the 'expert' anymore), but have experienced something special (be it good or bad) and feel that it is important enough to communicate to others. It has a certain

word-of-mouth appeal, with the mouths now extending beyond the immediate circle of friends and acquaintances. Also, the technology is constantly being updated, so users can access reviews from a variety of devices."

How Effective Are They?

While one may think that most of the reviews posted online must be negative, you will be surprised to know that this is not the case. At Mouthshut, for instance, Faisal says approximately 60 percent of the reviews are positive, recommending a product. When you have a bad experience with a product or a service, it's natural for you to air your grievances, but why do that when you have had a

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Not satisfied with the remuneration and perks offered in your company? Log on to 'talentequity.in' to rate your company.

On 'ratemds.com', you can rate doctors and medical professionals. It's also a great place to find out the best doctor in town on the basis of the reviews uploaded by other members.

good experience? The reason for this, he says, is that users realize that others could benefit from their reviews. Antoine, on the other hand, says that it's a mix of vanity and ego. According to him, users want their opinions to be heard, and the impact to be felt, even if they're hiding behind a pseudonym. The Internet, he feels, is the world's truly democratic soapbox; almost everyone has the opportunity to be heard.

Posting reviews is about more than just helping others. The Internet today is a powerful medium and the brands conscious of their image can no longer afford to ignore it. Initially, it was only the big brands that were present on the Internet, but now almost every brand, big or small, is exploring ways of engaging people online. This also means that any negative review posted about a brand is immediately noticed and efforts are taken to rectify it. If you were to post a negative review, be it about a restaurant or a service or a brand, rest assured that you will hear from them. You will often be offered discount coupons or other benefits if your claims are justified. In fact, reviews offer valuable feedback to the brands, as they can gauge what their customers think about them. Based on this, they can improve their services and implement suggestions.

For people like you and me, these reviews will help us to make an informed decision. Usually when you want to buy a new gadget, try a new restaurant or book a hotel, you tend to ask your family members and friends for their opinions. Online reviews take this a step further, and you can now benefit from the experiences of the community at large. One may wonder how far the reviews can be trusted, as they could be biased and/or written in the heat of the moment. To address these issues, reviews on most of the popular sites are moderated and other members are encouraged to rate them for their usefulness. Higher ratings would mean a high rate of accuracy, which means that the review can be trusted. Also, sophisticated algorithms, along with manual intervention, fork out biased reviews or reviews that seem to have been uploaded by brands.

So go out there and voice your opinion. Just as a review has helped you, your review can make a difference too.

- priyanka.tilve@chip.in