



## A Matter of *Popular Opinion*

**Faisal Farooqui** discusses the enormous impact consumers' opinion about a product and a brand can have, especially on the internet

On a hot summer day, Meenal Desai and Shweta Singh board TA-420 flight for Chennai, at Delhi. No sooner than they are comfortably ensconced in their seats, they are welcomed with copies of their favorite newspapers and magazines. Meenal skims through the headlines of *The Pioneer* and *The Hindustan Times*, even as she finds a copy of *Cosmopolitan* and *India Today* (the magazines she loves the most) in her seat pocket. Shweta's seat pockets, on the other hand, have *Business Today* and *PC Quest*—two of her favourite magazines. The two friends are bewildered at the level of personalisation. How did the airline know their likes and

dislikes, when nothing had been specified at the time of reservation?

The day is not far when every individual customer will receive the greatest possible personalised service (as described above) from a provider or a manufacturer. And for this, brands and





manufacturers are working hard to understand what consumers' opinion about their products on offer are. And this is just the beginning.

**Of Consumers and Their Choices**

A quick browse through MouthShut.com—a leading consumer social networking portal, reveals that there are more than 258 variants of cars and SUVs available in India. Or that a consumer will be confronted with more than 292 models when buying a cell phone. This is in sharp contrast to the 1980s, when only half-a-dozen car models were sold and the consumer had to be content with just three refrigerator brands. Life was simple, but the good old days were purely a seller's market. When choices were limited, manufacturers and sellers could afford to continue selling the same product without any significant improvements or modification.

Recent market research findings through surveys and ethnographic studies have revealed that consumers' buying decision are influenced by fellow consumers'

opinions (usually a trusted friend or a relative) of the product or service. In other words, people are more likely to buy something because someone has recommended it. Similarly, people also avoid buying a particular product if someone they trust has asked them to stay away from it. In addition, consumers will go the extra mile to find the best available price before making the purchase.

As products mature and companies innovate to keep pace with changing consumption patterns, it has become difficult for an average consumer to always seek advice from a fellow consumer before taking a decision, or to compare prices in dozens of shops. In order for consumers to get the best worth for their money, perfect or near perfect information is necessary. From an economics perspective, perfect competition can be achieved when buyers and sellers know everything about each other. Chances are that sellers already know everything they want or need to about the buyer, but the buyer is deprived of information. Thanks to the advent of the internet, word-of-mouth recommendation has taken on an all-new *avatar*. Consumers want all the facts before they part with their money. The large number of competing products with increasingly more features can be confusing. However, with the help of fairly basic internet research, consumers can now choose between different brands and features without any confusion or complicated advertising.

Consumer-driven information exchange such as that facilitated by MouthShut.com and consumer-driven ecommerce platforms such as eBay.in are at the forefront of leading the paradigm shift that is involved in bringing near-perfect process to buying and selling.

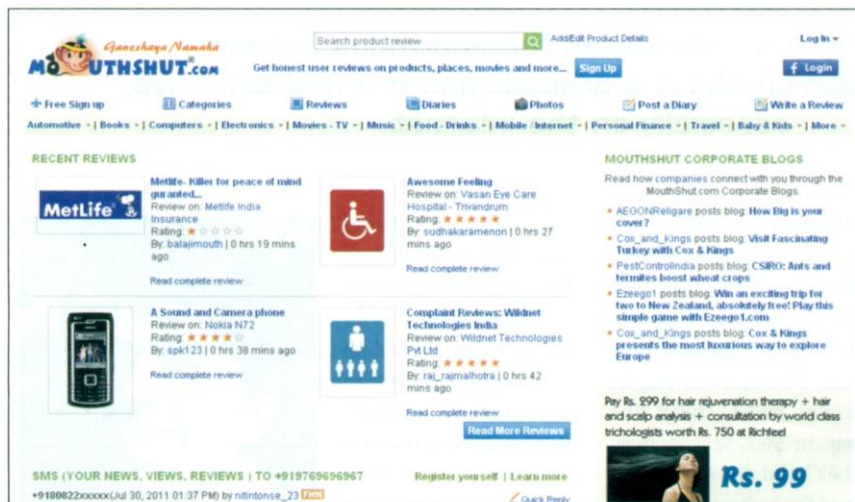
**How Reviews Help**

- ◆ For consumers, positive reviews are just as important as the price of a product—the positive opinions of existing customers can influence his or her purchase decision.
- ◆ Reading reviews is the most common form of online research and has increased customers' browsing time on the company's website as well
- ◆ A negative review is not always bad for a product's sales—the impact of the review may vary according to the customer in question.
- ◆ Reviews enhance the offline as well as the online sale of products.

**Kal aur Aaj – The Major Difference**

For a long time, manufacturers of goods and service providers took consumers for granted. They were happy doling out products and services as long as the consumer accepted them, without even an iota of respect for his opinion. The consumer did not even have a single platform where he could express freely his opinion.

The consumer, much like the proletariat, was invested with a lot of power, but was unfortunately rendered powerless to execute the same. Despite being the end-consumer, his opinion mattered so little to manufacturers who



*Mouthshut.com is India's first and largest user generated content platform that lets the consumers review a product and be vocal about its services.*

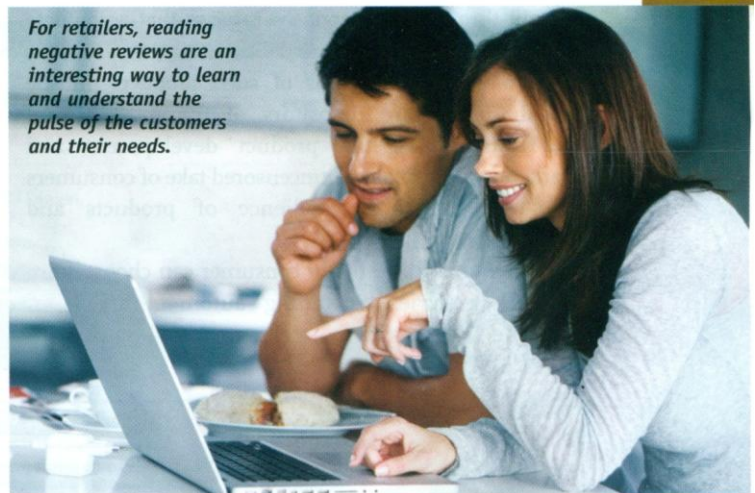


thought it best to beguile his judgment by clouding it with fanciful advertising and marketing strategies. What was left languishing in the background was his true opinion of the same. There were (and still are) some publications that provided some space to their readers, but the issues discussed were microcosmic and confined to the worldview of the publication. In a nutshell, the consumer, although a king of sorts, was rendered dumb, helpless and ineffective.

The American political activist, Wendell Phillips once said, "Revolutions are not made; they come." The consumerist culture witnessed a revolution of sorts with the advent of MouthShut.com and other websites such as Ciao.com (the UK) and Epinions.com (the US). Here, the maxim "Consumer is King" gains ground reality.

### Reviewing Reviews

Reviews don't just help consumers to come to a better shopping decision, but also provide invaluable insight to businesses, and an opportunity for them to feel the pulse of their existing and potential customers. By following



*For retailers, reading negative reviews are an interesting way to learn and understand the pulse of the customers and their needs.*

reviews of their company and by interacting with these consumers, businesses can gain priceless insights into the likes and dislikes of their customers. Such interaction also makes a strong statement for their customers' concerns, thereby boosting customer loyalty. On MouthShut.com, brand managers keenly study the reviews written about their companies, interact with consumers and redress their issues.

MouthShut was founded on an idea to build communities around brands. We found that companies were offering products to consumers who had no choice but to accept them as they were. MouthShut.com provides consumers a platform to voice their opinions on thousands of products and services that are manufactured and sold to consumers the world over. Millions of consumers gather online everyday and speak their mind about their real-life experiences with various products and services. The passion with which they rant and rave, and the sincerity in these reviews is captured one review at a time.

### Making it Count

MouthShut.com, established in 2000, had no real resources to speak of, except a vision to provide the consumer a platform that he could use to voice his opinion on products and services. The website capitalises on the diminishing role of professional reviews in influencing consumer decisions. Empowered by the internet, the average consumer ascribes greater credibility to the views of another similar consumer than that of professional reviewers who are increasingly deemed as marketing mouthpieces of large organisations. In India, the website is now a forum to connect with the country's most active and quality conscious consumers—to create buzz, seek opinion, influence purchasing decisions, and assess effectiveness and success of marketing programs.

A consolidated or aggregated rating can be seen on every product. Sophisticated design ensures that a reader

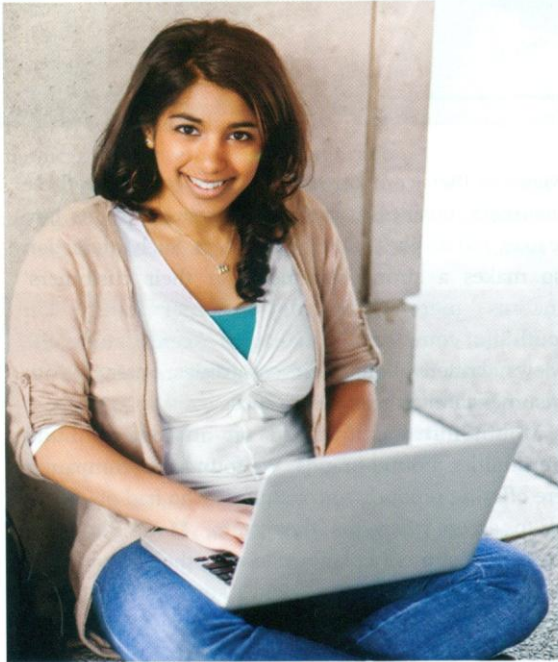


*Reading reviews of a product helps customers to make better purchase decisions.*



can sift through the responses in ways that accentuate certain types of viewpoints and diminish others. Reviews of hundreds of thousands of such products provide MouthShut a rare repository of the most critical end-result of all the product development and marketing—the final and uncensored take of consumers who are the target audience of products and marketing messages.

At MouthShut.com, the consumer can choose from several categories, including automobiles, books, computers, education, electronics, employers,



entertainment, fashion, food and drinks, etc., besides hundreds of sub-categories. This enables them to write frank and forthright reviews on products and services that they have used, thereby helping their peers decide which product to buy and which to ignore. Similarly, reviews written by other members also enable them to make the right choice.

The website provides a platform for consumers to debate on brands, and the feedback mechanism has been accepted by consumers and brands alike. The reviews written by the end-users are taken into serious account by brand managers who scout the website for honest opinion and feedback.

Review writing is the core of all activities, but its forms are many. On MouthShut.com, consumers can write elaborate product reviews, send in short and snappy reviews via the SMS platform or upload video reviews. If someone wants to understand a feature-by-feature breakup of products, he can avail the website's comparison features—here, one can compare products on the basis of price, features and reviews. For those interested in general blogging, there is the 'diary' section

where even sprawling thoughts find room quite comfortably. Virtual gifts and a photo gallery add to the overall experience of the platform. Apart from this, there is corporate blog—a platform for brand managers to connect with the consumers.

MouthShut.com introduced the corporate blog platform in 2006. This is a revolutionary platform and is much more than just a feedback response system. The corporate response mechanism allows a corporate to respond to the feedback, reviews and suggestions by users on MouthShut.com. It is a great tool for feedback redressal and management for a corporate.

### Taming the Social Media Monster

Retailers must understand that social media is 24x7x365 phenomenon. If the internet revolutionised communication, then social media has completely changed the way people use the internet. General blogging, micro-blogging, product blogging, and making and consolidating relationships is just the initial phase of social media. The internet has not seen a revolution of this magnitude since its inception. Social media is going to be the harbinger of a revolution that will redefine opinions and break stereotypes. Facebook and Twitter are the leading names here. However, MouthShut.com started the concept of community and blogging much before these were popularised by Facebook and Twitter. On MouthShut.com, there is a community of consumers who connect with each other about products and services. These consumers create a trusted circle, and can even send each other virtual gifts.

Since using the website, many retailers have found that their customers surprise them with what they want. In fact, pre-empting the wants of a social community on the internet is not easy. The website uses tools such as virtual gifts, various forms of reviews, diaries and photo galleries to engage consumers.

There is a misconception that marketing strategies and initiatives help in connecting with target audience better. Today, by merely being in touch with your audience, retailers can engage them and keep them hooked on to their brand. It is important for retailers to work out a communication strategy instead of a marketing strategy. Simply keeping in touch with consumers is an easy and sure-fire way for retailers to connect with their target audiences.

On MouthShut.com, we have seen some of the biggest brands talking to their customers and resolving their issues. Our corporate blog platform however, is more than just a platform to resolve issues. Its importance lies in the fact that a retailer's customer knows that they will be listened to. Companies use the platform to bring out their human face. 🗣️

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