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Fakes among the five stars

Positive product reviews are perceived as big selling points by consumers, but solicited content is suspected to dominate company feedback **By Chanyanuch Chutitham, Arissara Ratanachotviwat and Araya Engpornsin**

Like several members of her generation, 22-year-old Bunnaporn Javisuthunsa prefers internet shopping to going to real, physical stores. Bunnaporn finds that practically everything she could possibly want is purchasable online.

"Once, I was suffering from severe acne problems," she said. "I started looking for advice on how to treat my acne on the internet at various websites."

After weighing her options, Bunnaporn found a powdered product promising to zap teenage acne. The brand appeared to be popular, as implied by the comments. The college student thought she'd found a solid product to treat her condition. Besides, she'd read every review of the product that she could find.

"Some reviews said the product could make the acne go away overnight," said Bunnaporn. "Some said it could heal any kind of acne without any side effects."



CUSTOMERS AT YOUR SERVICE: An online advertisement to recruit people to write product reviews.

The reviews also offered instructions on how to use the product — dissolve the powder in water, apply the resulting paste and leave on overnight.

But despite following the precise instructions, Bunnaporn was in for a surprise when she looked in the mirror the morning after.

“When I woke up, my whole face was swollen and red,” she said. “The doctor said my reaction could have been worse if I hadn’t gone to the hospital fast.

“We can never know whether we’re looking at a fake review or one from real customers,” she concluded.

In that moment, Bunnaporn felt she had strong reason to believe that the vendor had neglected to disclose any information about undesired side effects. The reviews did not caution users about any side effects at all.

Asked if she would stop shopping online due to her bad experience, Bunnaporn said she wouldn’t. “Next time, I’d be more cautious, though. I won’t believe positive reviews so easily.”

The convenience of online shopping has led people to use laptops and mobile phones to run personal errands, from internet banking to renting movies and shopping, with a single click.

Some prefer online shopping because they can peruse the “objective” third-party reviews beforehand. These customer experiences can be genuine and useful sometimes.

But as online vendors seek to raise competition, some may intervene to raise their own appeal.

“Reviews have become rather important in [consumer] decision-making factors over the past few years,” said Sascha Funk, a lecturer in new media studies at Thammasat University.

“Statistics show that a significant amount of e-commerce customers are directly being influenced by peer recommendations, as well as online reviews, as they seem to present a real look into the products and services that are about to be purchased.”

Thailand leads the world in its reliance on social media to do shopping, according to a study by accounting firm PricewaterhouseCooper (PwC). More than half (51%) of online shoppers in Thailand said they purchase goods directly via various social media channels, outpacing India at 32%, Malaysia (31%) and China (27%), according to PwC’s annual Total Retail survey in 2016.

One study found that social media influenced 78% of shoppers globally, up from 68% last year. About 92% of emerging-market shoppers buy



PHOTO: 123RF

HOW TO SPOT FAKE REVIEWS

1) Don’t look at the star rating. The star rating is generally assigned quickly and clumsily.

2) Look for users’ impression of the product, not simply reviews listing off the features of the product. Some reviewers may simply write the feedback based on information received from the seller.

3) Check the timing and number of reviews.

If a product receives a lot of praise within a short period after it has been introduced, don’t rush into a buying decision yet. Some products require a certain length of time to verify results.

4) Cross-check with different reviewers for more details and see whether the reviews are published on a closed or open platform.

5) Be sceptical with ultra-positive or negative feedback because they can come from either bogus writers or market competitors of the product.

6) Apply critical thinking before making purchase decisions.



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products based on social media recommendations. Some 60% of respondents cited price as the most influential factor on where and how they shop.

The PwC report also found that 53% of Thai online shoppers said customer reviews helped influence their buying behaviour.

"Here in Thailand we can see an insane amount of paid social media endorsements in the form of product reviews by social media stars, which shows that brands consider reviews important marketing tools," said Funk.

The largest demographic of online shoppers are millennials or people aged 18-34 years old who are much less inclined to turn to in-store representatives for advice.

"Online selling has become more popular because everyone can easily navigate it to find exactly what they want," said Phailinrat Sudket, a content and review writer.

"Even a grandmother can do it if she has internet access."

NOT AS PLANNED

In June last year, Warit Lertsupthaworn had set a plan to visit Japan. It was the first time the third-year student was travelling with friends, unaccompanied by parents.

To plan his trip, Warit searched the internet for cheap accommodation options to save money. With the help of a hotel review app, he found and booked a hostel.

"In the review, people described the hotel as clean and tidy," said Warit. "People gave it five stars. People complimented it. They said it was very good."

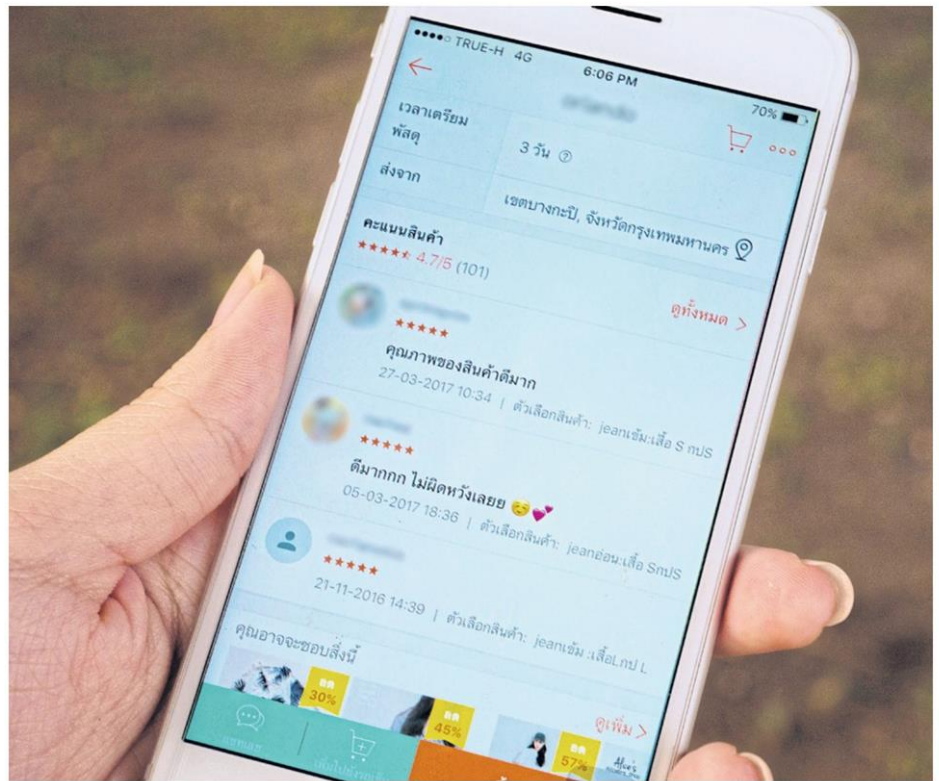
Once he landed in Japan, Warit headed for his hostel eagerly, but he was in for a surprise. "Honestly, when I first arrived, I thought I was in the wrong hostel," he said.

The room was a far cry from the attractive photos he had seen online. It was plain dirty and untidy, said Warit.

"I found hair, probably even some pubic hair, on the sheet and mattress. There was also dirt everywhere. I had to sleep with a clean fabric covering my face. It was that dirty," he said.

Warit said that while he mostly enjoyed his trip, he learned an expensive lesson.

"It made me realise that all those reviews we read should not be wholeheartedly trusted," he said. "My experience with the hostel certainly has dropped the credibility of online reviews in my eyes."



SELLING POINTS: Over half of online shoppers consider customer reviews in their buying decisions, but experts say a majority of online reviews are likely fake.

According to the Electronic Transactions Development Agency, e-commerce value in Thailand exceeded two trillion baht in 2014. Internet vending is a fast-growing market.

Fake reviews have emerged as competition grows in online selling. Some vendors are even willing to pay people to write fake reviews from different IP addresses.

"This fake review phenomenon is a consequence of the increase of choices in the market which in turn has increased competition," Phailinrat explained.

STICKING IT TO FAKERS

Online vendors like Amazon have taken tough measures against fake reviews. A couple years ago, they took legal action against over 1,000 sellers soliciting fake reviews.

Last year Amazon introduced a new rule stating that users can only leave five reviews per week on products that they did not purchase on the website to stop false feedback. Previously,

the number was unlimited.

Phailinrat estimates that false feedback, or fake reviews, constitute a majority of online review content. She says that over 80% of review writers have never tested the products beforehand and that they wrote them since they were solicited.

"Paid review writers can write reviews even if they've received only three sentences of information about the products," she said.

However, those solicited to write reviews are not always at fault. Sometimes, they are instructed to write a review directly after they use the product, affording them limited time to see if it really offers long-term results.

"If the company does not provide the full facts or let the product sink in, writers cannot properly assess the product's true quality," Phailinrat explained.

Many online reviews exaggerate benefits, saying consumers can "lose weight in one day" or "have white skin overnight". In scientific

terms, it's impossible for these descriptions to be true, but for marketing purposes they are considered acceptable. Consumers reeled into their tempting promises could face unexpected consequences and be dissatisfied.

For most products, users need at least several weeks to see if a cosmetic product or weight-loss solution works.

But most advertisers cannot afford to wait that long for feedback, said Phailinrat. They need to solicit reviews as soon as the products hit the market.

According to the Thai Consumer Protection Law Act, consumers have "the right to expect safety in the use of goods or services". If they should experience any harm from product or service consumption, they have "the right to have the injury considered and compensated in accordance with the laws on such matters or with the provision of this act".

However, when it comes to online reviews, a lawyer who asked not to be named said it's hard to prove if the review writers intended to actively harm consumers in the judicial process.

Experience and satisfaction rates are highly subjective.

The court grants more attention to practical and tangible evidence.

"People normally sue the company, not the presenter," the lawyer said.

While consumers call them "fake reviews", review writers see them as only "marketing strategies". Phailinrat compares review content to mainstream media advertising.

"Everything is exaggerated in the marketing world — not only in online reviews," adds Phailinrat. "This also happens with commercials, printed advertisements and radio commercials."

She also pointed out that most review writers would disavow responsibility by arguing "the effectiveness of the product depends on the individual" at the end of review content, similarly to when a commercial tags on the saying "This picture is for advertising only". ■