



Fake Reviews

by [Christopher Elliott, Special for USA TODAY Dec. 27, 2015](#)

Maybe it was her location in Pakistan that made it hard to believe she was reviewing luxury hotels in Providenciales, a Caribbean island. Maybe it was the polished language she used, which seemed lifted straight from a promotional brochure. Or it could have been the reviews, all of which awarded the maximum five dots to the properties.

“I’ve always been a big believer in TripAdvisor,” says Bob Cowen, who owns an aerial photography company in Farmington Hills, Mich., and spotted MelissaK’s reviews on a recent afternoon. He reported her posts.

Cowen’s experience is more common than you’d think. No one knows the exact number of fake reviews online, but experts estimate that anywhere from one-third to one-half of the reviews you see are not real, according Shannon Wilkinson, CEO of Reputation Communications, a New York-based online reputation management company.

“Few, if any, sites validate the legitimacy of their reviewers,” she says.

TripAdvisor didn’t respond to specific questions about MelissaK’s account, but several days after Cowen reported her suspicious posts, several of her reviews were removed. When I asked about them, all of her reviews vanished.

Kevin Carter, a TripAdvisor spokesman, said the account had been under investigation by its team of content specialists before Cowen reported it. Her reviews were removed, he said, because “they do not meet our submission guidelines.”

Here’s another troubling statistic: 65% of consumers trust the reviews on review sites, according to a recent Accenture study. By comparison, 52% trusted the reviews on a hotel-branded site. Reputation management specialists, disgruntled former employees and guests with an ax to grind continue to populate the Internet with false information.

Fake online reviews are such a problem that Amazon, which hosts user-generated reviews on its products, filed a lawsuit in April against several companies that it alleged sold bogus reviews. In October, it sued more than 1,000 individual reviewers, claiming they participated in the ruse.

Governments are starting to crack down on fake reviews, too. Last year, for example, the Italian government fined TripAdvisor \$613,000 for publishing misleading information. That followed a seven-month investigation into whether the website had taken adequate measures to avoid puEduard de Boer, a Netherlands-based reputation management expert, says the reason for the persistent problem is simple: “One more star increases the volume of the business significantly.”

The harm to consumers is immeasurable. Who hasn't read a five-star review and said, "Sounds like the perfect hotel"? Studies suggest a strong link between positive reviews and bookings, but how many of those were based on a false premise?

Businesses suffer, too. Jim Stern, an innkeeper from Charlottesville, Va., has attended conferences where guests are coached by travel "hacking" experts on how to leverage the system for a free night's lodging. "They told guests how to use fake reviews — or the threat of them — to get discounts or other accommodations," he says. The prospect of a bad review on Yelp or Trip-Advisor is too often enough to compel a hotelier to comp a room or a meal.

The fix won't be easy. Review sites must ensure that only the reviews of actual guests get published. A movement in the U.K. called "No Receipts, No Review" calls on sites such as TripAdvisor to refuse to publish a review unless a customer can show a photo of an actual receipt.

Carter, the TripAdvisor spokesman, says that's not practical because of the volume of reviews. Instead, TripAdvisor puts its reviews through a tracking system, "and we map the how, what, where and when of each review."

"We back that up with a team of over 300 content specialists globally, who work 24/7 to maintain the quality of our reviews," he said. "They investigate every review that is flagged for inspection by our system and act on the reports we get from our community, which in itself is a self-regulating force. The report Mr. Cowen provided is a good example of how a vigilant member of our community supports our efforts."

Still, consumers who use reader-generated reviews in their purchasing decisions need to be vigilant about fakes. Perhaps hundreds of millions of dollars of business have gone to undeserving hotels and restaurants as a result. We deserve reviews that are 100% real every time.