

Facebook groups trading fake Amazon reviews remain rampant

Lee, Dave; Murphy, Hannah . FT.com ; London (Aug 12, 2020).

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

An investigation by Which? discovered dozens of groups on the platform, several with tens of thousands of members, that were set up to game Amazon's review system by offering refunds or commissions in exchange for favourable reviews. Having strong reviews is one of a number of important factors that boost a product's presence on Amazon's highly competitive marketplace, with the cost of paying for dishonest reviews greatly offset by the resulting placement within the store's rankings. Which? said it found a bluetooth speaker product being shared on a Facebook group, with members told they would receive a full refund in exchange for a review.

FULL TEXT

Facebook groups enabling the creation of fraudulent Amazon reviews are thriving, seven months after the social network assured the UK's competition regulator it would curb the behaviour.

An investigation by Which? discovered dozens of groups on the platform, several with tens of thousands of members, that were set up to game Amazon's review system by offering refunds or commissions in exchange for favourable reviews.

Which?'s investigation was a follow-up to its work last year that discovered the practice was rampant on Facebook. It led to the network, and ecommerce site eBay, signing an agreement with the UK's Competition and Markets Authority to "better identify, investigate and respond to fake and misleading reviews".

Since then, the situation on eBay seems to have improved, with Which? researchers unable to find any sales of fake reviews when repeating the investigation. On Facebook, however, the level of activity appears to be unchanged.

"Our research shows that review-trading groups continue to thrive on Facebook, leaving shoppers at huge risk of being duped into buying products on Amazon that have been boosted by fake reviews," said Natalie Hitchens from Which?.

Which? said Facebook had removed several groups while it was investigating, and a further 11 once alerted to them. But the Financial Times was able to access a number of groups on Wednesday, many with thousands of offers being posted per day.

Offers to review a product in return for various incentives are made by so-called "agents" who request that interested reviewers take their conversation private. One agent, whose profile picture used a stock image of a blonde woman, told the FT: "I'm an honest man."

When asked if they were aware the practice was illegal, the agent said: "Yes. Will you order from me now? Please oder [sic]."

The fraudulent behaviour comes as Facebook faces growing calls to better police its platform and protect its users. In the first half of 2020 alone, it took down 3.2bn fake accounts and 3.3bn instances of spam.

Facebook told the Financial Times the fraudulent activity was not allowed on its platform, and that it had removed some groups brought to its attention by Which? and other groups prior to Which? notifying the company.

It added that it had updated its policies and was exploring the use of automated technology to help it better tackle the problem, although the coronavirus crisis had put a strain on its resources in this area.

"We have been working with the CMA for some time to help address this challenging issue and our safety and security teams are continually working to prevent this kind of activity," a Facebook spokesperson said.

A spokesperson for the CMA said: "As a result of our action, Facebook committed to improving the way it identifies, investigates and responds to fake and misleading reviews . . . We'll look carefully at these worrying findings and raise them with Facebook as a matter of urgency."

Having strong reviews is one of a number of important factors that boost a product's presence on Amazon's highly competitive marketplace, with the cost of paying for dishonest reviews greatly offset by the resulting placement within the store's rankings.

Which? said it found a bluetooth speaker product being shared on a Facebook group, with members told they would receive a full refund in exchange for a review. On Amazon, the product appeared top of the search rankings for "bluetooth speaker", had 2,558 ratings and a 4.9/5 customer score. Variants of the same product were helped further by an "Amazon's Choice" endorsement —since removed.

"We know that customer trust is hard to earn and easy to lose," Amazon said in a statement. "So we strive to protect customer trust in products Amazon's Choice highlights."

It added: "We also proactively work with social media sites to report bad actors who are cultivating abusive reviews outside our store, and we've sued thousands of bad actors for attempting to abuse our reviews systems."

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