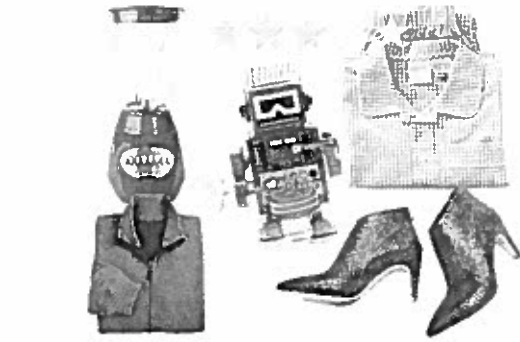


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When Shopping Online, Can You Trust the Reviews?

Retailers are reading customer comments because they help sales and credibility; the magic of 4.2 stars



To encourage more online shoppers to write reviews of the products they buy, retailers are making reviews more user-friendly, with options to sort and share photos. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES (3); ISTOCK (BLENDER, BOOTS)



By

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The holiday shopping season has only just begun, but the reviews are already in—the online product reviews, that is.

Retailers care more than ever about the commentary shoppers leave on their websites, and they are stepping up efforts to encourage more customers to share their thoughts. At the same time, the chains are doing more to make the reviews useful and engaging, adding photos and other features, while discouraging anonymous commenters by verifying actual customers.

Many shoppers head straight for user reviews when researching products online. Some 66% of shoppers who research online say they read customer reviews on websites, according to the Deloitte 2016 Holiday Survey, an online poll of more than 5,000 consumers.

Online reviews influence store shoppers too. The Deloitte survey found among shoppers who plan to use smartphones for holiday shopping, 51% said they would use them to read reviews, up from 46% last year.

Yet only about 4% of shoppers who make a purchase will write a review when asked to do so, says Matt Moog, chief executive of PowerReviews, which manages shopper reviews for more than a thousand retailers globally.

Retailers want more authentic reviews from real shoppers on their sites, and fewer fake reviews from people with an agenda, who may create an account solely to leave derogatory comments or hype. Amazon earlier this year began requiring reviewers to write from an account that has spent at least \$50 on a valid credit card, in part to eliminate such reviewers, who are also known as “sock puppets,” an Amazon spokeswoman says.

In contrast, retailers say “verified buyers,” as they are known in the industry, provide more useful information for future shoppers. They also tend to be more complimentary. Verified buyers leave an average of 4.34 stars in their review, versus 3.89 from anonymous consumers, according to a 2015 study by Northwestern University’s Spiegel Digital and Database Research Center, commissioned by PowerReviews.

Most retailers don’t hide or erase bad reviews. Increasingly, they monitor reviews and respond to complaints that might arise there.

Negative reviews serve an important role, says PowerReviews’s Mr. Moog, bringing authenticity to a site’s library of reviews. “It is very important to not screen out, in any way, reviews because they are negative,” he says. Some online sellers solicit positive reviews by sending customers a follow-up email inviting them to share their thoughts only if they love their purchase—a practice Mr. Moog discourages.

Five-star ratings aren’t the most influential, the Northwestern study found. What’s known as “purchase likelihood” peaks when the average rating is between 4.2 and 4.5 stars.

Taylor Espinoza, a 23-year-old Arizona State University student, doesn’t trust salespeople in stores, largely, she says, because she used to work in retail. “I know their main goal is a sale,” she says, “whereas online they are not pushing that.”

To encourage more shoppers to write reviews, shoe and apparel retailer Zappos.com, owned by Amazon, launched a customer loyalty program in September that rewards participation. Each review is worth 100 points—the same number of points a shopper gets for spending \$10, says Kedar Deshpande, director of marketing. Points are awarded regardless of whether a review is positive or negative.

Etsy uses follow-up messages, including mobile push alerts, to encourage shoppers to write reviews of purchases. Between 20% and 25% of purchases result in a review, according to a spokeswoman. Customers who leave a five-star review can include a photo of their purchase. More than two million photos have been shared since the feature was launched in 2015.

At apparel, bedding and home decor retailer Garnet Hill, shoppers get an email asking for a review about three weeks after a purchase. The time frame is meant to give them a chance to experience the product before weighing in. “It makes them come from a more knowledgeable standpoint,” says Wendy Thayer, director of brand marketing.

Customers are asked to use stars to rate the product overall, and in quality and value. They are asked to provide their location, gender and age range along with their comments. A third-party vendor screens the text, eliminating mentions of competitors and limited-time promotions.

Retailers are doing more to make reviews useful to the shoppers who read them. Best Buy’s website now pulls out the most common words into sortable, clickable lists of “pros” and “cons.” A Samsung LED Smart TV had more than 1,800 reviews, with more than 935 mentions of “picture quality” as a reason to buy, and at least one dozen mentions of the word “remote” that were critical.

Target has added descriptors so reviewers can award stars in categories such as “ease of assembly” for furniture, or “design” for home decor items. The big box retailer has also simplified voting so other users can deem a review “helpful” or “not helpful,” as a way for shoppers who don’t write reviews to still engage with them, a spokesman says.

“I always scroll down to see if there are reviews,” says Ana Tichelaar, a 24-year-old in Dallas who works in social media advertising and shops at least once a week. She looks for fit information and says information about the reviewer, such as age, height and weight, all help inform her purchases.

But for all that she uses reviews, Ms. Tichelaar says she hasn’t ever actually written one. It’s a hassle to log in before writing a review, she says. She would prefer to leave an anonymous review. “I’m really grateful for everyone that does write them,” she adds.