

# Word of...Keyboard.

**User-Generated Reviews in the Web 2.0 Community**

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## User-Generated Reviews in the Web 2.0 Community

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Chances are, we've all experienced, or will experience, shopping for something that we know nothing—zip, nada, zilch—about. In fact, when we merely think of a single product or service, it's possible for a plethora of brands to come to mind. Take digital cameras, for example: there's Panasonic, Canon, Fuji, Nikon, and Kodak brands. Add to that the variety of cameras within these brands: Canon's PowerShot A570IS or the PowerShot SD750 7.1MP, Fuji's Z10 or the Fujifilm Finepix F40fd 8.3MP, or Panasonic's Lumix DMC-LS70S 7MP. Even the hotel industry can prove pretty complex, with bed and breakfasts, specialty and boutique hotels, and the classic chain hotels. The sheer amount of options can prove overwhelming--and then ombiine all these options with a company bombarding you with information designed to do one thing and one thing only: sell, sell, sell. It is throughout this process (or just the shopping process in general) that user-generated reviews can prevent a grueling experience filled with confusion and uncertainty. User-generated reviews on websites such as Amazon, TripAdvisor, and Google Maps allow for the opportunity for customers to gain some control over a website's content and communicate with each other via "word of mouth" (or, in this case, word of keyboard!) about products and services. Through these reviews, users can read about and relate experiences and thoughts about displayed products, allowing for the establishment of a community on the website where one would not have existed before.

### The Nature of User-Generated Reviews

User-generated reviews exist on sites with interfaces allowing users to post reviews and comments about the displayed  products and services. In other words, these sites allow you, the user, to communicate what you think is the truth about a product, and read what other users think about them as well—instead of merely relying on the information the company or manufacturer provides. According to Brian Eisenberg, the founder of a New York-based e-commerce consultancy, "Most sites do a pretty poor job of giving enough information to the customer to make a purchase.



Less and less people are trusting organizations for their product information -- the BS levels are a little higher" (Leggatt 1). So in general, user-generated reviews

allow people to communicate with others who have had some experience with a product or service, enabling "word of mouth" to strongly influence customers when shopping online.

And strongly influence they do! According to JupiterResearch, one study found that 77% of online shoppers read the reviews and ratings of products posted by others, and become incredibly loyal to these sites because of the presence of these reviews (Owyang 1). The fact that this many people take other users' thoughts into serious consideration shows that the

Internet is no longer a solitary place; users are reaching out to each other, sharing information based on actual experience, and forming a community on the web.

Some websites featuring user-generated reviews include:

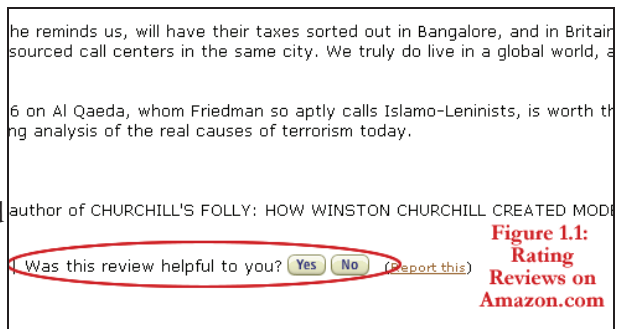
- *Amazon.com*: Reviews on products ranging from books, to technology, to jewelry
- *CurledUp.com*: Book reviews
- *TripAdvisor.com*: Reviews on hotels, bed and breakfasts, and other lodging in a given area
- *Maps.google.com*: Reviews on businesses in an area that a user maps (created by either google users or drawn from sites like CitySearch.com)
- *TrustedPlaces.com*: Restaurant, cafes, bars and hotels reviews

## Community

When website users have the opportunity to communicate with each other over shared interests, a community is often formed. One of the main unique features of these communities is that user-generated reviews are largely user-moderated. For example, users are often allowed to vote on which members are being the most helpful, what reviews or comments should be deemed inappropriate by the website management team, etc.

Features that allow user-moderated activity include:

**Ratings:** As shown in Figure 1.1, many user-generated review sites, such as *Tripadvisor.com* and *Amazon.com*, allow users to rate reviews in terms of how helpful they are.



**Figure 1.1:**  
Rating  
Reviews on  
Amazon.com



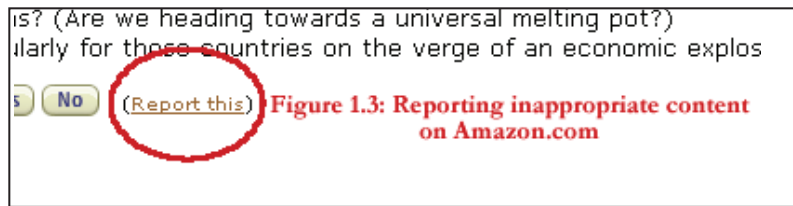
**Figure 1.2: Most Helpful  
Reviews on Amazon.com**

Furthermore, on *Amazon.com*, this system allows the reviews rated as the most helpful to appear at the top of the list, making them significantly more accessible to users looking for useful information (Figure 1.2). In

this sense, the *users* dictate which reviewers are the best by *voting* for them—making the site a sort of democratic environment. Any user’s voice has the potential to be extremely strong on sites with user-generated reviews—even if are they themselves are not reviewers.

**Reporting Option:** User-generated review sites often offer users the option to report content they feel is inappropriate to the website team who, if they are in agreement, will remove the content from the site.

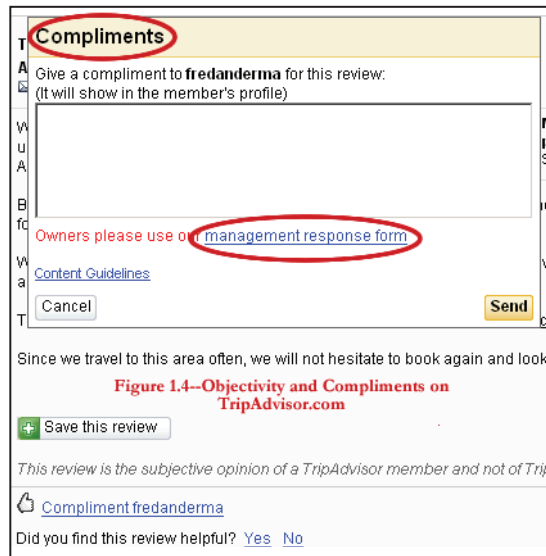
For instance, if a review is obviously incredibly biased, offensive to a community member or just plain ol' spam (ie. an unrelated ad where a review



**Figure 1.3: Reporting inappropriate content on Amazon.com**

should be), the user can report this content to the website management team, who will then take appropriate action. This reporting option is shown in figure 1.3.

Furthermore, on TripAdvisor.com, the management team of a hotel has the option of responding to any negative reviews about their business-- establishing objectivity and the ability for them to redeem themselves in they eyes of potential customers (Figure 1.4)



**Figure 1.4--Objectivity and Compliments on TripAdvisor.com**

## Comments

Although comments are not unique to sites with user-generated reviews (or compliments, as they are called on TripAdvisor.com--Figure 1.4), but one unique feature does exist on Amazon.com. Users can comment on the reviews, and then other users vote as to whether or not the comment is relevant to the discussion posed in previous comments—furthering the user’s ability to moderate the content on the website (Figure 1.5).



**Figure 1.5--Judgement of comment on Amazon**

## Badges

Badges are another kind of user rating system, except they are rewarded to users by the website team. They signify, among other things, that the user routinely contributes valuable content to the website.

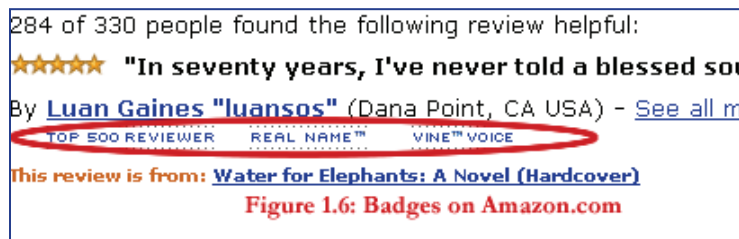
Examples of these badges are:

*#1 Reviewer, Top 10, Top 100, Top 1,000* :Reviewers ranked in terms of valuable content by Amazon.com within the community. These badges are temporary, and are among the badges given in terms of vote count in ratings (ie. How many products the user has reviewed, and how many votes contributed to the ratings on these reviews.)

*Real Name*: Users who choose to use their real name automatically receive these badges. The name is the same as the one on their credit card, which helps others in the community identify them.

*“The”*: This badge indicates that the person to whom it was granted is “the” celebrity most people associate with that Real Name. For example if Johnny Depp formed an Amazon.com account under his own name and wrote reviews, a “real name” badge and a “The” would appear under his name, signifying that he is indeed *THE* Johnny Depp.

Badges on Amazon.com appear both in a user's profile and under their names on their reviews (Figure 1.6)



*Controversy*

*Bias and Rigging*

On some sites, especially travel sites such as TripAdvisor.com, businesses are often rumored to post glowing reviews about their own services, calling into question the altogether validity of these reviews. Examples of problems with users rigging reviews include, according to KarmaWeb:

- Writing duplicate reviews in order to write quickly and to build up reviewer reputation (ie. duplicates)
- Writing unusually positive reviews to butter the publisher and the author in hope of landing a job as a full-time reviewer
- People with vested financial interest in the success of a product have family members or friends create positive reviews for their product and negative reviews for competing products
- Writing reviews to promote other web sites or substitute products (2).

For these reasons, some countries are really cracking down on those who write biased and misleading reviews in order to maintain the honest environment on these sites. According to Laura Papworth, in the United Kingdom “Hotels, restaurants and online shops that post glowing reviews about themselves under false identities could face criminal prosecution under new rules that come into force next year...for ‘falsely representing oneself as a consumer’” (1).

### *Problems with Badges*

The process of awarding badges has also received some debate. Badges are rewarded on the basis of how many reviews are submitted and how many votes a user gets in terms of their helpfulness. Since everything with a UPC code, from digital cameras to books, can be reviewed, some people surpass others quickly in the number of reviews and therefore votes, too, merely because of the nature of the products they review (Gaines 1). A person who reviews exclusively books, for example, will review significantly slower than a person who reviews technology, since reading books takes longer than just reviewing a product—so they will get less votes because they don't have as many reviews. Therefore, a bit of unfairness exists in someone who submits extremely good reviews in small quantities going up against someone who submits just as good reviews for something that merely takes less time to review.

Despite these controversies, user-generated reviews still allow not only for a community, but they also establish a sort of democracy on the web. They allow users to speak out about a product or service, drawing on their own experiences. Users moderate the site, rating reviews as helpful or not and reporting any inappropriate content, and thus a hierarchy is formed within the community. Sites such as Amazon, TripAdvisor, and Google Maps all allow users to escape a company's bias and revert to the “word of mouth” method of information transmission, something that proves that the members of the community present in Web 2.0 trust each other for advice—in a place where a community didn't even exist before.

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