

Study: Behavior of Online Reviewers Affects Their Credibility

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Consumers increasingly rely on recommendations in online forums, such as Amazon.com and Angieslist.com, when deciding which products and services to buy. But, in most cases, they've never met the posters of these reviews.

Without traditional cues to assess the credibility of reviewers, people evaluate not only the content of opinions, but also the online behavior of posters, according to a recent article in the *Journal of Marketing Research* titled "Listening to Strangers."

Factors influencing the perceived value of reviews include posters' speed of response to queries, the length of their opinions, back-and-forth dialogue, and a reputation for successfully answering others' queries, found the researchers.

The study was conducted by Nicholas Lurie, assistant professor of marketing at Georgia Tech College of Management, and Allen Weiss and Deborah MacInnis, marketing professors at the University of Southern California.

"Imagine that you send an e-mail to members of your neighborhood association asking for recommendations for painters. How do you decide whose recommendation to trust?," Lurie asks. "Our study suggests that you are likely to give greater weight to those who respond quickly, write a lengthy response, and engage you in a back-and-forth discussion."

In addition to finding that reviewers' current behavior affects value perceptions, the researchers found that previous reviews can help or hurt depending on whether information seekers want to make a decision about buying a particular product/service or just learn more about the options.

If information seekers want to learn more about a particular topic, such as important features to consider when buying a digital camera, they value recommendations from information providers who have made multiple contributions on the same subject. But they tend to discount advice from people whose posting history shows recommendations made across a wide variety of topics.

The reverse is true when information seekers have moved from the learning stage to the decision-making point. When people aim to make a decision, they value posters who've made recommendations across a wide variety of topics.

For example, in an online marketing forum, a CEO with a decision-making orientation who needs help choosing between different sales-force automation software packages might value information from an advisor with a wide range of interests more than the recommendations of someone with highly specialized expertise.

The researchers also found that receiving large amounts of information is more important for individuals with a learning goal than for decision-makers.

"Our results suggest that it is critical for marketers (as providers of information) to discern whether potential customers have a learning or a decision-making goal," write the researchers. "Making strategic choices about how to respond to customer inquiries and from whom such responses should come is particularly relevant to current marketing

environments in which communication is customer initiated.”

Provided by Georgia Institute of Technology

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