

Amazon's elite product reviewers

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Comments about a product online can make or break a sale. But who are the people behind the reviews and why do they do it?

In a new Cornell study, Trevor Pinch, professor of sociology and of science and technology studies and author of 14 books, and Web entrepreneur Filip Kesler conducted an [online survey](#) of 166 of Amazon.com's "top 1,000" reviewers, as identified by Amazon. The reviewers write about everything from obscure books and mainstream films to such products as the ThighMaster or a dog brush.

The researchers found that of the top reviewers:

- 85 percent had received free products from publishers, agents, authors and manufacturers;
- 78 percent of these often or always reviewed such free products;
- 70 percent were male;
- 40 percent are writers themselves;
- 11 percent, one of the largest occupational groups of reviewers, are retirees.

The study is summarized in a chapter in the forthcoming book, "Managing Overflow in Affluent Societies" (Routledge, 2011), edited by Barbara Czarniawska and Orvar Löfgren.

"The top reviewers publish many thousands of [reviews](#)," Pinch said. "They're almost making a second life, a second career out of it. The ranking system at Amazon is secret, but no doubt it's based on some

combination of the number of reviews written, but also the number of reviews found to be helpful" by readers of the site.

When Amazon launched in 1995, it sold only books and employed literary editors to review its titles. Then the company found it could simply use customer reviews to populate its pages. As Amazon grew from a bookseller to a general retailer, Pinch found that reviewers roamed further afield of their initial interests. He discovered, for example, a published poet reviewing a toilet brush, a novelist's thoughts on a pair of scissors and a professor's review of a light bulb. "This is a simple way to up your productivity," Pinch said.

Pinch said styles range widely, from tongue-in-cheek to stream of consciousness to "extremely well crafted. The quality of the writing can be surprisingly good. These are no slouches."

What do they get out of it? "Most reviewers write for enjoyment, self-expression or personal reward," Pinch said. "But once they get a ranking, they have to maintain their ranking, and some of them told us that their motivation changed. They became hooked on it, almost addicted. Because if you stop, your ranking drops."

There is also a sense of virtual community for more than half of [reviewers](#) who use the social media site Amazon Friends, Pinch said. Top contributors can join a program called "Amazon Vine" to obtain freebies and choose whether to review them.

Provided by Cornell University

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