

'Elite' Yelp reviewers live like stars

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Few writers live a more glamorous lifestyle than Sukhraj "Suki" Beasla.

The 32-year-old, self-appointed restaurant critic travels where she wants, writes what she wants, and is published regularly without the bother of having her prose edited. Peers respect her; her subjects, if they know who she is, look upon her with fear and treat her like royalty.

Nearly every month, she attends a lavish party - free food, free booze and swag at happening spots in Orange County, Calif. The parties are staged exclusively for Yelp's most prolific reviewers, the so-called "Elite Yelpers." Restaurants, clubs, bowling alleys and other venues pick up the tab as a way to gain exposure.

Organized by Yelp employees in Orange County, Los Angeles, San Diego and other markets, such events are part of a longstanding effort by the review website to grow a force of writers willing to regularly submit [reviews](#) for free. Many Elites have written more than 100 reviews - Beasla's total tops 900 - although the website has no official standard for joining the inner-circle, said Yelp spokesman Vince Sollitto.

Yelp benefits from having a voluminous flow of reviews, now estimated at 1 million a month. The fresh content keeps Yelp appearing high in Google search results and makes the website more attractive to consumers. Yelp argues that its core group of experienced reviewers, motivated only by a zeal for sharing personal experiences, provides the purest source of consumer opinions.

Elite Yelpers typically have demonstrated a willingness to write impartial reviews while also submitting photographs, checking in at local businesses, and participating in the website's online forums, Sollitto said.

"There are people who really live and breathe this idea that, 'I am an ambassador for my community, I am an investigator for my community, and I am going to share my opinions to help others in my community,' " Sollitto said.

Yelp will not disclose the number of Elite reviewers, except to say they are based around the world. "Yelp is different than most review companies in that we actually have people on the ground in every market where we exist," Sollitto said. "We have a community manager in each of our 100-plus markets worldwide - and that community manager is there to nurture and support and help the community of Yelpers."

Beasla, a Costa Mesa, Calif., resident who works as a social-media manager in Santa Ana, is the author of a food blog, EatSukiEat.com, and also posts a foodie motto alongside her Yelp profile picture: "Veni, Vidi, Edi - I came, I saw, I ate." She said she takes pride in her integrity as a critic, declining free meals because she knows the restaurants expect favorable reviews in return.

She is a soft touch, however, in reviewing Yelp Elite parties. To date, Beasla has gone to 52 such shindigs and has given perfect 5-star ratings to 51 of them. Only a December 2010 Christmas bash at Access Media Group in Fountain Valley, Calif., earned less - 4 stars - due to the huge turnout. "(The) mass of people jam packed in here was a little crazy and making me claustrophobic," Beasla wrote.

Because Elite Yelpers are considered strong, objective sources, their reviews tend to appear atop review lists.

Elite reviewer Kim Hooper, 33, a professional advertising copywriter who lives in Dana Point, Calif., has authored close to 300 reviews in part because "I love going out to eat (and) I love to write." She regards her reviews as a chronicle of her culinary adventures and enjoys directing people to places she likes.

"My friends will say, 'Oh, I'm going to Washington, D.C., do you have any recommendations?' " Hooper said. "I can say, 'Go to this place - it'll be a long wait but it will be worth it.' "

Negative reviews draw a response from business operators about three-quarters of the time, she said. Typically, managers want to know when she visited and who provided the poor service so the problem can be corrected. "(They'll say,) 'If you want to come back in, dessert's on us,' " Hooper said. "It's like a feedback loop."

Hooper, whose online motto is "I Yelp, therefore I am," said she has been approached by unscrupulous individuals offering to pay her for reviews.

"I've never done it. I think that's terrible," Hooper said. "When I look at reviews on Yelp, I feel like I can tell the ones that are fake. They're really generic, over-exaggerated accolades. No details."

Yelp continuously attempts to identify and filter out bogus reviews by means of a computer algorithm. In September, the site delivered an emotional shock to 34-year-old Lily Jeung, a self-professed "huge foodie" who attended University High School in Irvine, Calif., before moving to Portland, Ore.

Jeung had written about 1,100 reviews when Yelp abruptly closed her account, explaining in an email: "Our systems flagged a number of the reviews you wrote in connection with an investigation of businesses that

have tried to pay for positive reviews. Unfortunately, this decision is final and not appealable."

"It's like someone just deleted my entire diary - my entire food diary," Jeung said. "It's devastating. Everyone knows me as a Yelp girl."

Denying the accusation, Jeung posted a response on Yelp defending her tendency to write favorable reviews: "(A) lot of the reviewers bully businesses. ... It's awful! That is why I tend to review up a little."

Jeung also joined a class-action lawsuit filed last month in U.S. District Court in Los Angeles, alleging that Yelp exploits the work of regular, unpaid reviewers in violation of federal minimum-wage laws.

"By shirking its responsibilities to pay its workers, (Yelp) is in essence thumbing its nose both at their workers and the taxing authorities of all states and the U.S. government," the lawsuit alleges.

Sollitto, the Yelp spokesman, called the complaint "a textbook example of a frivolous lawsuit," adding, "The idea that using a free service voluntarily somehow generates an employment relationship is not supported by law."

Beyond the issue of wages, the case potentially could influence what gets posted in Yelp reviews. Under the federal Communications Decency Act of 1996, review websites such as Yelp are not considered responsible for opinions posted by independent consumers. Yelp could lose that protection if reviewers are seen by the courts as employees,, said attorney Randy Rosenblatt, who filed the action.

While the legal issues are sorted out, Beasla is happy doing what she's doing. The Elite Yelper estimates she spends about a quarter of her free time going places and writing reviews. She has rated gas-station

minimarts, public transit services, museums, hotels and taco stands, and refers to the party friends she has met as her "Yelp family."

"It's not just a hobby," Beasla said. "It's grown into something way more."

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