

Crackdown: Amazon sues to stop phony product reviews

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In this Oct. 18, 2010 file photo, an Amazon.com package awaits delivery from UPS in Palo Alto, Calif. Amazon is suing more than 1,000 people for advertising their services writing fake reviews for as little as \$5 as it seeks to crack down on bogus reviews on its site. The complaint filed Friday, Oct. 16, 2015 in King County Superior Court in Seattle marks the latest effort by the online powerhouse to crack down on fraud on its site. (AP Photo/Paul Sakuma, File)

Amazon is stepping up its fight against bogus product reviews on its site,

suining more than 1,000 people for allegedly offering to post glowing write-ups for as little as \$5 apiece.

The complaint, filed in state court in Seattle on Friday, takes aim at what is believed to be a burgeoning practice online: Some people try to make money by writing five-star testimonials about products they have never even tried. And some companies try to boost sales by commissioning such reviews.

Online shoppers are relying more and more on consumer reviews on everything from restaurant meals and Uber rides to hotel rooms and iPhone cases. About 45 percent of consumers consider product reviews when weighing an online purchase, according to Forrester Research.

Retailers have tried to crack down on paid-for bogus reviews in a variety of ways. Other sites that depend on customer-generated reviews, including Yelp and TripAdvisor, use computer algorithms and teams of investigators to detect fraudulent write-ups.

In April, Amazon, the nation's largest online retailer, sued several sites that offered to produce positive reviews. In the latest lawsuit, the company is going after writers of the reviews themselves who have accounts on freelance marketplace Fiverr.com.

The writers promise five-star reviews to companies that sell products on Amazon.com, according to the complaint. In many cases, the writers ask the sellers themselves to write the review, and then put their name on it, the lawsuit alleges.

In one example, a Fiverr seller named "bess98" said she would provide an "awesome" review if the seller provided the text.

Anyone who buys something off Amazon is considered a verified

customer and can write an online review about the product. That's one way Amazon tries to guard against bogus reviews.

In at least one instance, however, a would-be reviewer offered to receive an empty envelope from a seller to make it look as if the person had actually bought the product, according to the lawsuit.

The defendants in the lawsuit are identified only by their online handles because Amazon is still working to determine their real names.

The Seattle company is suing for unspecified damages and an order forcing the users to stop writing fake reviews. It said the offenders are liable for breach of contract for violating Amazon's terms of service.

In a statement, Amazon said the complaint is not against Fiverr.com but against individuals selling reviews and said the vast majority of the write-ups on Amazon.com are authentic.

Fiverr said it removes services that violate its terms of use.

"The challenge of merchants soliciting illegitimate reviews is one that faces all marketplaces and online platforms," Fiverr said in a statement.

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