

# How to spot a fake online review

October 20 2015, by Sarah Skidmore Sell

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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)

Do you trust online reviews? Now that Amazon [is suing](#) more than 1,000 people who allegedly offered to write glowing product reviews for cash, you might reasonably be concerned.

Turns out, deceptive reviews are commonplace online—and so are doubts about them. The research organization Mintel found that 57 percent of surveyed consumers are suspicious of companies or products that only have positive online reviews. And 49 percent believe companies probably give incentives for online reviews.

Fortunately, there are a few good techniques that can help you tell truth from fiction.

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## DON'T TRUST YOURSELF

A team of researchers at Cornell University created a computer algorithm for detecting fake hotel reviews by analyzing the language used in legitimate and phony write-ups. The computer program, Review Skeptic, is accurate about 90 percent of the time, but humans alone performed poorly at determining the truth teller.

"People are terrible," said professor Claire Cardie, who helped develop the system. "I was very surprised. We just cannot tell the difference much more than chance."

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## LISTEN TO THE LANGUAGE

Beware of extremes—overly enthusiastic or [negative reviews](#) are red flags. False reviews tend to use more extreme language to get their message across. So if someone says "It is the most comfortable bed ever," perhaps in all caps, take pause.

Additionally, the Cornell researchers found that when it comes to hotels,

fake reviewers tended not to talk about the spatial details—such as the floor or bathroom. Instead, they focused on the reason they were there, such as describing a recent fake vacation or business trip. In practice, this makes sense because someone who has never been to a location might have a tough time describing it accurately.

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## JUNK THE JARGON

On the flip side, beware of recommendations that read like product manuals. Reviews that repeat the full product name or model number may be an attempt to game the search engine system. And if they use excessive technical or marketing jargon, odds are they aren't providing a genuine review—most real people don't talk like that.

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## REVIEW THE REVIEWER

Check out the profile of the person providing the review, said Louis Ramirez, senior features writer with online deal site DealNews. If they only write [reviews](#) for a particular company, that's a huge warning sign they could have a vested interest in that business. Some sites let people upload pictures of the item they bought, which can help add credibility.

Amazon verifies some of its reviewers, indicating they actually bought the product (although some of the people it's suing allegedly found ways around that). Some other sites only allow posts from people who've made a purchase there. Look closely on the site for their review policies.

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## PAY ATTENTION TO DETAIL

If you think about your own experiences with an unpleasant experience or product, you can probably explain exactly why it was bad. Ramirez suggests if you're unsure about a review, put more stock in someone who provides details of why they didn't like a product ("Oh, the battery only lasted four hours") than in someone who complains more generally ("I hated this laptop. It was horrible").

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