How to boost online ratings

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Have you ever wondered how to get your customers to write more positive reviews? Wait a while before you ask for feedback about a service or product.

In a new *Journal of Consumer Psychology* study, researchers discovered a way to increase the odds of getting a better review. Their data revealed that people who waited longer or traveled farther before authoring a review gave more favorable evaluations.

The investigators analyzed data from more than 166,000 online restaurant reviews on TripAdvisor.com. They used a Google Maps application and information in the reviewer's profile to calculate the distance between the author's home and the restaurant.

"If someone visited a Red Lobster restaurant in their home town and then in another state, he or she gave a better star rating when the restaurant was out of town," says lead author Nina Huang of Temple University in Pennsylvania.

The same positive effect occurred when reviewers waited two, three or more months versus one month or less to write a review. Even more surprising was the discovery that reviewers who experienced both time delay and greater physical distance from the restaurant gave the highest ratings. In other words, two forms of separation created a "boosting" effect.

To understand why the ratings were boosted by time and space distance,

the researchers analyzed specific words in the reviews. They found that people who are farther from home and wait longer to write are more likely to evaluate something in abstract terms using adjectives such as a "pleasant" experience. People who are closer to home and write a review quickly are more likely to focus on specific details about the food, the service and the ambiance and use verbs that are often more negative.

The findings have significant implications for the multi-billion-dollar restaurant industy, Huang says. Business owners may want to consider asking patrons from out-of-town to give reviews. Companies that ask customers to give feedback immediately after a phone call may want to re-evaluate this strategy, she says. It may be wiser to send a follow-up survey via e-mail in the future.

Customer feedback is so valuable that it can influence whether consumers purchase a service, according to a recent survey by Cone Communications. The survey data showed that 85 percent of consumers are more likely to purchase something when an online recommendation is available, and 80 percent said negative reviews led them to change their minds.

Huang's study results also could benefit consumers. It might be wise to take a moment to distinguish between reviews written by locals versus travelers before judging a product or service, she explains.

"When people are reading a review, they assume it is objective," Huang says. "We found that reviews are not always as objective as we thought. Time and space distance is going to bias someone's evaluation of certain experiences."

 More information: Effects of Multiple Psychological Distances on Construal Level: A Field Study of Online Reviews, www.journals.elsevier.com/jour … ces-on-construal-lev