Humorous complaining: Funny online reviews get lots of attention but do they get results?

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Unless you're just looking to entertain your fellow online shoppers, you may want to think twice about writing that funny Amazon or Yelp review. According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, humorous complaints get a lot more attention from other consumers but may not be taken seriously by businesses.

"Humor can help consumers reach other people with words of warning, but it isn't always beneficial when complaining. Humor can signal that a bad situation is okay, and humorous complaints are less likely to lead to sympathy or a response that fixes the situation than non-humorous complaints," write authors A. Peter McGraw (University of Colorado), Caleb Warren (Texas A&M University), and Christina Kan (University of Colorado).

Consumers often use humor in their reviews on sites like Amazon and Yelp, especially when writing negative reviews. For example, one-star reviews on Yelp are the most likely to be rated as funny, while four- and five-star reviews are least likely to be rated as funny.

In one study, consumers were asked to respond to negative Amazon reviews. Although consumers preferred funny reviews and were more likely to find them helpful, they were also less likely to offer compensation or sympathy. Humorous reviews were seen as playful rather than serious, and this reduced the likelihood of wanting to fix the

problem or comfort the complainer.

However, companies shouldn't make the mistake of downplaying humorous complaints. The widespread attention a funny review receives can cause the story to spread through both traditional and social media. For example, when United Airlines refused to compensate musician Dave Carroll for a damaged guitar, his "United Breaks Guitars" parody on YouTube attracted millions of views and gathered enough media attention to create a public relations nightmare for the company.

"Humor is an effective way for complainers to get attention. However, humor doesn't always benefit complainers. Consumers who want others to right a wrong or simply offer social support would benefit from complaining in a more serious manner," the authors conclude.

More information: A. Peter McGraw, Caleb Warren, and Christina Kan. "Humorous Complaining." *Journal of Consumer Research*: February 2015.

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