



Strings can be pulled on hotel-review sites

Until a few months ago, Neha Shah of Holly Springs, N.C., trusted the hotel reviews she found at online sites such as tripadvisor.com. After all, they came from fellow travelers such as herself. But after a disappointing stay at a Zurich hotel that got glowing reviews, she's having second thoughts about the site's value.

"A lot of emphasis was placed on the service of the staff and how friendly they are," says the 37-year-old writer. "But the service was not consistent." And a much-ballyhooed breakfast turned out to be a huge disappointment. "Everyone who reviewed the hotel went on and on about the variety, and it simply did not exist."

TripAdvisor's home page promises "unbiased reviews of hotels, resorts and vacations" from thousands of real travelers. But Shah now suspects that some postings she read might have been planted by hotel staffers looking to boost business. Looking back, she recalls reviews that "read like brochures in many cases."

She might be on to something. As websites such as tripadvisor.com and igougo.com grow in popularity and influence, website executives say hoteliers are going to greater lengths to make sure their properties are reviewed favorably — from encouraging guests to post positive reviews to posting glowing reviews themselves under false names.

"It's happened many times," says Jonathan Haldane, founder and CEO of zoomandgo.com, a travel site that posts user reviews. "As part of our due diligence, we'll phone (a reviewer) to check on them and find it's actually someone in the hotel marketing department posing as a guest."

Haldane says it's often easy to spot the planted reviews; they have a gushing quality that just doesn't ring true. "Hoteliers have a tough time saying anything bad about their own properties," he says. "There's a tone to them, and our staff is trained to look for it."

Unlike some other sites, zoomandgo.com requires reviewers to submit detailed personal information, including their names and phone numbers. Every review that comes into the system is read and vetted by an employee. Even so, "some (fake reviews) obviously have slipped by," Haldane says. The cat-and-mouse game with hoteliers also goes on at igougo.com.

"It's not like you can keep (hotel insiders) from posting," says general manager Calvin Evanoff. Still, the site usually catches the fakes, and if it doesn't, the site's members do, he says. "When they see content that doesn't make sense, they let us know. That's the beauty of the community."

TripAdvisor marketing chief Christine Petersen also cites users as a major deterrent to hoteliers who try to game the system. Petersen notes a case in which a hotel sent guests an e-mail offering them cash if they'd give it a positive review. Within hours, TripAdvisor users had forwarded the e-mail to the website, which deleted the bogus postings that had come in that morning and posted a notice warning of the hotel's strategy.

"We do not approve of any kind of incentives," she says. "Nor do we approve of any kind of soliciting for positive reviews." Even when reviews are honest, they're not always helpful.

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Consumer Reports, which examined online hotel review sites in its March issue, says that "a lot of information (posted by users) is just plain wrong." Some users such as Chris Pool, 40, of Charlotte, a devotee of TripAdvisor, says he's struck by how often reviewers will disagree.

"One posting says how great everything is, and the next posting says it was the worst place ever, he says. "How can there be such a difference of opinion?" He believes Europeans tend to have lower standards than Americans, so they rave about places that are only so-so.

"I often discount the reviews of non-Americans on TripAdvisor," says Pool, a drain pipe salesman who travels often.

Still, despite such flaws, many travelers swear by the sites.

Steve Gunn of Seattle says he often sees postings that "appear just a bit too Pollyannaish, but I've learned to look beyond those."

Instead, the 45-year-old sales manager zeros in on the negative reviews of hotels that he's considering.

"The best value (the sites) provide is warnings from travelers who have had a bad experience. Admittedly, they could be planted by competitors. But why take the chance?"

Elaine Gause, 42, of Salt Lake City says she takes both super-positive and super-negative reviews with a grain of salt. But that doesn't mean the sites are worthless.

"My method is much like the Olympic figure skating judging: Discard the highest and lowest opinions and average the rest," says the CEO of Girl Scouts of Utah.

Hoteliers increasingly marvel at the sites' power with guests.

Take the Westin New York at Times Square, which recently saw a surge in requests for corner rooms with king beds. The rooms have great views.

"I couldn't figure out how these guests knew to specifically request such a room until I saw it on TripAdvisor," says Karen Colliton-Thomson, head of sales and marketing. "Word spread like wildlife on the site."

How important have the sites become?

Rachael Palumbo, head of sales for the Martineau Bay Resort in Puerto Rico, says her property has begun monitoring its reviews on TripAdvisor every week.

"If we hear the same complaint from several guests, we take action," she says. Still, "there are instances where we feel the reviews are not always fair. We wish the guest would have addressed the concern while on property so we would have been able to recover."

Palumbo says she would never post a review of her own hotel on the site, calling that "really unethical."

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But she has written reviews of other hotels she has visited, though never anything negative.

"Hoteliers tend to have great compassion for their fellow martyrs," she says. Moreover, "there is an unwritten code in the hotel world that this practice would be considered hitting below the belt."

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Our mission is very simple: ***"To maximize sales success by providing our clients with exceptional internet marketing results"***.

Our clients consistently enjoy industry leading success because of our dedicated focus and experience. Our use of state-of-the art tools, best in class technology and wealth of industry experience enable us to provide full solution applications. We recognize that our clients are experts at running their hotels, and our role is to develop and maintain online marketing leadership for our client hotels.

We differentiate ourselves through:

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We have a singular specialized focus on boutique hotel, resort and vacation home e-Marketing. Our sole goal is to be the best at what we do by ensuring maximum success for all of your e-marketing activities. Our 52 person design and development technology team delivers unparalleled quality and results. Our sole focus is resort marketing.

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Every client has unique needs, opportunities and priorities, our e-Marketing plans are always custom built and based on in-depth research of your specific hotel.

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We use proprietary state of the art tools and applications that enable project efficiency, measurability and success of your e-marketing. We not only promise success, we document it in a 24/7 real-time secured private reporting platform that we create for every hotel client. Our clients never wonder about how hard their marketing dollars are working because they always know!

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