

IS THAT REVIEW GENUINE?

The reviews on travel review websites look good and glowing. But how trustworthy are such reviews? Firoz Fazil finds out.



"Wow that was the funkiest hotel I have ever stayed."

"It was a life-time experience."

"I feel like coming back again and again to this hotel."

Such superlative-studded, over-the-moon reviews out there on the cyber space are commonplace now. But the question is: how reliable are these reviews on travel websites, viewed by the respective hotels as gospels and a great marketing tool as well?

Or they could even be the other way around: negative reviews that put a particular brand in trouble. So such reviews are double-edged swords. They can make or break a certain hotel brand.

Recently, Grand Resort hotel in America took TripAdvisor head on over its review. The hotel owner,

Kenneth Seaton, has accused TripAdvisor of hurting his business by putting Grand Resort atop its "2011 Dirtiest Hotels" list on TripAdvisor.com.

TripAdvisor is eloquent about its review:

"This year, the tarnished title of America's dirtiest hotel goes to Grand Resort Hotel & Convention Center, in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. The southern belle hotel failed to charm TripAdvisor travelers; 87 percent of those who reviewed it recommended against staying there. The unpopular property elicited such hotel review titles as "Worst Hotel Stay of My Life," "Stay Anywhere Else But Here," and "Absolutely Horrible!"

Getting into the top worst 10 list is not a good thing considering TripAdvisor's wide reach; an estimated 40 million travelers visit

the site per month. And Seaton did the obvious thing, sued TripAdvisor for a \$10 million lawsuit. The hotel owner feels that TripAdvisor acted 'irresponsibly' by creating and publishing such a list without validating or investigating whether such a claim is truly warranted.

The suit alleges that "TripAdvisor uses negativity as its main PR vehicle to provide publicity for itself at the expense of businesses all around the globe. TripAdvisor has made a direct claim about the Grand Resort Hotel and Convention Center based upon reviews that they cannot authenticate."

Checks and balances?

"TripAdvisor does not comment on threatened or pending litigation," said Nikhil Ganju, Country Manager – India, TripAdvisor, when *Voyager's World* sought his reaction on the Grand Resort issue.

Nikhil is pretty confident about the "content integrity" of TripAdvisor. "We take the authenticity of our reviews very seriously and have numerous methods to ensure the legitimacy of the content on TripAdvisor, including automated site tools, a team of review integrity experts, and our large and passionate community of millions of travelers that help us identify suspicious content."

"We devote thousands of hours each year to battling fraud and improving our fraud detection efforts to ensure the integrity of content," he added.

Nikhil said that TripAdvisor has three sophisticated systems in place to keep an eye on fake reviews. "First is our automated filters which keep an eye on fake reviews. Second is that we rely on our community. When they find anything fishy they will immediately report to our

He informed that TripAdvisor has tied up with two airlines, Kingfisher and Jet Airways, for providing incentive reviews. "We are basically urging the fliers to review on our site. In return they get flying miles. The reviews have to meet the same standards stipulated by TripAdvisor," he said.

Ankit Rastogi, Co-Founder and Business Head at India Hotel Review.com, opines that there should be checks and balances in traveller ratings.

According to him, in the Indian context most review sites do incentive reviews just to increase the content which further invites lot of fake reviews or biased judgments from opposite parties.

"TripAdvisor should disclose its algorithms if they are so much sure about their sanity. Else any such listing surveys must outrightly elucidate some incidents / actual customer base after validating their stay as supporting evidence," he says.

"It's surprising that they claim themselves as the most credible source of traveller reviews but have hardly shown any transparency in their rating mechanism. At least extreme ratings like this must be

Onus is on hotel managers



According to Linchi Kwok, the TripAdvisor case suggests that hotel managers need to pay close attention to their image on social media sites. They cannot prevent their customers from telling the truth about their experiences, but they certainly have the right to stop fake reviews that don't reflect the true products and services the hotels offer.

Hotels need to monitor their online presence 24/7. There are companies providing monitoring services for a fee. Such services send updates and reports to hotel managers. Managers need to take immediate attention to any negative reviews and

respond to them by helping guests address those not-so-pleasant experiences, namely:

(1) If the hotels made a mistake, then fix it and let the guests know that the problems have been resolved.

(2) If many guests complain about the same problem again and again, managers should ask themselves: is it a real and serious problem? Then, acknowledge the problem and find ways to fix it.

(3) If guests posted a good comment, "share" it in as many social media sites as possible.

The worst thing that could happen to a hotel is when a hotel never pays attention to any online reviews or fails to respond to any negative reviews. Because the managers never "know" there is a problem or issue, they never address it. Then, more negative comments build up. Over time, the hotel will be named as one of the "worst" hotels in the world or some sort. Only until this moment, the managers will be informed by the media or their

headquarter/boss that there is indeed a big problem in the hotel. Then, it will be too late to address the problem— the negative image has been "reinforced;" it is very difficult for the hotel to rebuild the positive reputation.

For sites like TripAdvisor, it is important to develop a valid and reliable scale for rating. TripAdvisor has linked with Facebook. If people use TripAdvisor with their Facebook account, the credentials of these people who rate hotels can be investigated.

It is also important to make the valid and reliable scale transparent – let every hotel/restaurant know the criteria being used and understand how they can get a rating of 5 out of 5. If all social media sites use valid and reliable scales and make sure users post real comments, the industry can benefit from it by closely watching the real feedback of their performance; customers can also benefit from it by having a trustful source (website) for reviews.

Verification is the only way that trust can be restored for any business currently producing unsubstantiated and anonymous reviews. Different levels of verification can be applied to help consumers make decisions as to the reliability of the information. It is notable that the TA subsidiary

HolidayLettings.co.uk

already has greater verification in place - which is 'powered by TripAdvisor'. See the screenshot below to know what is required to leave a review on this site. The same principles should be applied to their core site.

– Chris Emmins,
KwikChex.com



Chris Emmins

well balanced, double thought through and may have evidence attached," added Rastogi.

Tracing the history of review sites, Rastogi said: "HIQ first started the concept of review sites in India, which was followed by IHR. Then came OTAs with their own community platforms like

OKTATA and RAAHI till the giant TripAdvisor came to India. And certainly they get a huge number of eyeballs from Indian audience owing to the history of reviews they carry with them."

But, added Rastogi, most of these reviews don't translate into decision making as far as Indian customers are concerned. Mostly they go by word of mouth of friends and family or the decision making will have a heavy bearing on their long association with travel agencies and the relations or legacy they carry.

Unreal reviews?

"If you start with the fact that there is no verification process - not even to confirm that it is a genuine customer that has written the 'review', then you have to sensibly start from a point of mistrust," said Chris Emmins, co-founder of KwikChex.com.

Bournemouth-based KwikChex.com helps companies manage their online reputation.

Chris told *Voyager's World*: "You

can attempt to 'analyse' the content of all the reviews, but this is a laborious process. And with all the evidence about increased levels and sophistication of review fraud, our conclusion is that a very worthwhile and useful initial concept is fast losing its value to consumers."

But, Hari Nair, Founder-CEO of HolidayIQ, has a different take on the trustworthiness of travel review sites. According to him, well-known travel review sites are likely to have robust systems and processes in place for checking fake reviews. "However, a few invalid reviews might still creep in. In our experience the overwhelming number of

reviews are genuine and add a lot of value to travellers planning their holidays or trips," he added.

While refusing to comment on the TripAdvisor-Grand Resort imbroglio, Hari Nair informed that HolidayIQ has various systems in

place to track and eliminate invalid reviews. He, however, refused to divulge the details of the processes since that is "confidential and proprietary."

Customers need to be aware that some reviews are just not real, says Linchi Kwok, Asst Professor of Hospitality Management, David B. Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics, Syracuse University, New York.

Linchi told *Voyager's World* that travel review sites can track fake positive/negative reviews by tracing the IP address. It is difficult to screen the fake positive/negative reviews with 100 percent success rate; but at least it is possible to keep fake reviews at the minimal level.

Regarding mechanisms to clear out fake reviews, Linchi said that there are research studies examining the trustworthiness issues of online reviews (e.g. using text mining or sentiment analysis techniques). "Researchers are working on it. But I don't believe in any computer programmes which can help identify the "trustful" comments or "not-so-trustful" comments with 100 percent accuracy."

"What we can do is to look at the comments based on our best judgment. I will look at "consistency," "detailed descriptions," and "who posted the comment."

According to him, if 100 out of 120 users rate one out of five for poor service, probably the service is not good. "If five users rated one out of five for poor service, I will then read the reasons. If no descriptions were provided, I might not trust that review as much. If the users put their real names (a Facebook / Google / Twitter profile, etc), and why they feel the service deserves one in a scale of five, I will trust this review more," he explained.

Deceptive opinion spam

We know email spams that clutter our email inbox. Here in the realm of review websites, there is a new

genre of spams called deceptive opinion spams or inappropriate or fraudulent reviews. And the industry is grappling with this new phenomenon.

According to a group of young researchers at Cornell University, deceptive opinion spams are "fictitious opinions that have been deliberately written to sound authentic, in order to deceive the reader."

In their research, they point out two examples of deceptive spams. One of the following two hotel reviews is truthful and the other is deceptive opinion spam:

1. *I have stayed at many hotels traveling for both business and pleasure and I can honestly say that The James is tops. The service at the hotel is first class. The rooms are modern and very comfortable. The location is perfect within walking distance to all of the great sights and restaurants. Highly recommend to both business travellers and couples.*

2. *My husband and I stayed at the James Chicago Hotel for our anniversary. This place is fantastic! We knew as soon as we arrived we made the right choice! The rooms are BEAUTIFUL and the staff very attentive and wonderful!! The area of the hotel is great, since I love to shop I couldn't ask for more!! We will definatly be back to Chicago and we will for sure be back to the James Chicago.*

Should you need to know rocket science to distinguish between the genuine and fake one?

We can see a liberal usage of superlatives and narration in the phony review. In order to make it appear genuine, "me" and "I" are used in good measure!

A New York Times article tells us that there is an industry of "fibbers and promoters" who do fake reviews for a price. Perhaps, that might sound lovely for the hotels; but not for the long-term common good of the industry and the end customers.

- ▶ Fake reviews are a reality
- ▶ Review frauds high in Asia - notably India
- ▶ Tough to track fake reviews with 100% accuracy
- ▶ Hotel managers should check on them

Ferreting out fake reviews

Ankit Rastogi
IndiaHotelReview



As a step we in IHR, IndiaHotelReview, we have 90 percent reviews from our own travellers which we know have booked from us so chances of such reviews being fake are less. We will very soon be branding such reviews with a separate label as VERIFIED.

There will still be 10 percent which will be validated but IHR will not be 100 percent sure of their originals but this itself will provide strong signals to our audience a direction and trust on our reviews. Further after being five years in the review industry IHR boasts of a small yet authentic hotel reviews being committed to the unbiased opinions from mostly its users in tier-II and below destinations in India without spending a penny on paid advertising or incentive campaigns for posting. Our closure gives us the extra mileage and we take it seriously thanks to all our customers who make each next booking easier and informative.

Nikhil Ganju
TripAdvisor



Since TripAdvisor features remarkable scale and freshness of content -30 posts a minute covering more than 520,000 hotels worldwide - the site allows travellers to evaluate a large sample of reviews to make an educated decision. Our research shows the average traveller reads dozens of reviews before booking. Our advice to travellers when reading through the reviews of a property is to focus less on the anomalies that appear overly critical or overly complimentary. What is left is the collective wisdom of the community.

According to a recent PhoCusWright study commissioned by TripAdvisor, 98% of respondents have found TripAdvisor hotel reviews to be accurate of the actual experience, with 69% stating the reviews to be highly or extremely accurate. 92% of respondents agree that TripAdvisor hotel reviews "Help me pick the right hotel for my travel needs".

TripAdvisor and ASA

TripAdvisor came under investigation by the UK's independent regulator, Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), following a complaint by KwikChex.com about the veracity of its reviews.

KwikChex.com co-founder Chris Emmins said that the evidence overall was overwhelming. "We had discovered many proven fake reviews (both positive and negative) ourselves - as

had the media in their investigations. The complaint was therefore based on the fact that we viewed TripAdvisor's statements regarding genuine, honest, real travellers, 'reviews you can trust' etc. as misleading," he said. According to Chris, the first investigation (that of misleading marketing by TripAdvisor concerning their statements of trustworthiness) has been completed and the findings of

the investigative team have been released to both KwikChex and TripAdvisor. The formal process will be completed when the official ASA Council announces the ruling.

A second complaint, said Chris, filed by KwikChex concerns the use of TripAdvisor reviews by other businesses on their websites to promote their businesses. As the ASA CAP Code clearly states that a

business must be able to identify the person leaving the reviews - and with the evidence showing the substantial review fraud, we have asked the ASA to rule on whether any business should be permitted to use unverified and anonymous reviews from sites such as TripAdvisor. The ASA has confirmed they are investigating and will announce their findings in due course.

And there are sites like fiverr.com where people swarm to offer "I will post a positive review for your company for \$5"!

Lack of verification

Having looked at around 10,000 review and feedback sites, (not just travel), KwikChex.com has found that lack of verification has enabled extensive abuse.

"We are particularly concerned about Google's resources - their places/maps reviews and their new hotel finder as they are obviously very prominent in search results and have virtually no diligence in the system at all. The scale of abuse is exceptional and we have already started focusing on this and will be doing more in the forthcoming weeks," said Chris.

KwikChex.com is also examining other travel sites too, including SkyTrax which is influential in the airline business. KwikChex will seek to determine the level of reliability and trustworthiness and to engage with such businesses to "resolve any issues of abuse or distortion."

Regarding complaints from India, Chris said: "Although not as many as perhaps would be anticipated, given the size of the country and the scale and importance of tourism. In fact, the evidence is very strong that review fraud (positive and negative) is at extremely high levels in several countries in the Asia region - notably India, Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand."

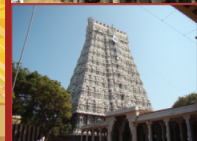
"There has also been criticism that TripAdvisor and some partners have been involved in offering incentives for people to write reviews in India. This can obviously encourage people to simply make up reviews. There are various forum posts referring to these incentive programmes mostly from review authors chasing their 'rewards'," he concluded.



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