

# How to read a consumer review

BY ADRIANOS FACCHETTI

At least 2 or 3 times a week I get a call from an anguished business owner about a negative review on the internet. Sometimes it's on Yelp, other times it's on other sites like Citysearch, Ripoffreport, or Avvo. Negative reviews can be extremely damaging to a business. But in many cases, it's best not to get too upset about them, unless they appear credible and they are defamatory. Even where a claim may be actionable, it's best not to sue for a variety of reasons that I've discussed previously on this blog.

But something I haven't written about yet is how you, as a potential consumer, should read a review. In other words, what should you consider in order to determine whether a review is to be trusted or not? After all, we all know that many businesses (affiliate marketers, in particular) write shill reviews in order to make it appear like they have a great reputation. Some of them even write malicious reviews to destroy their competition. So how do we know which reviews to trust?

Here are a number of guidelines to consider when you're reading a consumer review. Some of these are common sense, but as the old saying goes, I've found that common sense isn't so common.

**1. The "Gestalt"** – the first thing I look at is the whole of the business' internet reputation. I look at multiple review sites to see what the general trend is. Not surprisingly, if most of the reviews are fairly positive, that's a good sign. But I go beyond this. What do the positive reviews have in common? What do the negative reviews have in common? If positive reviews repeat certain things about the business I generally view this favorably, unless the language and sentence structure is so similar as to draw my suspicion. In addition, if the company has no negative reviews I look at this with a bit of skepticism. While it's possible that they have no unsatisfied customers, it's more likely that they're either fairly new or that they're using proactive methods to keep customers from making reviews, or to suppress reviews they don't like with SEO methods. But really, at the end of the day every business will and should expect to have a handful of [negative reviews](#). Every business owner has encountered the unreasonable or unhinged customer. And

every consumer has come in contact with a business owner who just doesn't care.

**2. The Language** – I tend to look at the grammar, punctuation, and other similar characteristics of a review too. Is it well-written? If the review is badly written or is in ALL CAPS, then I tend to give it less credence. Why, you may ask? It's because I think people who write well tend to think well too. There are exceptions, of course. And people who use ALL CAPS in their reviews are often emotionally fired up. I tend to look at those kinds of reviews with an extra grain of salt. While their review may be 100% true, I'm more likely to believe a review that seemed to have been written by a cool and calm person.

Also, is the language of the post **specific**? If the post is vague, general, or contradictory, this is a red flag for me. It tells me a few things. First, that it could be a post from a jealous competitor who is attempting to disparage the competition (not altogether common in my experience). Second, it's a disgruntled customer who will never be satisfied and may be seeking to exact revenge on the business owner. Or third, and worse, it is a person who may be emotionally disturbed or who is attempting to extort the business owner. Sadly, this happens.

**3. The number of reviews** – This is an obvious one. If the vast majority of reviews are positive and there are only one or two negative reviews, this is a good sign. The opposite is also true.

**4. Anonymous reviews** – It's very easy to take potshots at somebody when you think there are no consequences. It's much more difficult to put your name on a statement, especially a negative or a controversial one. For this reason, I find that anonymous posts on the whole are less credible. There are exceptions, of course.

**5. The reviewer** – the last thing I look at is the reviewer. Has this person posted multiple negative reviews about different businesses on a number of sites? If so, this is a major red flag. Most people do not post reviews on the internet at all. Even fewer post multiple negative reviews about different businesses. This suggests to me that the person may have emotional issues, is unreasonable, or is simply a malicious individual. Or worse, that the person is a

professional extortionist, which is a growing problem. It is inevitable that most, if not all business owners will deal with a negative online review at some point. You simply can't make everyone happy, no matter what you do.

Concluding thoughts: Laws are becoming increasingly friendly to consumer reviewers online, which means that fewer and fewer businesses will attempt to use the legal process to deal with these reviews. So consumer reviews are here to stay. The important thing is that reviewers need to realize how to take certain reviews with a "grain of salt." Not all reviews are created equal.