



What's better than a five-star review?

Research shows quality review content drives purchase decisions more than star counts

Successful business owners constantly review their business practices. Some of your practices may be obsolete. The sooner you update them, the faster your business can grow. The proof is the fact that market leaders are usually those who break the rules in a creative way.

As you clear away the unproductive concepts that are holding you back, here's a practice that deserves review: Are empty 5-star reviews really the best thing for your business? While five stars often mean the best when referring to restaurants or hotels, research from ConsumerAffairs suggests that 5-star reviews aren't necessarily the most helpful tools for the average business.

The Double-Edged Review

Clearly, reviews can be a double-edged sword. While they represent a vital piece of online marketing strategy and SEO, nobody wants to see bad reviews. Even though they may help you improve your customer experience in the long run, they can hurt your reputation while you make the necessary changes.

We want to help you maximize the value of your online reviews while minimizing the risk, so we've conducted research into what kind of review helps the consumer make a purchase decision. It turns out that there are more important considerations than the star count.

From our experience and anecdotal observations, we've come to realize that positive reviews, even five-star reviews, with poor or no content do not yield higher purchase intent from consumers. To find out why, we surveyed consumers and business owners to come up with some definitive answers.

ConsumerAffairs worked closely with partnered brands to collect quality feedback from an unbiased sample of customers. We've long understood that our consumer audience of over seven million monthly visitors rely on this rich customer feedback to make important buying decisions. However, in this survey, we wanted to specifically explore which key features of these reviews held the most weight with consumers.

The Experimental Design

Our experiment began by creating three very similar pages, like a marketer's A/B/C test. The review content on all three pages came from actual brand review pages on our site, but we removed the identifying information and attached the content to three fictional brands with original logos and text. We also controlled for all other page variables, including colors, images, shields, dates and so on. Then, we randomized the order in which each brand was presented to survey participants.

The three brands were presented with the following information on each page:

- One with high ratings (4.5 stars) and low review text
- One with low ratings (1.2 stars) and high review content
- One with medium ratings (3 stars) and medium review content

What We Asked Consumers

We asked participants to carefully look over each brand's review page and rate it on the following criteria:

- How informative was the page?
- How much do you trust the brand after these reviews?
- What is your likelihood of purchasing this brand?

The results showed that consumers felt all the pages were roughly equal in terms of how informative they were. When it came to brand trustworthiness, though, consumers were more likely to trust the brands that had more content on the page, not those with the highest star rating. This was an intriguing result, and further research supports that finding.

Factors Influencing Purchase Intent

After participants rated all of the brand review pages, we asked them more specific questions related to purchasing intent, including:

- After reading through all of the review pages, how would you rank the brands in terms of likelihood of purchasing?
- To you, personally, what is the importance of star ratings in your purchase-making decisions?
- What things do you feel are more important than star ratings in a purchase-making decision?

Just as with brand trust, the results demonstrated that purchase intent was closely correlated to the quality of the review content, not the star rating. A stricter interpretation of the results is that while the high- and low-content categories are significantly different, both categories do not vary greatly from the medium content. That indicates a graduated scale of responses, moving from low purchase intent associated with poor content to greater intent with better content.

Consumers prefer higher-quality content regardless of the brand's star rating.

That was the most interesting result, and it offers insights into the average consumer's purchase decision.

Direct Comparison of Star Ratings to Review Content

When we asked consumers directly how important star ratings were in their purchase decisions, the majority (57 percent) chose "somewhat" to "not at all." This makes it clear that star ratings do matter, but they are not the primary factor for most consumers in choosing a brand.

Importance of star ratings

57% "somewhat" to "not at all"
17% "very"

To follow up on this line of thought, we asked participants to tell us in their own words what was more important than star ratings in helping them decide. The single theme with the greatest frequency by far (27.5 percent, more than three times the second factor) was the word "reviews." Review-related elements such as customer experience stories were the most influential factors.

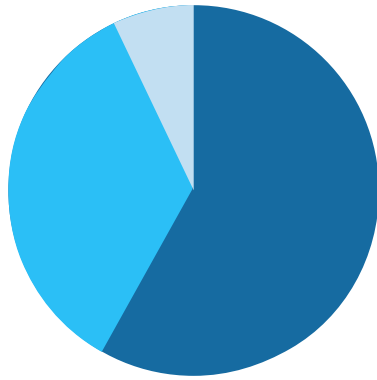
Support From Outside Research

Our results closely matched those from a related study on how much consumers trust the inherent fairness of online reviews. In 2013, a study published on Marketing Profs concluded that 75 percent of consumers felt information presented on online review sites is generally fair, but that reviews must be examined closely for trustworthiness.

75%
reviews are generally fair,
but must be examined closely



In that study, 60 percent of participants said they tended to pay more attention to customer comments than to star ratings. Only 11 percent of consumers pay more attention to star ratings, and more than one-fourth (29 percent) say they balance star ratings with review content for a more complete picture. Still, younger consumers tend to be more skeptical and need more review content to make up their minds.



60% pay more attention to comments

29% balance comments and star ratings

11% pay more attention to star ratings

Overall, consumers have more trust in information they find on larger review sites that present more facts on different companies. In Deloitte's research on the new buyer's journey, researchers found ample evidence that consumers are now placing greater importance on customer experience stories. In addition, those consumers who spent more time online researching their preferred brands tended to spend more when they made the final purchase decision.

Why Quality Review Content Matters for Businesses

To deal with the overwhelming choices they face daily, consumers are looking more and more to third-party review sites for reliable advice on brands. For businesses, offering consumers easier access to transparent, verifiable reviews gains high marks on the trustworthiness scale.

Offering consumers high-quality review content benefits your brand by:

- Guiding prospects in selecting the specific products and services that best fit their needs
- Educating them on products and services you offer that may not be obvious
- Reducing churn by amplifying the network reach of brand advocates
- Acting as a customer-built knowledge base so others can resolve common issues instead of contacting customer service
- Serving as social proof and demonstrating your brand's engagement with customers
- Boosting perceived brand responsibility in the marketplace

With the advent of a mobile generation with Wi-Fi and cellular service everywhere, consumers are living more of their lives online. It's natural that they turn to their online connections and reliable review sites first to discover which brands are best for them.

Conclusions Based on Our Study

Overall, these survey results have a very consistent message. Whether the brand's star ratings are high or low, it's the quality of the reviews that matter most. This supports our anecdotal observations that high-quality reviews benefit both the consumer and the business more than five-star reviews alone. The ability to access quality reviews from verified customers is critical in establishing trust with consumers. This type of review provides the kind of transparent, honest feedback that consumers expect.

Reviews do more than just provide random opinions. They can be a source for accurate feedback that consumers can't find anywhere else. They can also assist businesses by automatically generating a knowledge base where consumers can discover brands that fit their lifestyles. For example, a consumer may choose a brand based on a high-quality, two-star review because the features discussed in the review suit the consumer's needs, even though they didn't suit the reviewer. Just as sailors have done for centuries, consumers use stars to guide them, but make their most important decisions based on the personal experiences of those they trust.

Are you ready to connect with consumers and provide the resources they need to make smarter decisions? [Connect with our team today](#) and learn more about how ConsumerAffairs helps hundreds of brands collect and share quality customer feedback to generate more revenue in organic search.

Sources

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