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How to spot a fake online review

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Do you trust online reviews? Now that Amazon is suing more than 1,000 people who allegedly offered to write glowing product reviews for cash, you might reasonably be concerned.

Deceptive reviews are commonplace online. Fortunately, there are a few good techniques that can help you tell truth from fiction.

DON'T TRUST YOURSELF

A team of researchers at Cornell University created a computer algorithm for detecting fake hotel reviews by analyzing the language used in legitimate and phony write-ups. The computer program, Review Skeptic, is accurate about 90 percent of the time, but humans alone performed poorly at determining the truth teller.

"People are terrible," said professor Claire Cardie, who helped develop the system. "I was very surprised. We just cannot tell the difference much more than chance."

LISTEN TO THE LANGUAGE

Beware of extremes — overly enthusiastic or negative reviews are red flags. False reviews tend to use more extreme language to get their message across. So if someone says "It is the most comfortable bed ever," perhaps in all caps, take pause.

Additionally, the Cornell researchers found that when it comes to hotels, fake reviewers tended not to talk about the spatial details — such as the floor or bathroom. Instead, they focused on the reason they were there, such as describing a recent fake vacation or business trip. In practice, this

makes sense because someone who has never been to a location might have a tough time describing it accurately.

JUNK THE JARGON

On the flip side, beware of recommendations that read like product manuals. Reviews that repeat the full product name or model number may be an attempt to game the search engine system. And if they use excessive technical or marketing jargon, odds are they aren't providing a genuine review — most real people don't talk like that.

REVIEW THE REVIEWER

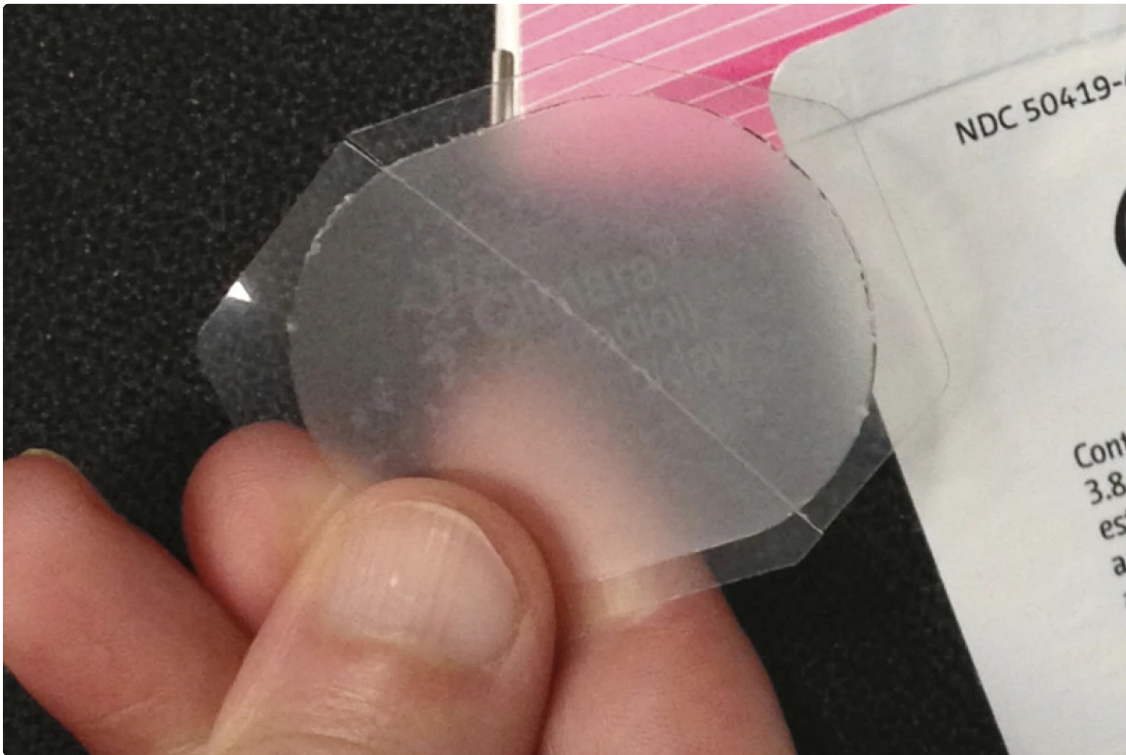
Check out the profile of the person providing the review, said Louis Ramirez, senior features writer with online deal site DealNews. If they only write reviews for a particular company, that's a huge warning sign they could have a vested interest in that business. Some sites let people upload pictures of the item they bought, which can help add credibility.

Amazon verifies some of its reviewers, indicating they actually bought the product (although some of the people it's suing allegedly found ways around that). Some other sites only allow posts from people who've made a purchase there. Look closely on the site for their review policies.

PAY ATTENTION TO DETAIL

If you think about your own experiences with an unpleasant experience or product, you can probably explain exactly why it was bad. Ramirez suggests if you're unsure about a review, put more stock in someone who provides details of why they didn't like a product ("Oh, the battery only lasted four hours") than in someone who complains more generally ("I hated this laptop. It was horrible").

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