



# Is It Reviewing or Bullying?

By CHRISTA GALA

We like reading reviews. Seriously, it's like having coffee with a friend and getting the latest scoop. But how reliable are reviews? And who's writing them? Amazon is suing more than 1,000 people for writing fake good reviews.

What about bad reviews? It's easy to hide behind a keyboard. Some local businesses say people often write them before they ever give a business a chance to fix the problem.



#### IF YOU RECEIVE A BAD SERVICE OR PRODUCT:

Take your complaint to the owner or manager before you take it online. At least give the business a chance to make it right. No business is perfect; mistakes are made. But complaining before you give the business a chance to fix it? Unfair. And if the business does fix it, there's no need to post online.

Dick Sears is a no-nonsense kind of guy. Affable and charming, he's been the mayor of Holly Springs for more than 14 years. But he was concerned when he saw an online group being especially hard on local businesses.

"Several businesses called me and said, 'We really want to come to Holly Springs, but we're not going to come,'" says Sears. "We don't want to deal with the Ladies of Holly Springs."

The name sounds demure, but the Facebook group "The Ladies of Holly Springs" is 5,600 members strong and was building a reputation for its vitriolic threads and business reviews.

One of the former administrators of the group, Tonya Palumbo, had heard similar rumblings. The two decided to talk.

"I said, 'You've got to do something about all of this bashing that's going on on your website,'" says Sears. "I don't know exactly how to tell you what to do because we have a free speech issue, but in some cases this is not free speech. If you have a problem with a business, you should go to the business and tell them. That's what people do."

Palumbo, along with site founder Dorrie Buccafusca, agreed and began instituting changes, including deleting posts with blatant name-calling and any business complaints where the poster had not first taken the issue up with the business personally to give it a chance to fix the problem.

That was about seven months ago. The commentary is back to largely being a chat group that facilitates coat drives, carpools for cancer patients and referrals for pediatricians.

But the harmony came at a cost. After Palumbo took a hard line with some of the posters, kicking them out of the group, they formed their own pages, and, she says, began harassing her. She's hired an attorney, filed police reports and even owns a stun gun.

"We got rid of 30 to 40 bad apples," says Palumbo. "I would love to know what makes people so hateful."

All reviewers are certainly not angry or on the "fringe," but the anonymity of the Internet often lends itself to a mob mentality frenzy.

#### NO ACCOUNTABILITY

Social media platforms are so new that now many people get behind the keyboard to vent online—about everything.

One Raleigh restaurateur with two restaurants, who declined to use his name for fear of retribution, said: "We are faced with an infinitely open platform for anyone with a phone to openly allow people to positively or negatively influence our business. My main issue is accountability. No one is accountable for what they say, how they say it and the detriment it may have on the business and people in it."

He says a mood can often affect a post.

"Someone may come into our restaurant, which has 30 employees and, on that particular day, maybe they had a fight with their spouse or a bad day at work, but they decide to come and have dinner and they're cranky. No matter what we do, if their attitude about their day is garbage, then we will automatically be responsible. That person will go home and hop on their device of choice and bash us, affecting the hard work of 30 people and hence de-motivating the staff with their harsh words and criticism."

#### STANDING UP HARDER THAN IT SEEMS

Business owners say they have little recourse for what they consider unfair reviews.

(The "reply" space on sites like Yelp is limited and readers must click through to read it. For other sites, the only option is for owners to jump into the fray where it turns into a "he said, she said" argument.)

Laura Dalton, owner of several GNC Nutrition stores across the Triangle, is constantly keeping tabs on reviews that might affect her bottom line. Recently, a reviewer confused her location with another. In the end, she had very little recourse even though the review was incorrect.

"One of our GNCs (at Park West Village) had an experience where a review was posted on our Yelp page for another location—and it wasn't a good one. The reviewer was confused by the address on Yelp and left a long and detailed account of how they would never shop with us again. We privately messaged them - heard nothing. Publicly commented - nothing. I contacted Yelp who said there was not enough specific information to remove it. A few weeks later, it was removed either by the reviewer or by Yelp, but it stayed up for well over a month."

Some business owners choose to ignore social reviews completely.

Our Raleigh restaurateur says: "If I respond with a backbone, I'm in the wrong. I haven't changed nor will I ever change a thing due to this online platform, so the way I have chosen to deal with it that I just stopped reading them altogether. Until the playing field becomes fair and someone comes up with a way to change things, I'm not interested in having anything to do with it. But that's just me."

#### ARE ALL REVIEWS TRUE?

Raleigh Magazine also talked with the owner of several ice cream shops across the Triangle who's dealt with issues regarding long threads of negative reviews about an employee. She agreed to talk to us only if we didn't use her name. She said she just couldn't afford the backlash for speaking out.

"If somebody's ticked off, they can crucify you," she said, adding that some posts are outright fabrications. "To make it a good story, you might need to embellish, and some of these people have no shame in doing so."

Interestingly, the majority of the population doesn't write reviews for restaurants, services or products. In 2014, MIT conducted a study of a private apparel retailer and found just 1.5 percent of its customers wrote reviews.

Considering the small number of people who write reviews in the first place and the even smaller percentage of those who write reviews that veer into "bash" mode, are the very few influencing many?

And what makes folks go into "bash" mode?

Sears thinks some are bored, eager for attention or feel powerful writing reviews that they feel may compensate them for a perceived wrong. In other cases, he thinks something more troubling could be at play.

"I know of one particular person in our town, which will obviously go unmentioned; I think this person has a psychosis. This person is scary. Just plain scary. I don't want to go into any more details, but I think some people do have an internal need to build themselves up or they just like to do this."

It makes our ice cream shop owner mad.

"People don't realize they are messing with our livelihood," she says. "Or they just don't care. They are interested only in revenge or payback, only themselves. They post as if it's a public service announcement. They insinuate everyone will have a bad experience, which discourages new business and growth for the owner. Shame on them. Everyone deserves a second chance."

Dalton says people sometimes forget the reach of social media and its impact—good and bad. She suggests running your rant by a friend before you post.

"Social media can be a wonderful avenue for businesses, but what I'm also seeing is a tendency to dash to the computer after eating somewhere or purchasing something at a boutique and venting to those in cyberspace versus a friend about an annoyance they experienced," she says. "Just as you are taught to take a breath, count to 10, think before you speak, such lessons should carry into the world of reviews."

The Ladies of Holly Springs group has been largely successful in doing this, but for many other online platforms, local and national, the rules are still largely unwritten.

#### FAKE REVIEWS?

Amazon recently filed a lawsuit against 1,000 people for writing allegedly fake reviews (for as little as \$5 a piece), masquerading as testimonials from real users. It's one of the most aggressive attempts by a U.S. e-commerce company to combat fake reviews.

#### ADVICE FOR BUSINESSES:

Dick Sears, mayor of Holly Springs, has suggested "cease and desist orders" for local businesses struggling with unfair complaints.

#### ARE BUSINESSES THE BULLIES?

The Consumer Review Freedom Act, pending in Congress, will combat corporations that try to silence online complaints. If passed, it would ban businesses from citing a non-disparagement clause, which some larger companies employ. A company called KlearGear.com sued a couple for \$3,500 for an online review. The couple fought the company and the court eventually ruled in the consumers' favor, awarding \$307,000 in damages.