Can we trust online reviews?

Level: Intermediate–upper intermediate

Time: 90 minutes +

Summary: This lesson is about whether we can trust online reviews. In this lesson, students:
1. study one of two articles, giving one side of the argument;
2. discuss their own experiences of online reviews;
3. write reviews of their own to be shared in class.

Materials: One copy of the worksheet per student

Group size: Two or more

Note: This lesson plan is for both pre-experience and in-work business students based on an original article first published in *Business Spotlight* issue 4/2019.

Warmer

Students briefly discuss their answers to the warmer questions with a partner or in small groups. Ask for some feedback. Do they regularly read reviews on these (or other) websites? If not, why not? Before moving on to the next task, find out whether they believe everything they read in these kinds of online reviews.

Key words

Divide the students into two groups, A and B. Give group A the 'Yes!' article, and give group B the 'No!' article. Each group should read their article and find their half of the key words in task 2. The definitions are given in the order that the words appear in the article. Students can listen to how to pronounce the words as well as see them in example sentences by visiting www.macmillandictionary.com.

Key:
Group A
1. nuanced   5. reactively   9. legitimate
2. investment   6. suspicious   10. combat
3. shortcomings   7. alienating
4. bias   8. exploiting

Group B
1. scepticism   5. ranking   9. sporadic
2. aggressive   6. trash   10. contractors
3. window-shop   7. dubious
4. teleport   8. inauthentic

Expressions

Students find and underline the expressions in their article, read them in context, then match them with their meanings according to how they were used in the article.

Key:
Group A – 1. b; 2. a; 3. e; 4. c; 5. d
Group B – 1. e; 2. a; 3. c; 4. d; 5. b

Understanding the article

Students first work with someone who read the same article as them. Together, they should make a note of all the arguments made by the author.

Then they pair up with someone who read the other article and share the information in their articles by explaining to their partner the points that the authors make. They should try to use the key words from their task 2 and the expressions from their task 3 when they do this. Next they discuss the two authors' opinions, which of the two they think presents the most convincing argument and how they each do this – paying particular attention to the authors' choice of words. Hand out to each student whichever article they didn't receive (either A or B) so they have both articles for their reference.

Discussion

Students first tick the types of reviews they regularly read before making a decision to employ someone, or book or buy something. They can add their own ideas on the write-on lines. Then they compare their selections with other students and discuss the follow-on questions.

Writing

In part a, working individually, students choose one of the topics and write a short review. Then, for part b, put the reviews up on the wall, and ask students to walk around and read all the other students' reviews. Tell them to choose one that they find particularly interesting, go to the student who wrote it and ask them some questions to get further information, for example: *What did it cost? Did someone recommend it to you?*

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1 Warmer

Have you ever read reviews on any of these websites?

- Amazon

- TripAdvisor

- Yelp

What sort of information do you hope to get from the reviews?

Do the reviews influence your decision to buy something or go somewhere?

2 Key words

Write the key words next to the definitions. Then find them in your article to read them in context.

Group A

alienating	bias	combat	exploiting	investment
legitimate	nuanced	reactively	shortcomings	suspicious

1. taking account of or including small but important differences _____

2. the amount of time, energy and money needed in order to make something successful _____

3. faults or problems that make something less effective _____

4. an attitude that you have that makes you treat something in a way that shows you prefer it to other things _____

5. in a way that deals with a problem when it arises _____

6. cannot be trusted _____

7. making somebody dislike you _____

8. using a situation so that you get benefit from it, even if it is wrong or unfair to do this _____

9. fair and reasonable _____

10. do something in order to try to stop something bad from happening or a bad situation from becoming worse _____

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Group B

aggressive	contractors	dubious	inauthentic	ranking
scepticism	sporadic	teleport	trash	window-shop

1. doubts that someone has about something that other people think is true or right

   _____

2. designed to do everything possible to succeed _____

3. look at something before buying it _____

4. send people and objects very quickly from one place to another in the form of energy or signals

   _____

5. a position on a list that shows how good something is compared to others

   _____

6. criticize someone or something in a very strong way _____

7. not completely honest _____

8. not real, accurate or telling the truth _____

9. not regular or frequent _____

10. people or companies whose job is to do work for others at a particular

    price _____

Can we trust online reviews?

Can we trust online reviews? Yes! Article A

According to surveys, 90 percent of consumers use online reviews and most of them trust these reviews more than they trust personal recommendations. But with the numbers of fake reviews increasing, can online reviews be trusted? Julian Earwaker provides us with arguments from both sides.

Yes!

"It's a nuanced problem. It's not just fake or not fake"
– Tommy Noonan

1 Studies show that we rely greatly upon online reviews. And their influence has been growing, which is why companies are investing so heavily in reviews. Trust lies at the heart of the system. Amazon, TripAdvisor and many others have an enormous investment in people trusting their sites. The media has highlighted the shortcomings of Amazon and other review platforms. They've reported on a lot of inauthentic reviews. But you've got ten times more authentic reviews than you have inauthentic reviews on the internet right now.

2 It's a nuanced problem. It's not just fake or not fake. What about reviewers who use a product they are given for free, to write a review? Is this necessarily fake? I would say no, because they had a real experience. Could it lead to bias? Yes. But who's to say how much bias influenced the outcome of the review? It's impossible to know. Even the reviewer probably isn't aware of how much that free product is influencing their review.

3 It's easier to make somebody up, a completely fake review from an anonymous consumer, who could actually be the owner or someone paid by the brand. Platforms like Amazon are operating reactively and taking down products with many suspicious reviews very quickly if they get bad press. Our data shows millions of reviews being deleted from Amazon. That's not necessarily solving the problem. They can't just delete anything that looks fake because then they start deleting real reviews and alienating those reviewers. It's just as bad to delete honest reviews and call them fake as it is to allow fake reviews.

4 To maintain the integrity of the system, it's a game of cat and mouse. You constantly have sellers who are finding loopholes and exploiting them. At the same time, you have Amazon chasing them down and putting systems in place to prevent them. Over time, you see these review systems develop and regulations tighten, making it harder for sellers to use illegitimate reviews. Combine that with the amount of money that's at stake for Amazon: heavy investments are made to ensure these reviews are legitimate and that people continue to trust the review system. Companies have teams of engineers trying to combat the problem. Ultimately, it involves making a huge investment to maintain the integrity of their platform.

TOMMY NOONAN is founder of ReviewMeta.com, a site that uses algorithms to analyse online reviews.

Can we trust online reviews?

Can we trust online reviews?   No!   Article B

According to surveys, 90 percent of consumers use online reviews and most of them trust these reviews more than they trust personal recommendations. But with the numbers of fake reviews increasing, can online reviews be trusted? Julian Earwaker provides us with arguments from both sides.

No!

"You have to approach reviews with a lot of scepticism" – Saoud Khalifah

1 You have to approach reviews with a lot of scepticism. Unfortunately, as e-commerce grows, more people engage in aggressive marketing tactics such as buying fake reviews to increase sales. Online reviews are extremely important: you can't window-shop an internet product, and you can't teleport to a hotel to see if it's any good. The whole basis for your decision is the reviews.

2 On e-commerce platforms, the more positive reviews you have, the higher your ranking becomes. Sellers understand this, and they know they need to increase that ranking to compete with others. Competitors trash each other's products to take down the ranking. And sellers buy reviews to improve their ranking. It's a constant battle to get that number-one spot.

3 But there's a lot of misleading information out there. Our analysis for platforms such as Amazon, TripAdvisor and Yelp shows that some 30 per cent of online reviews are dubious or inauthentic. In the hospitality industry, say a bed-and-breakfast place in the English countryside, it's highly likely that they will buy a number of fake reviews to add to the real ones. In that category, you would see that fake figure rise to between 60 and 70 per cent. Fake reviews used to be sporadic. Now, there's this huge ocean of data and there's only a tiny sea that is truly authentic.

4 If you're buying anything of high value, the onus is on you to do much more in-depth research. The most trustworthy online reviews are for restaurants. The worst are of service contractors such as plumbers. In New York City, the business service category with the most frequently faked reviews was hair salons and barbershops. We've received many fake reviews about our own apps and plug-in – there were people trashing us. They were usually sellers that we've actually exposed as untrustworthy.

5 It's a very difficult problem, and it will take a lot of coordination with the government and consumer protection organizations to put pressure on the platforms. Our solution to the problem is to use the best technology available to detect bias. The government could put legislation into effect, but there will always be ways around it. And there's also freedom of speech. Social media has the same problem. And the problem is only getting bigger.

SAOUD KHALIFAH is founder and CEO of Fakespot.com, a site that filters product reviews to find out what real users are saying.

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3 Expressions

Find and underline the following expressions in the article. Then match them with their meanings.

Group A

1. make something up

2. get bad press

3. a game of cat and mouse

4. maintain the integrity of something

5. at stake

a. be criticized in the media

b. invent something

c. keep the rules and laws of something in place so that its reputation is not damaged

d. likely to be lost or damaged if something fails

e. when one person is always chasing another, who is always trying to escape

Group B

1. number-one spot

2. the onus is on you

3. put pressure on someone

4. put something into effect

5. ways around something

a. it's your responsibility to do something

b. methods of solving a problem or of avoiding a difficult situation

c. persuade, threaten or force someone to do something

d. start to do something so that it becomes real and has practical results

e. the top place on a list

4 Understanding the article

a. **Work with someone who read the same article, and make a note of the author's main arguments.**

b. **Now talk with someone who read the other article. Use the key words and expressions from tasks 2 and 3 to explain the opinions and arguments set out by the author of your article.**

c. **Discuss the two authors' opinions, say who you think makes the strongest case and decide what part of his argument most convinced you.**

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5 Discussion

a. Tick the types of reviews you often read. Add any others that you read to the list.

☐ hotel   ☐ (holiday) tour

☐ restaurant   ☐ doctor

☐ book   ☐ film

☐ hairdresser   ☐ electrical goods

☐ service contractor   _____
(e.g. plumber, painter, electrician)

_____   _____

b. Compare your lists and discuss the following questions.

- Would a bad review stop you from buying, visiting, watching or employing any of the above?

- On average, how many reviews do you think you might read before making your decision?

- Do you ask people for their personal opinions and recommendations before you go somewhere, buy something, employ a particular service contractor and so on?

- Which are you most likely to be convinced by: someone's personal opinion or online reviews?

- Have you ever written an online review?

  - If so, what was it about?

  - Was it a positive, negative or purely informative review?

- Are you more likely to write an online review after a positive or negative experience?

6 Writing

a. Write a short review (approximately 100 words) of one of the following things.

- the last restaurant you went to

- the last hotel you stayed in

- the last film you saw

- the last book you read

- the last electrical item you bought

Can we trust online reviews?

My name ————————————————

This is a review of ————————————————————————

What I liked:

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What I didn't like:

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Mark out of 10: ————————————————————

b. **Read other students' reviews. Find one that you are particularly interested in, and talk to the reviewer to get further information.**