Trying to Bias TripAdvisor® Reviews – Bad Idea!

By Dr. Chuck Kelley

The Internet has given us many helpful new ways to communicate – to convey and receive information. Posting reviews and consumer opinions on websites like TripAdvisor® is now an extremely powerful shopping tool for travelers.

TripAdvisor is the world's largest site that provides consumer reviews of travel-related businesses. Many potential customers visit TripAdvisor when planning a vacation, and it has a powerful impact on consumer spending. Today TripAdvisor-branded sites reach 315 million unique monthly visitors, with more than 190 million reviews and opinions on more than 4.4 million accommodations, restaurants and attractions.

Consumer comments can make or break a business. Fearing the impact of negative comments, some businesses are tempted to try manipulating the review system in their favor. One obvious tactic is to try to overwhelm negative comments by having owners, employees and their friends submit positive comments. However, TripAdvisor quality assurance specialists claim that their extensive screening process can differentiate between real and fake comments, quickly removing fakes from the system. Hotels found to be trying to manipulate the system are then penalized by having their property ranking lowered and a customer warning message displayed on their listing.

TripAdvisor's actions to combat fraud and its public statements about these policies appear to have succeeded in reassuring the traveling public. A July 2011 PhoCusWright survey of 3,641 respondents, solicited at random through a pop-up invitation link on TripAdvisor.com and commissioned by TripAdvisor, showed that “98% of participants found that TripAdvisor's hotel reviews accurately reflect the experience.”

Recently, a small, independent three-star hotel in the seaside resort of Blackpool, England, tried a novel strategy to rig the system and improve its dismal TripAdvisor ranking. The strategy failed horribly and spectacularly.

The hotel inserted into the small print on its registration form the following sentence: “Despite the fact that repeat customers and couples love our hotel, your friends and family may not. For every bad review left on any website, the group organiser will be charged a maximum £100 [about $150] per review.”

When guests Tony and Jan Jenkinson spent one uncomfortable night in the hotel and later posted a highly unfavorable review, the hotel is reported to have charged £100 to the couple's credit card! The Jenkins were understandably quite upset, and their strong complaints led to investigations by several government bodies and a news story on the BBC, which was then picked up and carried by print and broadcast media around the world. Extensive publicity, yes! But not the type any hotel wants!

At Outrigger, we take a straightforward, honest approach to guest reviews. We believe that offering our guests an outstanding experience will produce overwhelmingly positive reviews on sites like TripAdvisor. And it has. We consistently receive excellent traveler reviews. Thanks to this winning strategy, earlier this year we were delighted to announce that 13 of our properties in Hawai'i and across the Asia-Pacific region were in the top 10 percent of businesses reviewed on TripAdvisor, resulting in their being awarded the TripAdvisor “Certificate of Excellence” for 2014.

We understand the importance of Internet sites that offer people the opportunity to comment on their experience, and TripAdvisor is just one of many such sites that our team monitors and interacts with every day. By simultaneously providing exceptional hospitality and embracing technology we have made customer-review websites a powerful marketing tool.

Like all companies, Outrigger has many ways to advertise and build its reputation. We believe that by providing our employees an opportunity to be their best, and by providing our guests with exceptional hospitality, our reputation will shine in every format, from word-of-mouth to online comments.

We are grateful to every member of our ‘ohana for providing the kind of wonderful hospitality that makes our guests cheer. 😊