

World Tourism Organization



UNWTO

Recommendations on the Responsible Use of Ratings and Reviews on Digital Platforms

World Committee on
Tourism Ethics

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Introduction

Throughout this last decade, user feedback has developed into an indispensable tool not only for consumers, but also for tourism service providers and operators who can align their products and services to better meet consumer expectations. In the sphere of travel and tourism, user-generated ratings and reviews on digital platforms have become a central part in the information, selection and decision processes of visitors when choosing places to visit, to stay or to eat.

Although there is no consolidated international data on the subject, several studies give an idea of the potential influence of ratings and reviews in consumer behaviour. According to a European Commission study 82% of respondents read consumer reviews before shopping.¹ A survey completed by Australian consumers suggests that 40% 'always' or 'often' used online reviews to assess a customer service, and that consumers were more influenced by negative than positive reviews.²

Presently, millions of user reviews related to travel are available online. TripAdvisor alone has reached overall 435 million travel related reviews and opinions covering 6.8 million accommodations, restaurants and attractions.³ Yelp, for instance, counts with overall 115 million reviews of local businesses worldwide.

1 Study on the coverage, functioning and consumer use of comparison tools and third-party verification schemes for such tools (European Commission, ECME Consortium and Deloitte, 2013)

2 Queensland Government, Australia - A step-by-step guide to managing negative online reviews <https://www.business.qld.gov.au/business/running/customer-service/managing-online-customer-reviews/a-step-by-step-guide-to-managing-negative-online-reviews>

3 Data from Q3 2016

With regard to the type of feedback that users can find on travel-related digital platforms, a distinction should be made between:

- (a) **“reviews”** which generally include more qualitative comments and descriptions, and
- (b) **“ratings”** which usually feature more structured or quantitative rankings corresponding to various categories and degrees of satisfaction of the user that can be part of a review.

Digital platforms which provide travel-related content generated directly by users can be a very useful source of information for consumers. This is not only true for the above-mentioned review sites such as TripAdvisor and Yelp, that are known amongst others for their user-generated content concerning destinations, attractions and businesses, but also for websites traditionally known as booking engines, such as Booking.com, Airbnb.com or Thefork.com, which have reviews integrated in their presentation of properties, restaurants and other amenities.

However, there are controversies about the veracity of some reviews. Occasionally, tourism service providers claim to have been subject to unfounded negative ratings or to cases of blackmailing by consumers, who threaten to write a negative review unless a demand for refund or freebees is met. Conversely, consumers have also reported cases of unfounded positive ratings of services. “Consumer Alerts”⁴ posted by the platform Yelp illustrate for instance cases where strong evidence was found of business listings that were caught trying to buy off better reviews. Although these events might be relatively rare in consideration of the hundreds of millions of published reviews, they warrant attention.

Whatever the type and form of user-generated information, the content of the reviews and ratings published on digital platforms has to be honest and trustworthy so as to ensure that consumers can rely on them when researching and planning their travels.

The World Committee on Tourism Ethics has elaborated the present Recommendations with a view to encourage the responsible use of ratings and reviews on digital platforms related to the tourism sector.

The recommendations are addressed to the three main groups of stakeholders directly involved in this digital process, namely:

- (a) digital platforms (operators);
- (b) service providers (businesses listed on these platforms); and
- (c) users (consumers).

4 Yelp Consumer Alerts: Know Before You Spend (2016): <https://www.yelpblog.com/2016/05/68746>

A. Recommendations for digital platforms

Digital platforms that incorporate reviews and ratings for the products and services they list should take measures to ensure the accuracy, reliability and credibility of the information offered. Digital platforms should undertake all reasonable measures to ensure that any review posted reflects real user opinions, findings and experiences.

The business model promoted by these digital platforms is based largely in sharing advice among a community. Providing user information publicly online involves a certain deal of trust, therefore the veracity of the information offered is essential for the integrity, reputation and good functioning of this type of platforms.

To facilitate the gathering of useful feedback, platforms should adopt guidelines providing principles and clear recommendations on the collection, moderation and publication of online reviews. Those guidelines should be easily available online for users and service providers and in several languages.

Whilst it is not always easy to verify the authenticity of user generated content, the digital platform should have quality control systems and processes in order to ensure that the content is clear, accurate and truthful.



To this end, digital platforms should:

(a) When getting the information,

- Make sure to have the correct identification of businesses listed on the platform.
- Include a mechanism that enables service providers to flag or correct factual information that is mistaken and/or complement with additional information.
- Allow service providers to reply online (publicly or privately) to reviews they get from the users.
- Take reasonable steps to ensure that reviews reflect authentic consumer experiences.

(b) When displaying information,

- Make sure the information is displayed as clearly as possible for users to understand.
- Detail the criteria used to provide the listing of services displayed on the platform.
- Post all positive and negative reviews or clearly point out the criteria used to publish reviews.
- Have quality control mechanisms in place to go through reviews, publish them once checks are complete and avoid unjustified delays in publishing the reviews.

(c) When dealing with possible misuse,

- Have mechanisms and policies in place to detect fake reviews and to deal with blackmailing if reported by service providers or users. Provide clear information about the existence of these mechanisms.
- Have easily identifiable and reachable contact details of the platform's customer service and have user-friendly procedures to file and process complaints.



B. Recommendations for service providers

Service providers must be aware of the fact that user-generated content is present in most, if not all of the tourism related digital platforms, and that it is there to stay. They should know that user-generated content may have an impact, either positive or negative, on a company's reputation. Companies are therefore encouraged to find the best ways of benefitting from the large amounts of feedback and information directly provided by their consumers.

For hoteliers, destination managers, restaurant owners, transporters and other stakeholders of the tourism sector, it is essential to grasp the online interactive technology in order to be able to address the issues raised by the user and to improve the products and services they market so as to align their business closer to consumer expectations.

To be in a position to better deal with consumers' reviews and ratings on digital platforms, companies, through their owners, managers and staff, should:

(a) In general terms,

- Regularly monitor digital platforms where the company is listed and make sure that the information displayed about their products and services is accurate and up-to-date.
- Clearly label advertisements as paid-for promotion in order to differentiate them from the online listing of regular services, ratings and reviews.
- Ensure that staff is trained to deal with ratings and reviews, is aware of any conflict of interest and understands the importance of providing honest information.
- Remember that reviews and ratings offer providers a valuable user feedback; hence companies should encourage clients to comment on their experience freely and honestly.
- Bear in mind that the large majority of reviews are unproblematic, either positive or negative; both tend to be well-founded.

(b) When dealing with controversial reviews,

- Gather information about the complaints that triggered the negative reviews and write, without delay, honest and informative replies that are useful to consumers in general.
- Contact the site hosting the content in case of suspicion of fake reviews.

(c) In any case,

- Refrain from bribing or buying off clients in exchange for reviews.
- Never write reviews about their own products or those of other competitive businesses nor encourage friends and relatives to do the same.
- Make sure that their external marketing or communication agencies do not issue fake reviews in order to increase the amount of positive feedback for the company, and never commission any individual or organization to create fake reviews on their behalf.

A top-down photograph of a person with long, wavy brown hair, wearing a white t-shirt and blue jeans, sitting on a wooden bench. They are holding an open book with a white cover and orange spine, and their hands are visible as they turn the pages. The background is a wooden floor with horizontal planks.

C. Recommendations for users (consumers)

Today's travellers participate actively in developing the content of digital platforms and interact with other users online. The vast majority of them not only consider digital platforms as an essential source of information when planning a trip, but are also heavily influenced by peer reviews in their choice of accommodation.¹

Given the growth of user-generated content on digital platforms and the increasing weight consumers attach to these, ratings can have an impact on a company's reputation, whether positive or negative. Similarly, consumer reviews also create certain expectations and could cause disappointment to those who read and rely upon other users' reviews if not used properly.

Hence, the importance of responsible behaviour by users, in particular with regard to the provision of genuine and accurate online reviews that can be useful to others.² In this respect, users of digital platforms should:

1 The Impact of Online Content on European Tourism 2013, p. 23; Cox et al. 2008, p. 12

2 See as an example TripAdvisor guide:
https://www.tripadvisor.com/TripNews-a_ctr.reviewerguideEN



(a) When entering a review or rating,

- Write honest and balanced reviews based on recent personal experience and include information related to the service or business that can be useful to other users.
- Not accept gifts or money in exchange for a favorable review or threaten suppliers with a bad review in exchange of favors.
- If an issue with a product or service arises, try to address it with the supplier first, best when it actually occurs as reviews are not meant for complaints afterwards. Of course, the way in which any eventual complaint has been dealt with might carry weight in the subsequent review.
- Avoid including in the review personal attacks to staff or the owner of the business.

(b) When using reviews and ratings to choose a destination or to select products and services,

- Browse through several reviews in different web portals, when searching to book a service, so as to get a broader picture of what to expect.
- Remember that not all visitors have the same needs and preferences. Reviews and ratings can give a direction but it is up to the users to decide what suits them best.
- Also remember that some platforms enable users to sort the reviews based on categories that might be important to a given traveler (family travel, business travel, reviews about the swimming pool, etc.).
- Decide what aspect of the product is more important to him or her (location, price, facilities, noise, breakfast, etc.) and pay special attention to it. It is useful to consider the overall rating, but also the rating by category and read a few of the reviews to get a better and more balanced idea.



In case of conflict

It is important to note that reviews and ratings are not certifications of any kind; therefore they cannot be used as a basis for a refund or claim, unless there is a specific marketing policy followed by the digital platform or service provider in this respect.

In turn, what can be used as a basis of a claim is the violation of the privacy and / or consumer protection limits set out in the competent legislation. Consequently, all stakeholders, issuing, hosting or commenting on reviews and ratings should be aware of the legal boundaries.

When conflicts arise between stakeholders, it is important to act in a responsible manner and to follow legal counsel, when necessary.

A. Conflicts between digital platforms and service providers

When observing possible irregularities on ratings and reviews by a service provider, a digital platform should:

- Take the necessary steps to communicate the issue to the appropriate party and delete all the information that appears suspicious in accordance with the national law;
- Ensure, as much as possible, that users are aware of the issue to prevent deceit;
- Evaluate whether to report the case and collaborate with the competent authorities when it may contravene the law.

When a service provider believes that a digital platform is not performing adequately, it should:

- Check the content policy used by the platform;
- Evaluate beforehand how the issue affects the reputation of the service provider;
- Contact the digital platform to inform about the issue, primarily by using any specific complaints reporting mechanisms made available by the digital platform;
- If necessary, seek legal advice to guide the next steps.

B. Conflicts between users and service providers or digital platforms

It is important to remember that reviews and ratings are not a formal complaint mechanism. In case of conflict with a service provider or digital platform, the user should carry out one or more of the following actions as applicable to the case:

- Contact the service provider or platform to inform about the problem and aim at finding a negotiated solution;
- Issue a formal complaint, remembering to keep any evidence that could support the claim (invoices, contracts, etc.);
- If the issue is related to privacy or consumer protection rights, the user should seek legal advice and, if needed, report it to the competent consumer protection authorities.

Conversely, when facing a conflict with a user, a service provider or digital platform should carry out one or more of the following actions as applicable to the case:

- Aim at solving the problem directly with the user in a friendly manner;
- Inform users about the possibility of issuing a formal complaint;
- Be aware of the legal boundaries and make them clear also to the users so as to make sure that privacy is protected at all times.

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