

The Customer is King, or Maybe Not

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Andrew Davis

Like many of us today that shop online, I have often relied on customer reviews. Seems silly to not take advantage of someone else's mistakes or experiences with a particular item, but I sometimes wonder about the world of anonymous reviewers for a variety of reasons.

I am constantly amazed at the time and effort some people take to post online with no apparent personal benefit. Some of their energy derives from frustration – They just bought this gizmo and the directions suck, or the screws were stripped, or maybe and some parts were missing or bent. Or they have a driving need to show people how smart, creative, and skilled they are by shooting and posting a video on how to make a museum-quality Queen Anne drop front desk from charred firewood.

Other online resources are purely educational – how to avoid kickback, sharpen a chisel, cut a circle on a table saw, or make MDF look like Aegean marble from the Middle Ages. You can subscribe to scores of YouTube channels today from woodworkers with both known and unknown credentials. It's an endless feast for the starving woodworker. It can also be dangerous since every YouTube video seems to have links to another ten to twenty – welcome to the rabbit's hole. If you're not careful, you will spend more hours watching videos on your iPad than cutting tenons and mortises in your shop.

It seems like every time I buy something online I get a request to rate the vendor. Did they deliver on time? Was the product as advertised? Was the buying experience delightful? Would you recommend the vendor to others? Was the website easy to use?

Later come the second set of requests. Please rate the product. Did it work as anticipated? Did the quality meet your expectations? Would you buy it again? Would you recommend it to your mother-in-law? Lastly, if you bought it on Amazon, you might get requests to answer a question from other perspective buyers. These can come years after you bought the product. Will the dust collector work on 110V? Does the router accept ¼" shank bits? Can the machine be put on a mobile base? Can I apply this paint with a brush? Can you believe how ridiculous some of the questions are?

The splendid and the vile: fake reviews

There are a few articles online about fake reviews. Of courses, these may be fake themselves. I found one from CNET that focused on Amazon: "Not everything is as it seems on Amazon's marketplace, where products are rated in a five-star system and a heavy number of positive reviews can help one brand stand out from a pack of competitors. Amazon has acknowledged it has a fake reviews problem, as it struggles to rein in coordinated efforts on other websites to flood product listings with good reviews in quid pro quo schemes that violate the company's terms of service. But for shoppers

comparing 15 versions of that wireless phone charger or dashcam, the overload of stars and comments - real and fake -- can be overwhelming.

This isn't a new phenomenon. Some Amazon shoppers accept refunds and gift cards in exchange for positive reviews, despite the company's ban on the activity. The e-commerce giant calls these "incentivized reviews," because they come from real shoppers who are paid for their positive opinion. Before Amazon banned the practice in 2016, reviewers would often admit they got a product for free in exchange for a review, but the practice is now fully in the shadows. Amazon has cracked down on the practice, kicking companies off its marketplace when it finds out the seller has broken the rules.

The problem has a circular nature. The faster a product can build up good reviews, the more visibility it can get as a "best seller" on Amazon and the faster it can earn the trust of shoppers who've never bought from that company before. As that company gets more customers, it also has more people it can solicit paid reviews from, speeding up its ratings success even further."

While I frequent Amazon, I never thought about this fake review issue too much. But I did wonder whenever I saw glowing accolades for the latest glue bottle, router bit, abrasive cleaner, or band saw blade. Can these comments be true?

More to the point, I tend to lend more trust to reviews or opinions on woodworking-specific sites like Rockler, Woodcraft, Woodworkers Supply, the tool guy, etc. On the other hand, these vendors may be victims of fake reviews as well. Who knows? What amazes me is how many true-to-life negative features or flaws can be revealed by people with buyer's remorse. Too often today, after reading reviews, you wind up deciding to never buy a product for your wood shop if the product was made in mainland China.

My other online information sources are from trade press articles that review "the top 5 xx devices," "benchtop yy machines," or battery-powered zz tools." However, side-by-side product reviews in magazines (benchtop planers, 14 inch bandsaws, battery powered sanders, shop vacs, push sticks, low-powered routers) are generally not useful unless you are in the market for one of these at the time they are published; even worse if you just bought one unless the article confirms your buying decision. If you search for one of these articles, you may find that it was published when you were in high school.

More often than not, reading reviews leads to my decision to "not-buy" or to hold off on the purchase for a while. Every one of the biscuit joiners I considered recently had a flaw that caused me to pause. Maybe I should just stick with dowels. Same for the drill press, except I made a purchase because I absolutely needed one to replace my old, non-functioning machine.

The gold standard in customer feedback or serious evaluations comes from Wirecutter, a site run by the NY Times, and of course Consumer Reports. These independent experts analyze and compare with depth and precision, but they don't publish a lot covering the tools and materials of great interest to Guild members. They do a fantastic job with electronics, appliances, and autos but not so much with joiners, planers, and router tables, etc.

Of course, if you are reading this essay, you have access to the resources of the Guild. I suggest more of us, especially the new members, could take advantage of the collective wisdom of the group. One step in this direction would be to combine the announce forum and the comments forum into one Q&A site and for more to subscribe to that new forum. Some of the issues are indeed timeless.

Online sites and videos may be sharing information, or sharing ignorance, or just promoting a product or service. You can never be sure. But advice from a fellow guild member is usually golden.