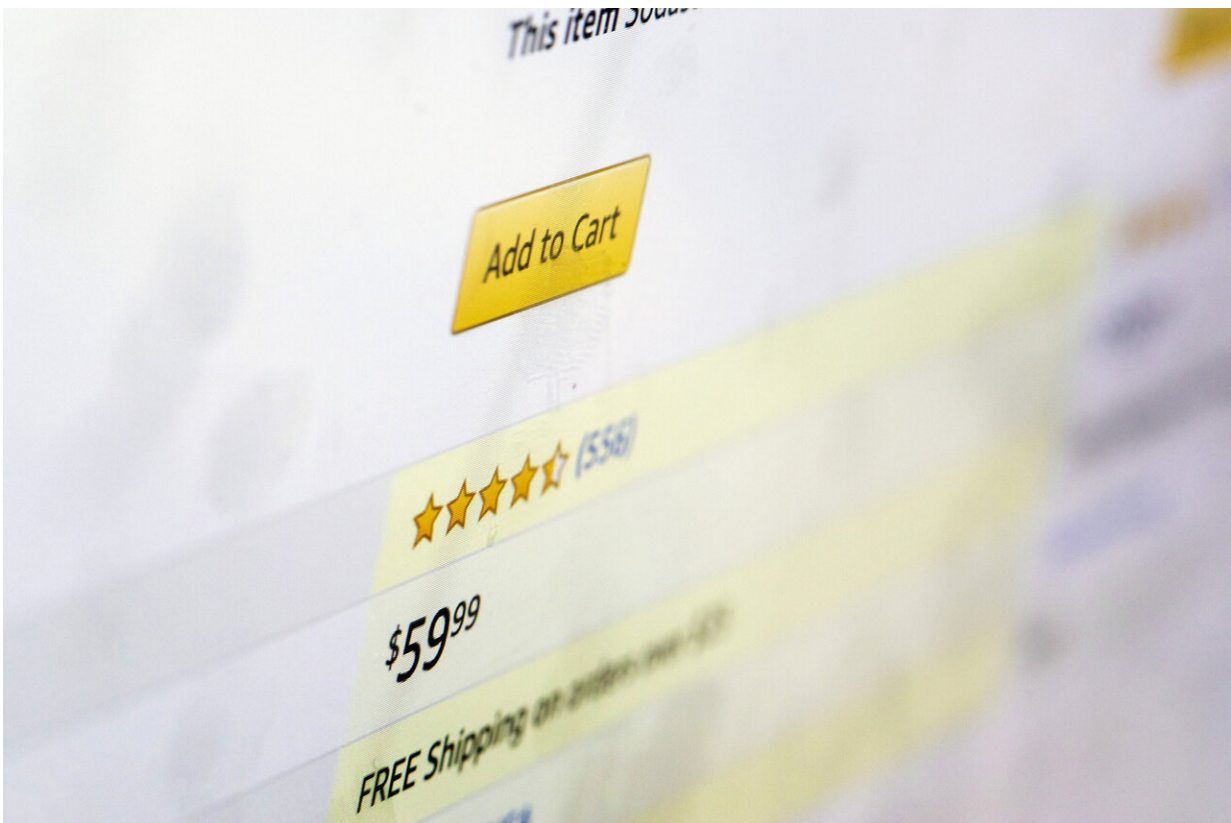


Smart holiday shopping: Avoiding fake reviews and tricky ads

December 16 2019, by Joseph Pisani and Anick Jesdanun



A customer rating for a product for sale on Amazon.com is displayed on a computer screen on Monday, Dec. 16, 2019, in New York. Online reviews at major retailers such as Amazon and Walmart and listing services such as Yelp look like a good place to get first-hand information from people who've tried a product or merchant.(AP Photo/Jenny Kane)

There are lots of bargains online during the holidays, but also plenty of ways to get scammed, even at established outlets like Amazon.

How can you be sure you're reading a legitimate [review](#), not one coming from a company employee? How can you flag sponsored placements and other ads—and protect your [credit card](#) once you buy?

Although there's no magical solution, try some of these practices to be a savvier online shopper.

REVIEWING THE REVIEWS

Online reviews at major retailers such as Amazon and Walmart and listing services such as Yelp look like a good place to get first-hand information from people who've tried a product or merchant.

But investigations by The Washington Post and BuzzFeed have described networks of fake reviewers paid to inflate ratings for lesser-known sellers on Amazon. Merchants might also have their own employees write favorable reviews, or trash competitors.

Amazon has waged a legal battle against fake reviewers since at least 2015, when it claimed in a court filing that "an unhealthy ecosystem is developing outside of Amazon to supply inauthentic reviews." The Federal Trade Commission recently settled with a cosmetics merchant that, it charged, had its own managers create fake accounts and direct employees to write good reviews on Sephora.com.

Beyond that, many so-called social media influencers also write reviews after receiving free products.

Saoud Khalifah, who founded the service Fakespot to help consumers avoid being influenced by fake and biased reviews, suggests looking

beyond text reviews. Search for video reviews on YouTube; you can at least tell that the reviewer has used the product, though it's not always easy to tell if they've been compensated.

Text reviews can still be helpful once you learn to spot unusual patterns, such as lots of five-star ratings in a short period of time.

If a service lets people rate reviews as helpful or not, look for reviews with an unusually high number of "helpful" votes. Khalifah said merchants might try to game the system by artificially inflating favorable reviews as helpful so they show up more prominently.

Another warning sign: reviews that carry high or low ratings without offering many specifics.

Other patterns are harder to spot. A reviewer might have been banned from one service, but still write for others. Websites and apps such as Fakespot can help by flagging the same person's reviews elsewhere and offering a revised rating.

DODGE FAKES

Just because you're shopping on Amazon doesn't mean you're buying from Amazon. The online shopping giant, like eBay, Walmart and others, has vast third-party marketplaces where anyone can sell goods.

The problem: That's where fraudsters try to sneak in their brand-name counterfeits.

In a report last year, the U.S. Government Accountability Office said 20 of the 47 items it bought from online stores with third-party marketplaces were counterfeit. It isn't just about getting duped; phony products might be made with toxic chemicals or carry other risks.

One safeguard is to research whom you're buying from. The "sold by" section will list the seller's name. Look up its website to see if there are negative reviews or if the site looks unprofessional. Blurry photos and misspellings are red flags. Others include sparse reviews or complaints about knockoffs.

Be sure to compare the price to other sites. If it's much lower, you may be looking at a phony.

COUPONS WITHOUT THE HUNT

Save money by installing browser extensions from such companies as Honey, RetailMeNot and Wikibuy. A button will show up on your web browser. Click to automatically search for and paste in discount codes such as "CYBERDEAL" when you're ready to check out.

The companies have other money-saving tools. Honey, for example, lets you track products and will notify you when there's a price drop at Amazon, Macy's and other major stores.

Your options are more limited on your phone. Browser extensions work only on traditional desktop and laptop computers.

PRODUCT PLACEMENTS

Amazon, eBay, Walmart and Macy's are among the retailers that are stuffing their online stores with ads to make more money.

Companies big and small can bid to get their products near the top of a store's [search results](#). They look just like regular product listings, except for the word "Sponsored." You might think that a product is showing up at the top because it's somehow better.

Instead, sellers typically buy ads for their more expensive products or ones they have just launched to get the product in front of more shoppers and increase the likelihood of a sale, said Juozas Kaziukenas, the founder of Marketplace Pulse, a market research firm.

Before buying a product that was an ad, make sure that it fits what you're looking for and that there isn't a cheaper option.

CREDIT CARD SAFETY

Once you're ready to buy, don't hand your credit or debit card number to just anyone. Even if the merchant is legitimate, smaller businesses might not have the resources to keep up on security. That could leave your data exposed to hacking.

You can protect yourself by using credit cards when possible, as they offer better protections than debit cards. Federal law limits liability to \$50 if your number gets stolen—and banks will often waive that entirely. Though there has been a decline in fraud involving existing credit card accounts, it still amounted to \$6.5 billion last year, according to estimates from the advisory firm Javelin Strategy & Research.

Some banks let you create temporary numbers that can be set to expire once you make your purchase, preventing merchants from charging you again down the road. And of course, if the number gets stolen, it won't work.

Digital payment services such as Apple Pay and Samsung Pay also automatically substitute your card number with a digital ID. But there aren't that many merchants that accept them for online transactions.

You can also use PayPal to keep merchants from having your real card number. Instead, PayPal keeps the number and makes the payment on

your behalf. Be sure you're paying a business directly, as you get some protections, including reimbursements when merchants ship damaged or counterfeit items.

If you're making a cash transfer to pay an individual directly, you're on the hook if something goes wrong.

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