Online reviews:

the consumers' perspective

feefo

1.

Introduction

There is a paradox about the way we shop. On the one hand the internet means we have never been better informed about products and services, with ready access to reviews about everything from shoes and double-glazing to cars, medical treatment and recruitment agencies. But in the era of fake news and social media manipulation, confidence in much of what we read or see online is being undermined.

All of us can research specifications, compare products, prices and opinions with a few flicks and taps on a phone. This makes the role of reviews ever more central to building consumer trust. Providing feedback from like-minded shoppers is one such way businesses can enable consumers to shop with more confidence. Trust is emerging as a key issue for companies as without it, their brand is virtually worthless.

This report explores the attitudes of a representative sample of 2,000 UK consumers towards online reviews and how they use them. It examines the influence of reviews, the extent to which they are trusted, and where they feature when shoppers embark on their paths towards buying.

For businesses, having a trusted review platform is indispensable, giving consumers confidence to buy while providing hugely valuable insights that power more responsive, smarter business decisions.

This report comprises the most immediately exciting and interesting results.

To find out more or discuss the results further, contact marketing@feefo.com

Matt West
Chief Revenue Officer, Feefo

Key findings

Shopping and research
Blended shopping, using both the high street and internet, remains a mainstream approach. Regardless of how they shop, consumers still regard reviews as hugely significant and useful, and that level of importance is even greater than last year.

Using and leaving online reviews
Many more shoppers read reviews than post them. The barriers to greater participation involve ease-of-use, trust and a deficit in the belief that reviews matter to an organisation and will be acted on. Organisations need to ensure they make leaving reviews as easy as possible from all devices and they should be explicit that they value reviews.

Building trust
A huge proportion of shoppers are now worried about fake reviews, with the number increasing substantially on last year. Companies that want to be taken seriously by consumers need to provide a review platform that provides trusted reviews from real shoppers.

The future of online reviews
About a quarter of consumers are attracted to new ways of accessing reviews, and having the technology that gives them the information they want as quickly and succinctly as possible.

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Shopping and research behaviour

Shoppers have many reasons for choosing products and services and multiple paths to making a final decision on what to purchase.

Shoppers have many reasons for choosing products and services and multiple paths to making a final decision on what to purchase. Whether it is buying designer jeans, a car or selecting an estate agent, this research shows that they regard the most crucial pieces of information as price-comparisons on the internet (74%) and customer/professional reviews (68%). This is little changed from last year's survey in which 66% of shoppers said they would turn to reviews first to help them decide.

| Price Comparisons | 74% |
| Customer/Professional Reviews | 68% |
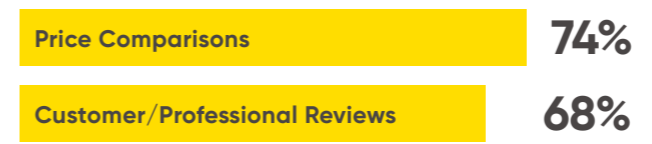
Yet although online is irreversibly changing the way consumers acquire goods and services, the bricks-and-mortar experience is still alive.

The largest groups of respondents (39%) say a blend of shopping online and on the high street is their preferred way of buying products and services.

39%

One-in-four shoppers prefers to search online and buy in-store (25%), whereas 14% favour researching in-store before buying online. Shopping exclusively online is most popular (38%) among the young and middle-aged (18–44). Unsurprisingly, consumers aged 45+ are more likely to stick to xshopping exclusively in-store.

search online, buy online	14%
search online, buy in-store	25%
shop exclusively online	38%
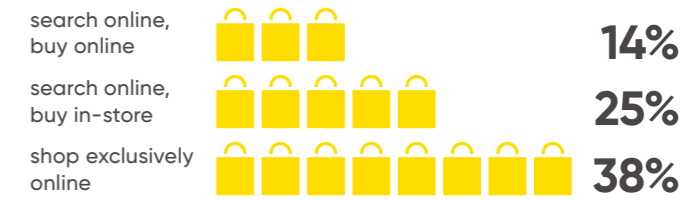
3.

Using and leaving online reviews

Reviews dominate decision-making for consumers

While personal recommendation is still a major influence on where shoppers go and the choices they make, reviews are now hugely important. The research shows that almost all shoppers read reviews.

94% 94% of consumers said that they check reviews when looking for a product or service, which is a substantial increase on the 75% in our research last year. Reviews could hardly be more influential and are a dominant force in consumer decision-making.

Women are more likely to read customer reviews on the internet (71% compared with 64% for men) as well as looking at star ratings (48% compared with 39% for men).

71% ★★★★★★★☆☆☆ 👩

64% ★★★★★★☆☆☆☆ 👨

More than half of respondents (53%) said they regularly check reviews when looking for a product or service, while more than one-in-ten (11%) check reviews every time they have a purchase in mind.
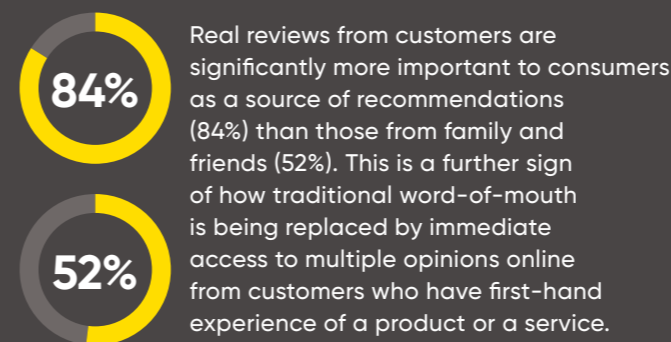
When it comes to finding reviews, Google search is the most common method (62%), followed by going to a company's website (37%) and browsing independent review websites (34%).

Google	62%
Company Website	37%
Review Website	34%

"94% of consumers said that they check reviews when looking for a product or service"

What kind of reviews do consumers value most?

Professional reviews posted by experts may individually have more influence, but the research found that consumers regard reviews from their fellow customers as more useful (67%). Just 4% said they find professional reviews more helpful about which product or service to buy. Women (71%) are more likely to view customer reviews as helpful than men (64%).

84% / **52%** Real reviews from customers are significantly more important to consumers as a source of recommendations (84%) than those from family and friends (52%). This is a further sign of how traditional word-of-mouth is being replaced by immediate access to multiple opinions online from customers who have first-hand experience of a product or a service.

Other factors also influence consumer buying decisions – the 'sentiment' of a review (how the person feels about the product) and its tone, and how many reviews a product/service has.

The main sentiment of a review is by far the most influential characteristic for purchase decisions (68%), followed by the number of reviews (55%) – especially for men.

Consumers prefer to read reviews rather than post them

Reading reviews, as we have seen, is now an essential element in how consumers reach decisions about which goods or service to buy. But posting a review about how the experience went requires effort and a different set of motivations, which is why less consumers are likely to do it.

38% of consumers surveyed said that they sometimes leave a review

23% of consumers leave a review "most of the time"

24% of surveyed consumers leave reviews "rarely"

24% or shoppers leave reviews regularly

Young consumers (aged 25-34) are considerably more likely to leave a review every time (10%) than those aged 35-64 (4-5%).

Those aged 65 or over are more likely never to leave a review (20%) than respondents aged 18-54.

Unsurprisingly in our digital world, most consumers (59%), prefer to leave reviews online – especially women (62% compared with 52% for men). However, 22% of those surveyed don't have any preference for where they leave a review, suggesting they would consider leaving a review while in a store.
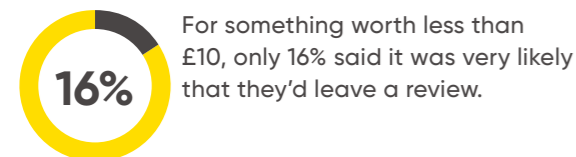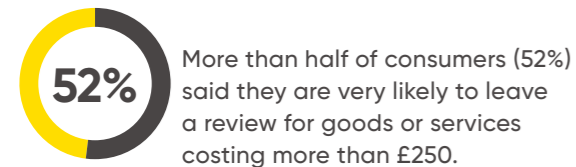
Which products are most likely to attract reviews?

Of course, not all products and services are reviewed equally. As consumers we are less likely to review a box of paper clips than a new car or a recruitment agency, solicitor or estate agent.

The research found that consumers are more inclined to leave reviews for services such as holidays/travel (50%), as well as restaurants/dining (49%) and electronics (43%). Household items attract reviews from 36% of respondents, while clothing, jewellery or cosmetics motivate 26%.

✈	**50%**
🍴	**49%**
🔌	**43%**
💡	**36%**
👜	**26%**

Price also matters. The higher the price of the item or service, the more likely consumers are to leave a review.

52% More than half of consumers (52%) said they are very likely to leave a review for goods or services costing more than £250.

16% For something worth less than £10, only 16% said it was very likely that they'd leave a review.

How can brands encourage more customers to leave reviews?

• Make it quick to leave a review

• Make it as easy as possible to leave a review

• Convince consumers that your brand cares about their opinion

The insights derived from reviews using advanced platforms are now so valuable that any business putting obstacles in the way of potential reviewers is neglecting an essential resource. Organisations need to make it as easy as possible for real customers to contribute.

The top three reasons why consumers don't leave a review:

1 Lots of questions to answer (59% – up from 52% last year)

2 Concerns about their privacy being compromised because of leaving their details online (46%). Two-thirds of consumers said that they wouldn't link their social media to their reviews. This reflects a bigger, global trend. Consumers are more concerned about controlling their personal data and how brands use their data and opinions.

3 Being pestered to leave a review (43% – down from 47% last year)

Valuing feedback

Disappointingly, as many as one-in-two shoppers are unsure whether retailers take their feedback into consideration, although the answers vary according to the age of the respondents.

Consumers aged 35-64 are more likely to be unsure whether retailers take their feedback into consideration than those aged 18-34 (50% compared with 34%).

50% Among those who never post reviews, 50% say it is because they see it as a waste of time.

45% 45% don't believe retailers or service-providers will take any notice.

This is a big increase on last year's research, when just 14% said they were deterred from posting reviews because didn't know if the company would respond.

4.

Building trust

Online reviews have flourished in recent years, but in the era of fake news the question of who to trust is vital.

Phoney, paid-for reviews have been besmirching the credibility of what appear to be honest posts, leading to publicity that damages the reputations of the businesses involved. For any business it is important to give consumers every reason to have faith in reviews.

Among consumers as a whole there are contradictory attitudes towards online reviews and compared with last year, trust may be deteriorating.

89% Nine-in-ten consumers (89%) surveyed said that they are worried about fake reviews, which is a big increase compared with the 75% who gave the same response last year.

"One-in-four consumers said that they had misled by a review"

Fewer than two-in-ten (17%) believe that reviews are policed appropriately. Brands that have their customer reviews verified by an independent company, are trusted more – by 43% of consumers surveyed.

59% Six-in-ten consumers (59%) said that they are more likely to buy from an organisation that only publishes verified reviews.

25% But there are still too many bad experiences out there, undermining what reviews should stand for. One-in-four consumers we surveyed said that they had been misled by a review.

Consumers aged 18-34 and frequent online/in-store shoppers are more likely to be misled by reviews. This suggests that exposure to fake reviews increases in direct relation to the number of reviews read; but is also a feature of a generation that is a little too ready to put its faith in whatever it reads online.

How many reviews does it take for a consumer to trust a brand's review system?

Between six and 25 was the most popular answer.

Men are more likely to be influenced by whether the reviews are verified (35% compared with 29% for women) or have accompanying videos.

Age also emerged as a factor influencing expectations of reviews. Middle-aged and older shoppers are more likely to be influenced by the general sentiments of a review, while the younger generation are more swayed by visual cues such as product images.

In general, the 18-24 age group seem less bothered by questions of trust and whether reviews are verified. Having grown up doing almost everything online, they may have to learn some sharp lessons about which reviews to trust when shopping on the internet.

"consumers value technology that enables them to make better purchasing decisions by making their fellow shoppers' reviews more accessible and straightforward"

5.

The future of online reviews

Technology is transforming lives – making almost everything we do smarter, easier and quicker.

The same transformation is taking place with the technology that powers online review platforms, where artificial intelligence and machine learning are firmly embedded, giving customers and businesses fast and accurate insights into the questions that matter most to them. For businesses, analytics and performance metrics reveal key factors and trends in customer sentiment that may otherwise have remained undisclosed.

How then, can reviews evolve to meet changing consumer habits and expectations that are shaped by technological developments?

46% 46% of consumers are interested in using their smartphone cameras in-store to trigger access to product reviews, prices and comparisons, especially those in the 18-44 age group (56%) or people who shop frequently. Less than a third (32%) are firmly against the idea.

Two-thirds of consumers overall (66%) may not be willing to link their social media profiles to reviews they post, with more than one-in-six (16%) uncertain. Yet readiness to link reviews to social media is highest among the 18-34 age group (26%), which may foretell a change in attitudes, reflecting this generation's immersive use of Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook and other applications.

Video reviews are another avenue for feedback, which some shoppers find easier to digest than text. Among the shoppers polled, men are more likely to watch product videos on the internet (27%) than women (20%). A third (33%) of the 18-24s watch product videos, but even 20% of the over-65s use videos to help make a purchase.

27% 👤👤👤👤👤👤

20% 👤👤👤👤👤

In last year's research, there was an overwhelmingly positive response (91%) to the use of artificial intelligence to provide rapid summaries of the pros and cons of a product or service. In the current research, 31% of respondents, for example, will read up to 25 reviews before choosing a restaurant.

It's clear that, for the time being, consumers want technology that gives them fast and accurate access to fellow shoppers' reviews, sifting out the topics they are most interested in, such as the range and quality of a restaurant's vegetarian options, or the fuel efficiency of a car model.

6.

Conclusion

This year's Feefo research on consumer reviews is both encouraging and worrying for retailers.

On the plus side, far more consumers are informing themselves by reading reviews about products and services when shopping. If your brand collects real reviews from genuine customers that shoppers instinctively trust, the advantages are obvious – it can help clinch sales and increase revenues.

Trust remains the biggest challenge, because even if businesses have good reviews, on its own that may not be enough to convince increasingly sceptical consumers. The absence of any negativity is a red flag for many shoppers who are becoming increasingly savvy to working out fact from fiction when it comes to online reviews. We all know that every product or service disappoints someone, even if for trivial reasons, so being transparent and showing your willingness to display and respond to negative feedback can go a long way to increasing consumer trust.
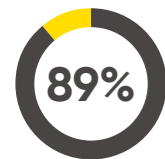
89% Nine-in-ten consumers surveyed (89%) in this research said that they are worried about fake reviews. That's substantially up from the 75% of people surveyed last year who expressed the same worries.

It is the most marked change from last year's research, which otherwise found broadly similar trends in attitudes to consumer reviews. This is also the one change that retailers, service-providers and professional services companies need to address as quickly and comprehensively as possible.

Consumers are more likely to trust (and buy from) brands which have independently-verified reviews, providing them with the testimony of real people who have actually bought or used a product or service. With cloud-based platforms providing rapid and easy access, there is little excuse for businesses to neglect customer opinion. Even more so when they consider how artificial intelligence and data analytics now turn consumer reviews into a goldmine of actionable customer insights that enable a business to act fast to resolve previously unseen pain-points and capitalise on quickly-emerging trends in consumption or demand.

As review systems become more familiar to businesses and shoppers alike, every sector will also have to address changing expectations, because technology does not stand still.

The other main challenge is to encourage more consumers to leave reviews. Making it quicker and easier to publish a review will undoubtedly increase participation. Most people have highly valuable feedback but they need to be enticed into sharing it. An important part of that is demonstrating that their views will be taken seriously and will not be lost among the billions of voices online.

Companies with trusted review platforms that attract real customers are meeting these challenges, forging ahead competitively. They are using the technology as an evidence-base for smarter business decisions and improved brand management that builds trust and boosts sales.

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Fancy a chat? Get in touch with questions, and our friendly Feefo team will be happy to help you.

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