

Case 13.

In the not so distant past, travelers relied mainly on guidebooks and/or seasoned travel agents to help them select the most appropriate accommodations when staying in unfamiliar locales. This was rarely problematic because guidebooks are written by professional writers and edited for accuracy, and agents usually provide candid recommendations even when commissions paid to them by hotels vary considerably. (The long-term financial success of travel agencies depends more on cultivating long-term relationships with clients than focusing on strategies that maximize commissions.)

Because of the expanding reach of the Internet, however, today's travelers are likely to eschew guidebooks, viewing them as limited and dated. Even the less tech-savvy find it easier than ever to locate a guest review of any particular hotel online—sometimes within only a few days of the reviewer's checkout date. The Internet puts consumers in control of their travel plans, and travelers increasingly turn to online travel websites as an alternative to travel agencies, whether virtual or brick and mortar. Online, consumers are able to gather all the facts they need and compare prices and options to find the best deal. This can be done at travelers' convenience, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

As websites that publish guest hotel reviews become more influential, some hotels go to great lengths to ensure that their properties are rated highly. Some hoteliers claim that investing in their properties and focusing greater attention on customer service – the traditional course for improving the profile of their establishments – is an inefficient, if not entirely ineffective, counterweight to out-of-context rants posted by disgruntled guests. Analysts say that hotels now rely on a number of strategies to raise their online ratings, from encouraging guests to write flattering reviews, to offering future discounts for positive comments online, and sometimes even submitting bogus recommendations to websites. While most hotel operators publicly claim they do not to attempt to influence reviews, publishers of online travel websites profess to be inundated by fraudulent posts, which force them to develop numerous measures to protect travelers. Stanley Roberts, CEO of the dining and review site We8there.com, evaluates every review submitted to his site, relying on “instinct and experience” to ferret out reviews of doubtful authenticity. Even so, Mr. Roberts concedes that he is never sure if he catches all the fakes or retains every legitimate post. Indeed, sites such as We8there have come under heavy criticism by hotel executives who claim that subjective filtering is now preventing the posting of positive guest comments.

In the absence of an accurate means to gauge the influence of self-selected reviewer comments, the consequences of this dispute remain unknown. Yet, for the parties involved, the stakes are high. Whatever the case, resolution seems far away when even the most temperate encouragement by hoteliers to encourage posting feedback pushes website publishers to summarily delete every review of the offenders' property.