

TECH TIPS

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How to Use Online Reviews and Ratings

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When you're shopping online for products or services, it makes good sense to look at the products' reviews and ratings. Typically, reviews consist of a few short sentences, and the ratings are expressed graphically with a one-to-five-star rating system – one star is the poorest rating, and five stars indicate the best rating. Here are some key things to look at before you make your purchase.

Legitimate reviews and ratings

Popular, broadly purchased items often have lots of reviews with a wide spectrum of ratings. However, if there are just a handful of rave reviews (all four – and five-star ratings) or if all of the reviews are posted in a very short time period, that's a clue that those reviews are illegitimate, and may have been posted by the product's seller. To minimize bogus reviews, Amazon flags reviews as a "verified purchase" to indicate the item was truly purchased from their store.

How to read positive and negative reviews

Even though the description of the product may sound great, and the picture shown on the web pages looks like it has everything you're looking for, it's a good idea to read high and low rating reviews.

Besides examining the product's basic features, there are several key criteria to look for when read-

ing reviews: Quality of materials and construction; easy-to-reach, responsive customer service; the manufacturer's warranty period and return policy; negative review comments that recommend a better product, or a different model instead of the one being reviewed; and negative reviews given because of delivery problems rather than the product's quality.

If available, read the questions and answers

You can find some valuable information about the product that isn't listed in either the product overview or the product specifications by reading the questions people asked, and reviewing the answers provided by either the manufacturer, the seller or other users of the product.

Compare competing product ratings, prices and specifications

Many online stores allow you to make side-by-side comparisons of several products, listing the ratings, prices, shipping costs and the product specifications. To initiate these comparisons, look for a check box near the item description, and click the Compare button at the start or below the listing of competing products.

Sometimes the seller will keep the price down by making key features "optional" add-ons that require a separate purchase – so adjust for these differences when comparing costs of competing alternatives.

In some cases, it may be worth the effort to compare the product information for the same product from different online stores (for example, Best Buy versus Amazon).

Consult free buying guides and user manuals

If you aren't familiar with the product's latest features and the terms used to describe them, search online for a buying guide for the product you want to buy.

Online buying guides are provided by manufacturers or merchants to help educate you – but be aware

that they might be biased in favor of the products they make or sell. Search the manufacturer's website for a user guide or user manual for the make and model number you're thinking about buying. They can also explain what features are included and how to use them.

Unbiased buying guides from independent testing laboratories, like Consumer Reports, are your best bet for comparative reviews of competing products. Consumer Reports also addresses a key question that the typical online review comments don't usually cover – long-term reliability and failure/repair rates of the competing products. One drawback of Consumer Reports, however, is that some reviews can be outdated, and their recommended models may not be readily available.

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The Tech Tips article in the Sept. 18, 2019 issue of the Rossmoor News describes the free digital resources available from the library.

It's not a problem if you don't have a current library card! You will find a link on the top of the library's webpage to get a digital library card that you can use to take advantage of many of their digital resources.

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