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Advice Sites
User-Shared Resources and Recommendations
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Learning Objectives. This chapter examines how to:
- Encourage social bookmarking of organizational web pages
- Draw attention to organization news and information via social news sites referrals
- Promote positive consumer reviews and recommendations
- Create effective exchanges on forums and chats

Overview

Advice site is a collective term for third-party websites and apps that enable users to exchange information about online resources and personal experiences important to them and potentially relevant to organizations. Advice sites include:
- social bookmarking sites,
- social news sites,
- review and rating sites, and
- forums and chats.

These venues are notable because promotional messages *originate with users*, not the organization the might benefit from them. Nonetheless, organizations can capitalize on these user-generated suggestions and comments and can foster the process in several ways. Organizations can:
- register and participate directly in some of these sites
- encourage users to share their (positive) experience as a way to create visibility and positive attitudes toward the organization, and
- monitor site comments relevant to the organization and respond, if appropriate.

Social Bookmarking Sites

Bookmarking, in general, involves saving the URLs of visited (or "favorite") websites, blogs and other web venues for quick access in the future. Users can bookmark visited sites on the web browser on their computer or smartphone, or can use a cloud-based system, such as Google Bookmarks, which allows accessing the user's stored list from any device.

Whereas traditional bookmarks are intended for personal use, *social bookmarking* involves storing bookmarks on a third-party site where they can also be *shared* with others. Therein lays the opportunity for using social bookmarking to promote organizations and causes.

Overview of Social Bookmarking

Social bookmarking helps users locate valuable web content through a process of *discovery*. In many ways social bookmarking sites act like a search engine to enable users to valuable web resources of interest to them. However, guidance is based on *descriptive titles* and *social tags* provided by contributors as well as *comments* and *votes* by site users. *Folksonomy* (descriptions and tags created by people using everyday language) thus is the foundation for how web pages are indexed, instead of keyword content matches, usage frequency or quality assessments determined by search engine algorithms.

To take full advantage of social bookmarking sites, users should register, complete a personal profile and upload a personal photo – similar to Facebook, LinkedIn or Google+. Sites can be viewed by anyone, but only registered users can submit items, compile personal lists of links, make comments, or vote.

Social bookmarks can be saved privately (accessible only to the user), but are most valuable to both organizations and site users when shared was widely as possible. Users have the option of sharing with only specific people or groups, or only within certain networks, or with all site participants. Bookmarks typically can be sorted by chronology, by contributor, by category, or by tags (keywords identified by users). Many systems provide notifications of new bookmarks, web annotations, and group or other social network features.

Value of Social Bookmarks

For organizations and causes, social bookmarking represents an important way to put content in the view of people who are especially interested in an industry or area of endeavor. Although once viewed as an important link-building tool to enhance search engine rankings (see Chapter 4), the focus today is on generating exposure (and traffic) among qualified potential website and blog visitors by creating backlinks that facilitate searching and browsing.

A presence on one or more social bookmarking sites also can lead to *faster search engine indexing* (versus higher ranking) because of the additional exposure and the frequency of social bookmarking sites being crawled by search engine spiders. But the biggest benefit comes with the implied endorsement of a site derived from positive comments and votes by others – activities that organizations can promote.

Leading Social Bookmarking Sites

More than a dozen social bookmarking sites operate today under various business models, such as folkd.com in Germany and MetaFilter, a moderated community weblog in the United States that invites links to web resources primarily to provoke discussion.

Two larger sites are most notable: Delicious.com and StumbleUpon.com.

Delicious.com was one of the first social bookmarking sites (originally known as del.icio.us) and remains a popular site despite being revamped in 2011 to place greater emphasis on curation and discovery. Users who wish to add content must register and complete a profile and are encouraged to upload a personal photo. Bookmarks can then be added four ways: by importing saved bookmarks from a personal web browser, by clicking on a social/share button embedded by owners on websites or blogs, by clicking on a browser-specific extension button an owner can install on the bookmark toolbar of his or her web browser, or by directly inputting page information on the Delicious website or mobile app. (Delicious supports several computer and mobile web browsers, but not all.) Links added on Delicious are public by default, but can be reset to be private at any time.

When a link is added, the name and a thumbnail image of the poster (or commenter) appear in the listing, which also begins a running count of the number of times the link is accessed (saved) by others. By clicking through to the full listing, users can access a hyperlink to the website or blog and can see all the people who shared the link, along with a list of related links of possible interest. Users with the applicable accounts can share the links with others via Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Pocket, Instapaper or email.

Users can access four standard link lists: My Links (the user's own posts), My Network (links by friends or others who the user follows), Discovery (community-picked links based on the user's stated interests), and Trending (most popular current posts based on the user's stated interests). Users can search links and generate custom lists based upon #tagname, @username, keywords, @username and #tagname, @username and keyword, or URL (http://...). Tags also can be combined to a tag bundle. Users are added to the user's Network using the blue "Follow" button on the top of the other user's profile, or via the Social tab on the Settings page to locate friends on Facebook or Twitter and then follow them.

StumbleUpon.com is classified as a social bookmarking site but positions itself as an intelligent discovery tool tailored to users with one or more specific interests.

Similar to Delicious, users can share evaluations of websites and webpages by providing comments and voting and can compile lists of sites and pages along with the comments and ratings shared by others. However, as the site's name implies, finding sites is not as

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Social Bookmarking Sites as Useful Content Curation Tools

Beyond generating traffic to a website or blog, social bookmarking sites such as Delicious can be used a curation sites to compile a set of materials from the web that can be used for content marketing purposes.

As needed, these can deployed as the basis for commentaries, reposts or the launching off point for new content.

Delicious lists also can be a convenient way to maintain a running inventory where content has been published on the web by simply establishing a consistent system for tagging items based on title, topic, date, venue or other appropriate and meaningful terms.

Other curation sites, such as Scoop.it, operate on fee basis much like Delicious, but are intended specifically to help content marketers, thought leaders, community managers and knowledge managers to curate web content for their own publishing operations.

straightforward as using a search engine or Delicious. Instead, users "stumble upon" sites by scrolling through a queue of related sites – a process that can be fun but time-consuming.

An important tool for using the site is the Stumblebar (task bar) that appears on the StumbleUpon site, or can be installed on the top of the user's personal web browser. Users click on the "Stumble" button to successively preview websites that have been bookmarked by site users and might be relevant to the user's stated interest(s). A thumbs-up button allows liking a site or page, while a thumbs-down button says the site is "not for me." The same button is used to report a problem. Other buttons enable users to add a page to an existing or new list, comment on a page or to recommend it to others. A secondary drop-down toolbar enables users to add web pages to StumbleUpon, adjust personal settings, and review/edit interests, friends, lists and likes.

Using Social Bookmarking for Promotion.

Organizations can benefit by encouraging the idea of social bookmarking and participating as a registered user on the site.

- **Encourage users (such as employees) to become registered users of social bookmarking sites** and to embed Delicious buttons on their bookmark tool bar and/or to install the StumbleUpon tool bars on their browsers. Then encourage them share relevant web resources.

- **Embed social/share buttons** for Delicious, StumbleUpon and other leading sites by downloading the required plug-in (HTML code) from sites such as AddThis.com and ShareThis.com or individual buttons from the sites themselves.

- **Establish a presence on one or more social bookmarking sites.** A critical key to success is become an active participant on one of these sites on a regular basis. Register, acquire an easy-to-recognize user name, and create a complete user profile (with photo). Depending on the circumstances, you might or might not wish to link your Delicious or StumbleUpon account to sites such as Twitter, Facebook or LinkedIn.

- **Contribute regularly**. It's important for users to submit recommended bookmarks from a variety of appropriate sources on topics relevant to your organization (and thus to your target audience) in order to gain exposure, establish the trust of others, and establish your organization as an industry leader. Thus, only about one-fifth of posted bookmarks should be your own content (follow an 80-20 rule). Bookmarking your own content is a controversial practice, but is probably necessary to assure getting into the content stream. Neither Delicious nor StumbleUpon impose prohibitions on self-promotion.

- **Bookmark selectively**. Focus on quality over quantity in an effort to be relevant and provide value to site users. Place special emphasis on information that people will find engaging and useful – "how-to" explanations, lists, tutorials, videos, images, infographics, etc. Avoid content that is strictly self-promoting unless the organization is of broad interest to people with a specified interest. Don't bookmark pages that will become quickly outdated without being updated. Be sure to include all key organizational web pages,

microsites and blogs. Just don't over-share to the degree you annoy or you run the risk of annoying or losing followers.

- **Foster positive relationships among regular site users.** The better your portfolio of bookmarks, the more likely people will be to share, like or vote up your content. Whenever a mutual follower sends a message to you, a red number will appear on your toolbar. Always acknowledge such efforts to connect with a reply comment or thank you. Also follow back the people who follow you. Reshare posts, engage with people, ask questions and post comments. Being an active participant is also a way to curate content for possible use in other social media activities (see sidebar).

At least one automated service (www.socialmarker.com) can distribute bookmarks to multiple social bookmarking sites, but it might not be necessary or beneficial to flood the space. Be selective, at least in the beginning, and then assess results.

Paid Promotion on Social Bookmarking Sites.

Although Delicious does not presently offer paid promotion of listings, StumbleUpon's Paid Discovery program permits sponsored content to be inserted with some frequency in the queue of displayed websites and pages pertinent to a user's specified interests. Paid submissions are clearly labeled as "Sponsored" and indicated with an icon next to the comments.

Social News Sites

Social news sites are third-party websites and apps that operate much like social bookmarking sites, but compile reader recommendations about current *news stories* found on the web (versus web pages or blogs). Social news sites also incorporate a rating or ranking system that guides readers to the most popular, most important, or most unusual posts. On some sites, organizations post original content.

Overview of Social News Sites

Social news sites differ from advertiser-supported, automated *news aggregation sites*, which simply compile news from other media venues as a convenience for users (see Chapter 8). Social news sites are often lauded as for facilitating peer-to-peer learning, as a form of audience empowerment, and as a tool to promote the exchange of ideas and opinions critical in a democracy.

Both special-topic and general-interest news sites operate on the website. Slashdot.com, for example, focuses on science and technology related-news. Recommendations are then evaluated by editors who determine which stories will be placed on the site's front page. Fark.com provides an irreverent perspective on current events ladened with offbeat stories submitted by readers. Similar to Slashdot, the choice of stories is the province of the site's operators but registered members are invited to vote on stories. As the site explains, "Fark is supposed to look like [legitimate] news... but it's not news. It's Fark."

Three Leading Social News Sites

Today, the most popular general-interest social news sites for promotional purposes include Reddit.com and Newsvine.com. Digg.com abandoned its popular user-driven submission system in 2012 to become a news aggregation/curation site but maintains a user voting mechanism and is still frequently considered an important social news site. All three sites allow any user to view stories but require users to register to either submit or vote on content.

Reddit.com ranks among the 50 most-visited websites and is the most popular social news site. The name is a play on the past tense of "read," where a person can claim "I read it….." Any registered community member (known as a *Redditor*) can submit and vote submissions up or down. Use the Submit link on the front page of the site to enter the URL of the site and a title (or click the "Suggest" button to have a title auto-fetched from the page you're linking to behind of the screen). Then, select a *subreddit* by choosing a suggested topical category or by typing a few letters to search for one.

A unique feature of Reddit is its categorization of topics and its more than 5,000 subreddits, which are also fashioned as user communities. Major categories for links include educational (including news and science), entertainment, discussion-based, humor-light hearted, image sharing, self-improvement, technology and meta (site administration, announcements and blogs). Only about 25 "default" subreddits are listed on the site's front page, and users can develop their own customized list on their subscriber page. Entries can be sorted based on whether they are hot (popular), news, rising, controversial, top (most reviewed), or promoted.

Each subreddit contains its own front page that shows newer, highly rated articles or text posts. Registered users can comment, and the posted comments also can be rated up or down by users. Individuals and organizations also can create their own subreddit based on a topic of interest to them. Redditors can "friend" one another simply as a mechanism for quick access to postings and comments by the friends lists. Users earn "link karma" and "comment karma" for submitting popular links and comments. These non-redeemable points appear as a badge of honor on the user's home page. Contributors of well-received posts can also be granted "reddit gold" – access to Reddit's premium program that offers special membership benefits.

Newsvine.com is a considerably smaller but well-established social news site that was revamped in 2013. The site provides links to external news content on the web (called *seeds*) but also welcomes original articles from registered Newsviners.

Submissions appear on the site's front page as well as the news columns created by members of user groups (known as *Nations*). Each member is assigned a user column with her or his own subdomain (e.g. username.newsine.com), where the user can complete a personal profile, manage their site activity, and link their Newsvine activities to one or more social networking sites.   A registered member can join up to 15 Nations based on personal interests. Members can also create and recruit others to join their own Nations.

Registered Newsviners use the site's pull-down Publish menu to seed a link or post an original article, photo or video. The typical social news post summary includes an image, headline and the name of the original source of the item and well as a count of comments

received to date. When the visitor clicks through to the full item, the name of submitter, a date/time stamp, and hyperlink to the original source is provided. Contributors also can place an item in one of 20 basic categories and provide a brief summary as well as list of keyword tags. Subsequent registered users who view the post also can add Comments or vote up a post (similar to a Like button). Comparable options are available for articles, photos and videos.

Digg.com is now a news aggregation site whose editors (not readers) compile stories from across the web and displays them in a smart looking display featuring photos, headlines and the first one or two sentences of a story. Users can click on individual stories, but also receive a Daily Digg news summary via RSS feed.

Today, a "digg" is a positive vote given to a story using the "thumbs up" icon appearing below the story summary. Any user can digg a story, and every vote helps to inform editors where a story should appear on the website or mobile app. Today, a story's Digg Score is created using an algorithm that is heavily weighted in favor of the number of diggs, but also takes into account Facebook *shares*, tweets for a story, and other data. Users can see a breakdown of votes by rolling over the story. Digg.com does not currently permit comments.

Using Social News Sites for Promotion

Exposure on social news sites can be an effective promotional tool that can create awareness among people with specific interests and also drive traffic to websites (referred to as the *Reddit effect*, also the *Slashdot effect*). A high influx of traffic from Reddit has been known to crash smaller websites not accustomed to the volume (ironically referred to as the "Reddit Hug of Death").

Some key tips for taking advantage of social news sharing:

• **Incorporate social/share buttons in web content**. The easiest way to gain exposure to embed social/sharing buttons for Reddit, Newsvine and Digg in news releases and blogs that enable members of these sites to make recommendations.

• **Establish a presence on the site.** Within the limits specified by each of the sites, social media managers or other organization representatives also can join each of the sites as members, and submit items to relevant groups (Reddit subreddits and Newsvine Nations). Consider creating your own groups and then actively promote them by friending/inviting others on the site.

• **Linking news stories on sites**. Reddit provides the greatest opportunity for promotion and generally is the most tolerant of direct promotional efforts by organizations. The site has no stated prohibitions against self-promotion, but after-the-fact has flagged Reddit posts with deprecating "Hail Corporate!" tags if linked to egregiously self-aggrandizing messages without news value. Enforcement, however, is irregular because of the huge number of subreddits to monitor.

The site's "Reddiquette" rules discourage promoting reddit posts – asking for votes, conducing polls using the title of a submission, sending tweets or other messages asking

for votes, asking for votes in exchange for gifts or prizes, or creating mass downvote or upvote campaigns. Other guidelines apply to new submissions—including prohibitions against hoaxes, flooding submissions, sensationalizing titles, deceptively shortened hyperlinks (that hide the destination), and including irrelevant links that add nothing (*linkjacking*).

Newsvine's Code of Honor prohibits self-promotion and self-advertising, including seeding links to one's own web content. Although posting links merely to drive traffic elsewhere for personal or financial gain is prohibited, but does not necessarily preclude linking to news stories where a client is mentioned or featured if it can be argued that the story involves a legitimate news story of interest to site members. The Code of Honor also has provisions related to respecting others, avoiding the use of headlines to bait click throughs, and the responsible hosting of columns.

- **Q&As on Reddit.** Two subreddits provide valuable promotional opportunities in the form of dialogues between Redditors:

I Am A… is a highly forum that operates like a press conference where Redditors can prompt others to ask questions about any topic using the site's comment system. Various notable public figures and subject matter experts have participated in these sessions. Posts are preceded by AMA ("ask me anything").

Today I Learned is a subreddit where members can share something new that the user has learned recently – and about which they were uninformed previously. Although the concept might be familiar to other users, the content must be original and not published previously in the subreddit. Various rules apply to TIL posts: the submissions must be substantive (not trivia), verifiable, avoid personal opinions, unrelated to recent politics, and not be merely current or recent news announcements. Posts must begin with TIL…, be descriptive, unambiguous, and stand on their own (not require readers to click on a link). "How-to" stories should be avoided.

- **Original Articles on Newsvine**. A unique advantage of Newsvine is to enable registered users to post articles. The process is facilitated by an easy-to-use Article Editor that provides a template for creating headlines and text and for embedding photos, videos, captions and article-related polls. A calendar tool facilitates scheduling. Authors can benefit from positioning themselves as experts or thought leaders on particular topics in the news, and from heightened recognition among site users by submitting articles as well as comments on articles and seeded links. New articles cannot be self-promotional, but can the same as those appearing on a blog or website.

Review Sites

A **review site** is a third-party website where users can post evaluations about a business or other organization or a product, service or person. Many review sites incorporate some kind of rating or scoring system, which provides a shorthand summary of user evaluations. Examples include 1-to-5-point scales or a 1-to-5-stars system. However, the primary value of a review results the written comments provided by experienced users, which are a way

for site visitors to assess whether to do business or become involved with the organization. Mobile access is especially valuable for users on the go when choosing hotels, restaurants, events and retail merchants.

Some review sites feature only reviews written by staff or professional experts. Examples include ConsumerReports.com and viaMichelin.com (reviews from the famous travel guide). Some of these sites also welcome readers' comments, such as CNET.com. Various other sites rely entirely on user input. Numerous special-interest magazines, such as *PC Magazine* and *Car and Driver,* also feature reviews by staff writers and other experts but incorporate user feedback in their online editions. In addition to these sites, various blogs are devoted to product reviews by the blogger and incorporate confirming or disaffirming user feedback in the comments.

Review sites are specifically dedicated to providing user feedback and do so in a more formal or structured format. Importantly, more informal user recommendations can appear in a wide range of other social media (see discussion in Chapter 9).

Role of Reviews in Promotion

In increasing numbers, online merchants and retail merchants are including review mechanisms in their websites, microsites or landing pages. Why? Surveys show that endorsements or explicit recommendations from satisfied users are one of the most persuasive arguments for buying a product online or offline.

- Four-fifths of small business website searches involve websites featuring reviews.
- Similarly, about 4 out of 5 prospective product consumers consult review sites when purchasing major products or choosing restaurants, hotels or movies.
- User endorsements are trusted by more than two-thirds of web users.

Evidence suggests that only 1 out of 7 reviewers are motivated to publish reviews based on negative personal experiences. The vast majority of reviewers hope to help others, think it's polite to provide

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Rating Sites Versus Review Sites

A **rating site** (also known as a *rate-me site*) is a specific type of review site which is normally not used by organizations to promote products or services.

Typically people use a rating site to ask others to assess attributes or themselves or others, such as physical appearance, voice or personality. Examples include HotorNot.com, RateMyFace.com and Facemash.com (which began as the predecessor to Facebook).

People also ask others to judge their pets or creative works-- writing, graphics, video or musical performance. The motivations of requestors for posting items on these sites range from self-assurance and self-improvement to unabashed ego-gratification

Other rating sites measure the occupational performance of individuals – mostly for the benefit of people who must work with them. The people being judged typically don't seek such evaluations, but often heed the comments received. Examples include RateMyCop.com (police), RateMyProfessor.com (university), RateMyTeachers.com (high school) and TeachStreet.com (online and classroom instructors)

Rating sites usually simply ask users to make a simple yes/no (favorable/unfavorable) judgment after presenting two alternatives. Others use 1-5, 1-7 or 1-10 point scales. Comments often are not solicited, but some rating sites invite respondents to explain the reason for their votes.

feedback, want to share positive experience, or believe good performance should be recognized. Only a few reviewers are prompted by the desire to be recognized as a higher-ranked purchaser or to develop a reputation as a reviewer.

Amazon.com pioneered the movement when it encouraged readers to share reviews of books (and other products) available from the online merchandiser. Other early examples of third-party websites dealing in product reviews include Epinions.com, which was later acquired by eBay and now operates to supply product evaluations to Shopping.com. Another example was TripAdvisor.com, which originally featured professional reviews, but later embraced and was highly successful in featuring traveler-generated reviews. Today, the company generates most of revenues from bookings generated on the sites and relying on

Many product manufacturers, software and app developers, game developers, movie producers and theater owners, music promoters and operators of restaurants, hotel and entertainment depend on positive reviews sites to jump-start awareness of their brands, foster positive attitudes, and prompt actions.

Concerns About Review Sites

Anonymous Reviews. Many reviews are posted anonymously, and might or might not involve the user adopting a username or pseudonym. Anonymity removes barriers from participation, encourages candor, and has been deemed an important part of free expression in the United States. However, problems can arise when people misuse their anonymity to be unfair or abusive, to use reviews to interject malicious comments, or to engage in veiled self-promotion. In general, reviews are most credible and most valuable to users and organizations when signed by the reviewer.

Advertising- and Sales-Related Pressure. Review sites follow several business models. A few are pure review sites without potential conflicts of interests. Many are supported by display ads on products or services related to the site's focus. Many offer special deals or promotions in tandem with reviews. Others use reviews to promote the direct sale of products or services on the site and only include reviews for products or services available for purchase on the site.

Involvement in advertising or product sales can raise questions about potential conflicts of interest and possible efforts by sites (or pressure from advertisers) to suppress or delete negative comments. In general, this is not a problem for websites that sell multiple brands within the same category because users compare reviews within the same site to determine which brand to purchase and will probably purchase one of them. This assumes that merchants are not under particular pressure to liquidate particular inventories or promote products with higher profit margins. Such potential conflicts of interest can make review sites suspect.

Categories of Review Sites

Although social bookmarking and social news sites are each dominated by a couple of key sites, the best review sites for a particular organization will depend on type of product or service offered and organization's location(s) and product/service category.

Sites vary in terms of their geographic coverage, popularity, usability (navigation and ease of use) and quality of reviews. Most are free to searchers. A notable exception is Angie's List, which charges users a monthly subscription fee that varies by market based on the size of the geographic market and the resulting number of available reviews accessible to subscribers.

Major categories of websites featuring review and ratings include:

- **Search Engine/Local Directory Sites** -- Promote businesses in specific geographic markets through free listings or paid advertising. Examples include: Google Local, Yahoo Local, CitySearch, Merchant Circle, Local.com and various Yellow Pages directories such as DexKnows. Google+ Local now incorporates professional reviews from Zagat (now owned by Google). Facebook competes in this arena with programs for local businesses (Chapter 12). Reviews also play a role in location-based marketing programs such as Foursquare (see Chapter 4).

- **Hospitality Industry Sites** – Guide consumers in making choices and facilitate reservations at local restaurants, hotels, nightclubs and other leisure venues. Yelp.com is the most influential site in the category and covers other retail establishments. Restaurant sites include Open Table, Urban Spoon and Zagat. Sites dedicated to hotels include TripAdvisor, Hotel.com, RoomKey and Trivago.

- **Other Consumer Services Sites** -- Provide referrals for vendors supplying various consumer-related services, organized by geography: Examples: Angie's List (home services), Judy's Book (wide variety of topics), KidScore (children-friendly establishments). Sites reviewing automobile dealers are Edmunds and DealerRater, whereas Houzz.com and Porch.com focus on home design and remodeling. Health care-related sites include InsiderPages, Wellness.com and Doctoroogle.

- **Merchandise/Brand Sites** – Offer shopping advice on various types of merchandise. ConsumerSearch.com is among the most reputable site and compiles both expert and user reviews on various items. Other sites covering a broad range of topics include Epinions.com and Shopping.com (sister sites

Fake Reviews: Astroturfing and Trolling

A problem confronting review sites is the increasing incidence of both positive and negative reviews found on sites in attempts to bias results. Studies have shown upwards of 20% to 25% of reviews on certain sites to be fakes.

Astroturfing (a variation on the idea of grassroots lobbying) involves business owners and their confederates (including unscrupulous "reputation management" firms) that stuff review pages with *positive* comments about a client.

Trolling is the pejorative term for loading a review entry with *negative* comments about a competitor or peppering reviews with comments that discount or discredit positive reviews.

A third problem results from reviews written without actually experiencing the product.

Many review sites have algorithms that help evaluate whether a review is authentic and to filter out suspected fake reviews (both false positives and false negatives). Some also conduct sting operations to uncover businesses writing their own reviews and have riled businesses by removing suspected questionable posts. Yelp has sued at least one firm for writing false reviews for pay.

Potential indictors of a fake review include the use of excessively effusive, gushing language; the use of vague self-references and terms; reviews coming from multiple accounts on one computer; a user account with only one review; and comments that diverge significantly from others,

owned by eBay). TopGear is devoted to expert and user reviews of cars.

- **Technology Review Sites** – Play a critical a critical role in marketing various high-tech and computer-related items, including computers, peripherals, software programs, games and apps. Examples include CNET, Tech Radar, The Wirecutter, The Verge, and ZDNet.

- **Complaint Sites** – Offer venues for consumers to voice unhappiness with products and services. The most reputable venues are the websites for the more than 100 local Better Business Bureaus. Other examples include Complaints Board, Ripoff Report, iRipoff, Unhappy Franchisee, Complaint Center, Complaints.com, Consumer Affairs and Pissed Consumer.

- **Employer Review Sites** -- Target prospective employees with feedback from current and past employees about management, working conditions and pay. Employers incorporate them in recruiting programs if comments are primarily positive. Examples include GlassDoor, EnjoyMonday, RateMyEmployer, Job Advisor and Kunuku.

Using Review and Ratings Sites for Promotion.

Recognizing the diverse range of review sites available for digital promotional and social media managers, here are some key ideas for deploying review sites effectively:

- **Recognize the value of user endorsements and recommendations**. Reviews need to be an important of many digital promotion programs and require serious attention from social media managers.

- **Be listed on important search/directory and industry-specific sites.** Search engine/directory sites are essential for local businesses, whereas hospitality, consumer services, product and technology sites ought to the primary foci for marketers who sell nationally or globally. Many listings are initiated when users identify an organization to review, or when the site wants to provide a comprehensive list of businesses known to be of interest to audiences. If not already listed, organizations should seek out listings. Various sites have minimum qualifications in order to be listed, along with required elements for each listing. Because of the sheer number of sites available, be selective and focus on the critical review sites that can most impact your organization. Begin modestly, then expand as indicated by the results obtained and the staff and other resources required.

- **Encourage customers and others to post reviews**. Identify simple ways that satisfied customers can serve as brand evangelists by identifying the prominent sites where you're especially interested in generating positive visibility. Then tell customers using mentions of review sites on receipts, decals, post scripts or footers in emails, table tents in restaurants and hotel guest rooms, inserts in bills and receipts, and preprinted mentions on thank-you notes sent to customers for their business.

Also train cashiers and other customer contact staffers to encourage people in appropriate situations to post reviews. Consider offering a small incentive for participation (similar to offers made to encourage completion of customer satisfaction surveys). As possible,

encourage friends to seed the conversation, but never submit fake reviews that positively extol the virtues of your product or service – an unscrupulous practice that can destroy user trust in both the organization and process (see sidebar).

- **Monitor comments on sites.** Many small business owners routinely track reviews on sites on such as Yelp, while hotel managers monitor sites such as Travel Advisor. Set up automatic alerts to notify you when the organization is mentioned in a review or blog.

Several third-party monitoring services specialize in monitoring comments on review sites and provide easy-to-use social media monitoring software (see Chapter 9) expressly for smaller businesses. Examples include Bazaarvoice, Yext, Reputation.com, ReviewTrades, and Tradur. Monitoring reviews is important, especially to quickly identify abrupt pattern changes potential problems. However, it's important to not become obsessed. Organizations can expect a combination of positive, negative and lukewarm comments.

- **Respond to reviews, as appropriate**. Many sites providing a messaging capability that enables business owners to contact reviewers. As time permits acknowledge positive comments--or at least extraordinary ones. Some reviewers might wish to engage in an ongoing dialogue. Determine whether such a commitment of time is practical in exchange for heightened customer loyalty and extended word of mouth. One study showed that slightly more than half of respondents said they are likely to book a hotel again if managers respond to reviews.

Avoid any suggestion of bribery or asking a reviewer to change or delete his or her comments. As available, also use tools available on the site to share with others what's being done to resolve a well-known problem. TripAdvisor has created a response tool on its site for this purpose.

- **Use the feedback from reviews to improve product or service offerings.** Perhaps the best advice is to use the trove of ideas and data contained in reviews to correct problems and

> **Effectively Responding to Negative Reviews/Complaints**
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> Many small business owners feel compelled to respond to every negative comment. The best advice is to never get angry and to not argue. Consider the substance of the complaint and recognize it's impossible to please everyone.
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> Reviews that are filled with only snarky comments, and no specifics, are the most difficult to appease and might best be simply acknowledged with an apology.
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> Reviews that cite specific problems that can be remedied should always be answered:
> - Thank the reviewer
> - Acknowledge the problem,
> - Describe how it's being rectify, and
> - Offer a token incentive (discount, check-in offer, give-away, etc.) as a goodwill gesture for the customer to try the product or service again.
>
> In general, keep responses short – and avoid protracted excuses or explanations. Most importantly, demonstrate your genuine concern about the customer and your commitment to improvement.

encourage positive actions by the organization. Share positive comments with staff – and call out the specific accomplishments of employees that are cited by satisfied customers. Identify trends in comments where improvements are called for – whether in product design, pricing, service delivery or staff training. Use the intelligence gathered to foster organizational learning. The best way to get positive reviews in the future is to improve the organization. Recognition will follow performance.

- **Merchandise positive reviews to your advantage.** Consider ways to showcase positive comments that have been received. Possibilities include: a special page on the organization's website, scattered "call outs" on web pages and publications, a reviews tab on Facebook, sponsored posts on Twitter or LinkedIn, paid advertising, excerpts below the signature on outgoing emails, company presentations and meetings, and internal communications.

Paid Promotion on Review Sites

Review sites can be good venues for paid advertising because users are typically motivated to purchase. Many review sites offer their own advertising programs or work through ad networks such as Google AdSense to sell prime text or display advertising space. But be cautious: Avoid any appearance the presence of paid ads are contingent on positive reviews, or vice versa.

Directory sites, such as Google Local, offer free listings with limited enhancements at no cost (see Chapter 4) in order to enhance the usefulness of the site to visitors.   Not surprisingly, however, their goal is to parlay businesses with free listings into paid advertisers.

Native advertising has not yet made its way into the content of most review sites, but publishers and marketers can be expected to experiment with the idea. The obvious problem is that intermixing unsolicited, positive reviews with sponsored (paid) messages can raise questions about the credibility of the site and the reviews it contains. The unintended effect could be to destroy the value of the site as both a source of credible information and as an advertising venue that can command top ad rates.

Forums and Chats

Forums and chats are websites and app-based venues that enable people to engage in interactive conversations typically related to some aspect of their personal or professional lives.

Forums are text-based, *threaded* discussions that enable people to pose questions, supply responses, or make comments on a particular topic over an extended period of time. Forums do not require users to be online simultaneously, and thus comments are *asynchronous* (not posted in real time). An individual can start a thread or conversation on a particular topic and then leave the site. The text remains in tact. As others enter the forum, they can read comments, answer questions, or add personal observations on the topic. The number of potential participants is unlimited. Forums are also called *discussion boards* and *bulletin boards*.

Chats are text-based conversations that occur among people visiting a website (often referred to as a *chatroom* or *channel*) at particular point in time. Thus chats are *synchronous* (posted in real time). Conversations are usually unthreaded, and thus can shift from topic to topic based on the sequential flow of the conversation. Users type

messages in a single stream. Importantly, participants only can see the conversation that took place after they signed on and until they sign off. (Although a permanent archive of the conversation is generated, this typically is only accessible by the chat owner.) Users can send, receive and reply to messages from many users simultaneously, or can reply privately to a particular participant. Chat software generally imposes a limit on the number of participants at any one time (often around 200 people).

Seeking and Sharing Opinions and Advice

Forums and chats were among the earliest forms of social media and predated Web interfaces. Modern-day web-based forums are the successors to *newsgroups* and *usenet* discussions that relied on dial-up phone connections and crude DOS-based software.

In part due their novelty, chats became especially popular in the 1990s as a way to interact with others. Conversations often covered just about any topic on the minds of participants. As their numbers proliferated, bulletin boards and chatrooms began to devote themselves to particular topics. And with the emergence of new technologies, many of the purely social functions performed forums and chats were usurped by social networking sites and other social media. In fact, many social networking sites incorporated forum or chat components.

Although less popular today as a social tool, forums and chats remain viable platforms as a social medium for some groups, such as teenagers and college students, but still appeal to adults with interests in specific topics (see sidebar). Therein lays their value for digital promotion purposes – as venues to connect with people and organizations with common concerns.

Controversy is the stock-in-trade of some forums and chats. These bring together people interested in exchanging opinions regarding topics about which they are passionate or hold strong opinions. These sites are venues for some of the liveliest conversations on the Web.

Forums and Chats Today

Today, various commercial sites operate forums and chats. Some of the largest forums operate outside the United States or are part of social networking sites, such as Gaia Online, which operate the world's largest forum.

Major forum site operators include BigBoards, Proboards, Yuku, Whirlpool and CNET (all.com). Major chat site operators are 321chat, 99chats, comfrog, chat-avenue, icq, omegle, paltalk, wireclub and tinychat (all .com). Wikipedia and other websites maintain lists of the top forums. TopBestBox.com and other websites track major chatrooms.

Although some forums and chats are general-interest sites or are devoted to topics such as dating and sex, the forums and chats most valuable for digital promotional purposes are devoted to specialized topics.

Popular categories and some of the topics they cover include;

Technology – computers, electronics, technology issues, user problems and workarounds
Entertainment – music, television, movies, books, video games
Recreation – cars, motorcycles, travel, outdoors, and the arts
Politics – news, people, current events, controversial topics (gun control, abortion, etc.).
Sports – professional sports leagues and teams, college sports, amateur athletics, personal training.
Lifestyle – family issues, personal finance, gay and lesbian interests,
Health – diagnoses and treatment of specific physical or mental health conditions, alternative medicine, caregiver support

Advice is the mainstay of many other sites. People *seek advice* from peers and experts about their personal situations, but also want to share advice, opinions and personal experiences with others. Sharing online serves as a valuable psychological coping mechanism but also is a constructive way to help others.

Health is an excellent example of a domain where people seek and share advice online. In so doing, peers (versus medical providers) provide valuable social support in several forms. *Information support* involves sharing facts and suggestions about particular courses of action to take. *Emotional support* includes encouragement, reassurance and confidence bolstering from people with similar experiences. *Network support* reinforces the notion that person is not alone – and that others are available to help.

User Advantages Over Social Networking Sites. Many users choose to interact with others on forums and chats instead of social networking sites. Why?

Forums and chats are generally simpler to use. The learning curve is minimal. On forums that deal with professional or technical topics, for example, users can quickly enter the site and search for information. They can leave a question on a forum and return later to check responses. Although not as efficient as a wiki (typically organized by topic), searchable forum discussions are more efficient than scrolling through uncategorized chronological posts on a social networking site.

These sites also do not require users to register, to provide a photo or to complete a user profile. Users do not even need to identify themselves and can a different moniker each time they sign in. Anonymity can lead to some users to engaging in bad behavior (rudeness, vulgarity, harassment of others) because their identity is not known. However, anonymity also can be an incentive for others to seek advice or share information about sensitive topics. The lack of user photos on many forums and chats further reinforces a sense of confidentiality.

Organizational Involvement in Forums and Chats

Similar to social networking sites, organizations can become involved in forums and chats two ways: *participation* in or *sponsorship* of a forum or chat.

Participation. As participants in independent forums and chats operated by third-parties, organizational representatives can monitor discussions and interject comments that reinforce the organization's marketing or promotional efforts. This strategy requires continuous attention to the conversation taking place in threaded discussions or chats. The purpose is reach forum or chat participants who are potentially influential opinion leaders or members of targeted audiences.

Five Organizational Strategies for Using Forums and Chats

- **Monitor** (lurk) – research comments, gather competitive intelligence
- **Discussant** – pose questions or issues, comment, respond to postings
- **Promote –** encourage people to join and participate through using both online and offline communications.
- **Advertise** on third-party forum or chat sites
- **Sponsor** a forum or chat on the organization's own website or as a microsite.

Similar to social networking sites, participation is often coordinated by a *community manager* who follows the conversation on behalf of a client organization and becomes recognized as an expert by forum or chat members.

Today, organizations generally focus their involvement in special-topic themed forums and chats that appeal to participants who have a specific interest in their product, service or activities. In many business or professional arenas, one or two forums are generally the principal online meeting places for industry thought leaders.

Sponsorship. As sponsors, organizations can underwrite the (modest) cost of operating forums and chats that are devoted to topics specific to the organization's product, services or mission. Here the strategy might be merely to follow the conversation (a practice pejoratively referred to as "lurking") but to not intercede by trying to guide or censor the conversation.

Typical participants in sponsored forums or chats might include customers, employees, professionals, students, hobbyists, and other with specific interests connected in some way to the organization.

Such discussions have proven to be particularly popular among high technology companies, which use forums and chats to answer questions or resolve problems confronted by software developers, system or user analysts, and system users. Forums and chats are a highly cost-efficient way to resolve routine queries and avoid more costly requests for assistance received via email, instant messaging, or telephone calls by technical support staff in customer care centers.

Organizations also benefit by tapping the expertise of their customers who revel in the opportunity to show their prowess and/or help others. Other "low-tech" organizations can benefit similarly. A forum or chat sponsor benefits by being recognized as the site sponsor and by creating a community that brings together people with common interests.

The organization resources required to oversee a forum or chat are also considerably less than sponsorship of a social networking site.

Professional Conversations in Forums and Chats

Video Chats and Forums

Today text is the primary mode of communication on forums and most chats. However, various chat platforms facilitate two-way chats between friends and family using video. Personal message systems (see Chapter 10) provide video exchanges between two people, while web conferencing systems (see Chapter 14) provide permit collaboration among small numbers of designated people in remote locales.

However, the number and quality of video-based chat sites open to people in pursuing advice or discussions about particular topics (include many topics relevant to organizations generally) remains limited. This capability can be expected to grow as people become more accustomed (and comfortable) being seen on video. However, privacy concerns and the hesitancy to of being seen by strangers might continue to limit the appeal of such video chats.

Because forum posts are permanent, it is important that comments identified with the organization be grammatically correct, spell-checked, and well written. Formatting for the appearance of forum posts is usually controlled (and limited) by the forum software. Use subheads and bullets to enhance the readability of longer posts when appropriate. Use boldface and italics sparingly. Avoid colors if that option is available. Typing a few words in all caps for emphasis is permissible, but avoid screaming by typing whole sentences in all-capital letters.

When joining a forum or chat, review the rules governing participation. Many early forums and chats were *moderated* by a volunteer or subject-matter expert. Most chats today are *unmoderated*, i.e. there is no host who facilitates the conversation, screens posts, and maintains order among potentially unruly participants.

Writing Forum Posts

Two alternative situations involved when writing forum posts: starting a new thread or adding to an existing thread.

Starting a new forum discussion topic is useful when an organizational representative wants to pose questions, stimulate discussion, conduct research, or guide the conversation in a forum or discussion group. Initial posts should be carefully thought out and written in a way to encourage comments and to help assure that comments remain on the topic.
- Choose topics relevant to your organization. Make sure that new threads are pertinent and will be interesting to forum participants.
- Use keywords that will attract the attention of prospective participants and search engines (whose spiders crawl and catalog many forum discussions). Carefully consider synonyms and antonyms that can be used to vary the language in posts. But avoid jargon or language not meaningful to the typical forum user.
- Many forum software packages ask authors to create a label for new threat topics. Use short, pithy, but descriptive titles – which will be the labels used to identify new threads in forum indices.
- Make sure posts are substantive, with enough information to prompt interest or discussion. For SEO purposes, posts should have at least 200-250 words. Note: Shorter succinct replies are always appropriate when replying or following up a comment. But avoid flip answers that might be perceived as cynical or smart-alecky.
- Be provocative … create controversy… get the conversation going. Encourage alternative perspectives.

Adding to an existing discussion thread requires bridging the conversation to make a point that's important to a client's marketing effort or position on an issue. Always make comments that add value to the conversation.
- Be respectful, not disparaging, of comments with which you disagree.
- Use a low-key selling approach. Avoid posts that appear to be spam.
- Explain concepts, clarify terms, or outline the pro's and con's of ideas that might have been raised in the conversation.
- Include hyperlinks to digital resources available from your organization.

- Guide people to other resources (even if not from your client organization) that might be helpful to address the topic under discussion.
- If a topic is raised that you might have addressed in a previous post, summarize your earlier response, and then provide a reference that tracks back to your earlier comments.

Writing Chat Posts

As with discussion boards or bulletin boards, a good strategy is to follow a chat for several days before delving in as a participant. Whereas the transcript of a forum is usually readily accessible, a chat requires observing the discussion in real time. Such "lurking" is prudent.
Similar to a forum, participants can both introduce new topics and respond to topics already in the conversation stream. Unlike a forum, however, several conversations can be going on simultaneously within the chat. Thus following the conversation is important. Waiting for the right moment might be beneficial.

Follow chatroom "netiquette." Some guidelines for being a good "chatter":

- Introduce yourself upon your arrival in the room. Identify your role or affiliation with the organization you represent and your reason for being in the room. (Unlike personal or sex chatrooms, sharing personal background or interests might be unnecessary or inappropriate.)
- Develop a presence by visiting the chatroom periodically. Always use the same username so people come to identify you as a regular, respected member of the group.
- Make sure topics introduced are relevant to the theme or focus of the chatroom. Contribute by adding value to the conversation.
- When posing a question, be succinct but clear about what you're asking. Obtaining responses might take some time. Be patient.
- If a heckler or badly behaving member is encountered, use the "Ignore" button available on most software programs to avoid receiving messages from the troublemaker. If appropriate, inform others in the room of your action and report the abuse to the chat moderator (if there is one). Demonstrate courtesy to everyone.

Chatroom Acronyms

When chats gained popularity in the 1990s, users delighted in creating clever abbreviations as way to reduce the number of keystrokes used, to make messages shorter, and to impress others with their chat acumen. As many as 1,400 such abbreviations are used in chats as well as in instant and text messaging.

Today, today these abbreviations often are considered amateurish. In general, they should be avoided in professional conversations–or if there is any possibility that their meaning might be misunderstood.

Here are some of the most common chat abbreviations that still occasionally creep into chatroom conversations or might be useful:

- FK - Away from keyboard
- ASL - Age/Sex/Location
- BBS - Be back soon/shortly
- BRB - Be right back
- BTW - By the way
- CYA - See ya
- FYI - For your information
- IMHO - In my humble opinion
- LOL - Laughing out loud
- LTNS - Long time no see
- LTNT - Long time no talk
- NBD - No big deal
- OIC - Oh I see
- ROFL - Rolling on the floor laughing
- THX - Thanks
- WTG - Way to go

- Many professional and B2B chatrooms do not heavily rely on the use of acronyms, abbreviations or emoticons ("smileys"). Follow the customs you observe in the room. Use discretion about using these if there is any chance that chatters might not understand their meaning (see sidebar).
- As appropriate, use the "Private Message" function to communicate with a single individual. In general, ask before using the "PM" function. Also be sure that you don't then neglect others who might be responding to posted comments or questions.
- As a courtesy, always indicate when departing the conversation.

Using Forums and Chats for Promotion

Here are several things to keep in mind when using forums and chats:

- **Avoid monopolizing or controlling the conversation.** The greatest benefits are derived by encouraging a robust discussion of ideas. Recognize that not everyone will necessarily agree with your perspective. Avoid being pushy, exhibiting hostility, or behaving in a way that reflects unfavorably on your brand or organization. People remember brands but the not the names of obnoxious organizational representatives.

- **Avoid concealing your organizational affiliation; be transparent**. Organizational representatives should readily acknowledge their affiliation and not attempt to be surreptitious. Lurking or posting items anonymously might be appropriate in limited instances, but organizational representatives run the risk of later being "outed" or attacked ("flamed") by duped participants. More problematic from an ethics perspective is *pseudo-anonymity*, the creation of a false identify where the person intentionally misrepresents himself or herself. Remember: Organizational representatives need to engender trust and might wish to capitalize on their organizational affiliation in the future.

- **Avoid overt commercialism.** Blatant attempts to promote products or services with advertising-like tactics or language are generally not productive–and can easily alienate participants. Instead, integrate topics you might wish to raise in the flow of the conversation, or introduce new topics in a way that is not glaringly promotional. Always focus on *ideas*. Strive to advance the conversation and to help participants find solutions to problems or questions they might ask.

- **Follow the site's protocols.** When participating in a forum or chatroom for the first time, a good idea is to also review and then follow to the site's published rules or FAQs governing conduct. Participation involves adhering to both the site's explicit rules and implicit customs. Most sites emphasize the importance of collegiality, and place a premium on respecting the privacy and dignity of all members. Many sites prohibit using the forum or chat for research purposes as well reproducing or republishing of comments on the site, whether or not comments are anonymous.

- **Promote participation**. People benefit most when the largest possible number of perspectives is represented. As the sponsor of a forum or chat, and similar to other online venues, it's critical to attract a continuing stream of both returning and new site visitors using the full array of online and offline tools.

- **Use social monitoring tools to assess comments on forums or chats**. Organizations with an interest in tracking comments should inform monitoring services about their interest in tracking particular venues. Monitoring can provide a valuable source of market and competitive intelligence.

Paid Promotion on Forums and Chats

In general, third-party forums and chats do not require a heavy investment by the site operator and often do not create large numbers of users over a given period of time. As a result, site operators generally do not aggressively pursue advertising in the same way as SNSs such as Facebook or LinkedIn. Instead, operators might opt to participate in brokered advertising programs such as those operated by Google, Yahoo or Microsoft. Organizations that use brokered text or display advertising might wish to identify special-topic forums or chats as places where their online advertising can be contextually targeted or arrange advertising directly with the site's publisher.

In general, avoid using sponsored sites for extensive self-promotion. Although the page layout can (and should) be consistent with a website or which the forum or chat is a part, only a modest level of sponsorship branding is required. Extensive promotional announcements, in-house ads, and rich media presentations can unintentionally suggest to visitors that the site is merely a promotional tool, not a platform for the serious exchange of ideas. These ancillary elements can also distract attention from the content of the conversation.