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Online Reviews: When Do Negative Opinions Boost Sales?

When purchasing items online, reading customer reviews is a convenient way to get a real-world account of other people's opinions of the product. According to a new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#), negative reviews that are offset by a politeness-factor can actually help sell the item.



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“Most of the research on consumer reviews has been on the content and volume of the message,” write authors Ryan Hamilton (Emory University), Kathleen D. Vohs (University of Minnesota), and Ann L. McGill (University of Chicago Booth School of Business). “Our research looks at how the politeness with which a particular message is communicated affects consumer opinions.”

In a series of five experiments, the authors examined how including a marker of politeness in a negative product review affected the image of both the reviewer and the product being reviewed. For example, phrases like “I’ll be honest,” and “I don’t want to be mean, but...” are ways to soften the arrival of bad news and warn a reader or listener that negative information is coming.

In one experiment, participants were asked to read a page-long description of a luxury wristwatch. Two versions of the product description were used, one of which added this polite customer complaint, “I don’t want to be mean, but the band pinches a bit.” Results indicated that people were willing to pay more for the wristwatch if they read the description that included the marker of politeness (\$136 versus \$95).

The study also asked participants to complete a survey evaluating the “personality” of the brand. Results showed that the review using the marker of politeness caused the brand to be seen as more honest, cheerful, down-to-earth, and wholesome than the same review without the polite customer complaint.

“Our research raises the intriguing possibility that brands might benefit when polite customers write reviews of their products—even when those reviews include negative opinions,” the authors conclude.

Ryan Hamilton, Kathleen D. Vohs, and Ann L. McGill. “We’ll Be Honest, This Won’t Be the Best Article You’ll Ever Read: The Use of Dispreferred Markers in Word-of-Mouth Communication.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2014. For more information, contact Ryan Hamilton (ryan_hamilton@bus.emory.edu) or visit <http://ejcr.org/>.

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