Building trust in online consumer reviews

BS ISO 20488:2018 *Online Consumer Reviews - principles and requirements for their collection, moderation and publication* aims to improve the integrity of reviews, increase consumer confidence and protect businesses.

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A new standard for online consumer reviews

BS ISO 20488 Online Consumer Reviews is an international standard that provides good practice for the collection, moderation and publication of online consumer reviews. The standard is voluntary but organizations that choose to comply must meet its principles and requirements.

It may be used by any organization that manages online consumer reviews including: suppliers that manage their own reviews; contracted third parties; or independent sites that publish reviews about multiple suppliers. It recognises that different parts of the process may be performed by different organizations.

The standard offers benefits to everyone involved (see 'Glossary of terms'). It boosts confidence in online reviews by providing valuable guidance to review administrators who are committed to achieving excellence, protecting suppliers from inaccurate or fraudulent reviews, and helping consumers to make informed decisions.

Why was the standard needed?

Online review sites allow consumers to share their views and experiences of a wide range of products (e.g. clothes, electrical appliances, cars) and services (e.g. restaurants, hotels and builders). Online reviews have the power to influence consumer behaviour and impact businesses. Millions of consumers check reviews before deciding which products and services to buy, spending an estimated £23 billion each year as a result.[1]

On the plus side, online reviews can empower and inform consumers, and drive industry improvements. However, fraudulent reviews (written by consumers, businesses or their competitors) can mislead consumers, damage a business's reputation and impact sales. It is vital to both consumers and businesses that online reviews are managed effectively to ensure that information is fair, accurate and trustworthy.

How was the standard developed?

The online reviews standard was written by an international multi-stakeholder group of experts, including representatives from:

• Review administrators - e.g. Feefo, Trustpilot and Bazaarvoice
• Suppliers of products and services - e.g. retailers, hotel industry
• Consumer groups - e.g. ANEC, Consumers International and BSI's Consumer & Public Interest Network (see 'Further information')

Involving all relevant stakeholders ensures that all viewpoints are considered, and the standard takes a pragmatic approach to addressing genuine problems. Standards are developed by consensus, which means that everyone must agree on the content.
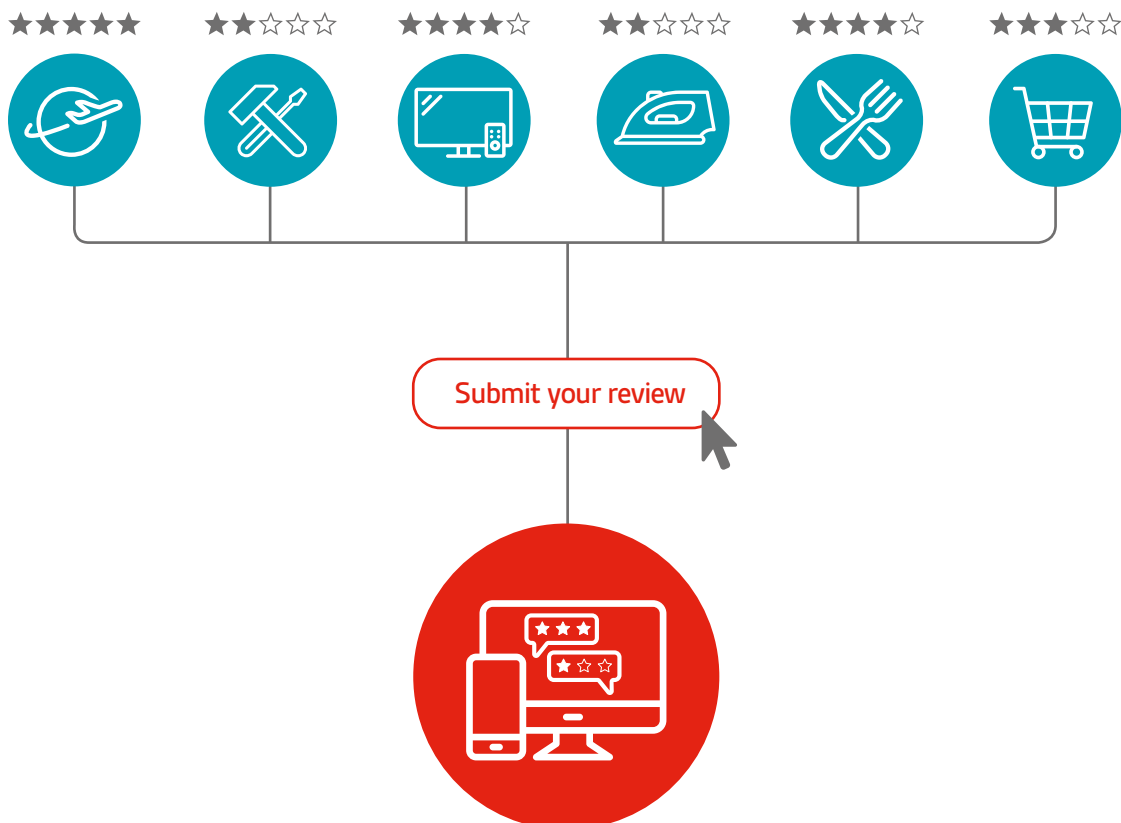
Online consumer reviews: key principles

Guiding principles

The standard defines seven guiding principles for review administrators, which senior management must consider at all stages of service design and delivery, and clearly communicate to all members of staff:

- Integrity
- Accuracy
- Privacy
- Security
- Transparency
- Accessibility
- Responsiveness

Privacy and security

Review administrators may ask for personal information from review authors, to help verify the authenticity of reviews. However, they must be given the option to remain anonymous to the public, for example, by creating a nickname.

The standard specifies that review administrators must take all reasonable steps to safeguard users' personal information. For example, by installing appropriate anti-fraud mechanisms and training staff in the relevant national legislation (e.g. GDPR).

Terms and conditions (T&Cs)

Every review administrator must develop their own T&Cs, which spell out the rules for consumers and suppliers submitting content to the site, making it clear that non-compliance may lead to content being rejected or removed. The following criteria must be included:

- Content must be factually accurate, to the best of the review author's knowledge
- Reviews must be based on a personal consumption experience
- Defamatory language cannot be used

T&Cs must be clear, accessible and accepted by anyone wishing to submit a review.

Ratings and reviews

All reviews must be dealt with in a fair, unbiased and consistent way, regardless of whether the content is positive or negative.

All reviews must contain a total rating of the product or service being reviewed, and a submission date. Where overall ratings (e.g. aggregated scores) are displayed, the review administrator must give clear information about how these have been calculated.

Reviews must be clearly marked if they have been:

- 'altered' from their original format (e.g. translated from another language)
- collected by reward (e.g. an incentive was offered in exchange for a review)
- edited by the review author after publication

Moderation of reviews

The standard specifies that all submitted reviews (text and pictures) must be subject to moderation, either before or after publication, to ensure that they meet the site's T&Cs. Moderation may be automated or manual. All content, regardless of whether it is positive or negative in nature, must be subject to the same moderation process and time limits.

Dealing with fake reviews

To build trust in consumer reviews it is important that review administrators deal swiftly and effectively with fake reviews. When a review is found to be fraudulent the administrator must:
- remove the review
- review its anti-fraud and moderation processes and make any necessary improvements
- block future reviews from that review author

Editing and removal of reviews

Only the review author can edit a review. Review administrators cannot change reviews in any way.

The review author may request that their review is taken down at any time. The review administrator can remove any reviews found to be fraudulent or in breach of the site's T&Cs.

Dealing with disputes

The standard specifies that suppliers being reviewed should have a 'right to reply' on the public forum. Supplier responses are subject to the same moderation process as consumer reviews. Any user of the site should be able to 'flag' potentially problematic reviews for further investigation.

Glossary of terms

- Consumer - member of the general public purchasing or using products or services from a supplier
- Supplier - organization or individual providing a product or service being reviewed.

- Review administrator – organization collecting, moderating or publishing online reviews.
- Review author – consumer writing the review for publication online.

FAQs

Q. Do all online review sites have to follow the standard?

A. No, the standard is voluntary for those organizations that want to demonstrate a commitment to good practice. The standard may also be used by suppliers wishing to compare potential third-party review administrators.

Q. How will I know if an online review site complies with the standard?

A. Any organization that complies with BS ISO 20488:2018 should make it clear on their website. The use of standards is driven by market demand – so, if in doubt, ask.

Q. Where can I get a copy of the Online Consumer Reviews standard?

A. The standard is available to buy from the BSI Shop – shop.bsigroup.com. Reference copies of British Standards can be accessed at most libraries and universities.

Q. What is BSI?

A. BSI is the UK's National Standards Body. It has been publishing standards since 1901, which set out good practice and guidelines for organizations to follow, thereby making products and services safer and better for consumers.

Q. What is the Consumer & Public Interest Network?

A. CPIN is an independent network of trained volunteers, supported by BSI. It exists to represent the UK consumer voice in standards. CPIN works closely with other consumer and public interest organizations in the UK, and beyond, to build better British standards.

Further information

ANEC
European consumer voice in standards
anec.eu
🐦 @anectweet

BSI
UK's national standards body. To find out more about standards or to get involved.
bsigroup.com
🐦 @bsi_UK

BSI-CPIN
UK consumer voice in standards. For more information on how to get involved email: consumer@bsigroup.com
bsigroup.com/consumers

Consumers International
A membership organization that brings together 200+ consumer groups worldwide
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🐦 @consumers_int

ISO
International organization for standardization
iso.org
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