

OFFICE OF CONSUMER PROTECTION

Bots and Consumer Choice

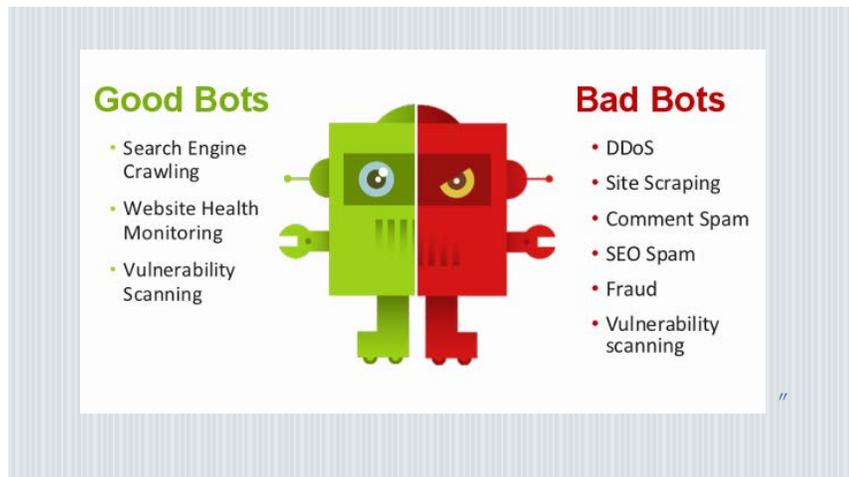
March 6, 2018

Advertising Fraud:

Opinion spam or real experience review?

Nonhuman sources account for [roughly 48 percent](#) of all traffic to thousands of websites. The nonhuman sources, called bots, are essentially computer programs.

Whether consumers are faced with good bots (e.g., indexing sites for Google) or bad bots (e.g., [malware](#) or SPAM bots) matters greatly to consumer choice and purchasing behavior. Consumers [increasingly rely](#) on



“user reviews” rather than store personnel, in making buying decisions.

In recent months, the news has discussed bots assuming human identities to write fake comments to [the FCC](#) or to promote “fake news” to the [voting public](#). But that is not the limit of how bots can be used to influence choice.



Ensuring Integrity in our Marketplace



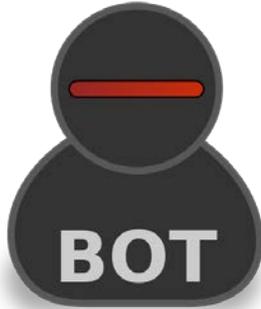
If you have been a victim of these scams, or if you have any questions about a merchant’s activities, please contact the Office of Consumer Protection.

100 Maryland Avenue
Suite 330
Rockville, MD 20850
Main: 240.777.3636
Tip Line: 240.777.3681
Fax: 240.777.3768

You can also file a complaint online by clicking [HERE](#)



According to a [Nielsen](#) study, two-thirds of consumer say they trust consumer opinions posted online. But are those online reviews posted by humans or by bots?



More and more, marketers are realizing that the traffic on websites are not human. Putting aside the [tremendous difficulty](#) this poses to marketers and brands, how does this impact consumer choice? Recent studies suggest that consumers should be less trusting of online reviews. In fact, one advisory firm predicts that by 2020 a “[digital distrust](#)” will set in as people will consume more false information than true information.

[Yelp labels](#) approximately 25% of its reviews as “suspicious.” [Google released](#) IP address of fake reviewers in a Dutch court case. Airbnb was [accused](#) of blocking bad reviews. And while it is [illegal](#) to ban *honest* reviews, it hasn’t stopped businesses from [suing customers](#) over their negative reviews and claiming defamation.

Natural language processing and machine learning technologies can process human-like content and on a massive scale. In a

recent [consumer survey](#), 79% of people say they’ve seen a fake review in the last year. But 84% of consumers admit they can’t always spot them.

So with this much manipulation, how can consumers trust the information they read? Amazon’s first step was to [ban](#) reviews paid for by free or discounted products and to [sue over 1,100 sellers](#) of fake reviews. Law enforcement agencies [bring cases](#) to [halt companies](#) from supplying fake reviews.

By doing more research, you can spot [some clues](#) to a fake review:

- Flood of reviews in a short time
- Reviews with similar language
- Can’t find the company website
- High percentage of five-star reviews
- Vague or short reviews
- Odd language and phrasing

Before making a purchasing decision, consumers need to check reviews from multiple sources, use reputable review outlets like [Consumers’ Checkbook](#) or [Consumer Reports](#), and even speak to sales staff trained on the products or services offered. As technology evolves, building trust over online information matters more than ever.

