Bad Reviews Can Boost Sales. Here’s Why

by Jonah Berger
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By making people aware of a product they otherwise wouldn’t know about, even the harshest review can be a boon.

The reason? Our analysis showed that by making consumers aware of a book they would otherwise not know about, even the harshest review can be a boon.

Time plays a role as well. In follow-up experiments in which participants were asked how likely they were to buy various books, we found that negative reviews hurt well-known authors regardless of any delay between the review and the purchase decision. In these studies, negative reviews initially hurt unknown books as well, but the detrimental effect quickly diminished. For purveyors of obscure products that get poor assessments, this is good news, suggesting that product awareness often lingers after the memory of the bad evaluation fades.

Companies understandably try to quash negative publicity, but our analysis suggests this isn’t always the best tactic. When an established brand is at stake—or in a product category, such as cars, where advertising budgets and pre-review awareness are generally high—it’s smart to make an effort to limit bad press. But if the negative publicity seems likely to increase brand awareness, smaller or unknown brands would often do better to let it go. They might also consider undertaking potentially controversial moves to increase their visibility. If a risky tactic gets a bad response, the attention might nevertheless increase product recognition and ultimately boost sales.

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