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Influence of Restaurant Reviews Upon Consumers

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Abstract

It is generally believed that restaurant reviews can influence consumers' decisions in choosing a restaurant. A survey administered to a sample of 420 college faculty and staff members suggests that while most restaurant patrons may read reviews, they are not used as the sole selection criterion. Recommendations of friends, the restaurant's current reputation, and perceived value may have greater influence upon the choice than does a review. The authors discuss the implications of both favorable and unfavorable reviews.

Influence of Restaurant Reviews
Upon Consumers

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How much influence do restaurant reviews potentially have upon
their readers? This is a concern of many restaurant owners and mana-
gers whose restaurants have either been reviewed or are in the process
of being reviewed. With more newspapers and magazines now carrying
restaurant reviews, the chances of a restaurant being reviewed are
greater than ever. Additionally, restaurateurs may wonder whether the
reviewer's reputation and where the review appears make a difference
in the level of reader acceptance. Data in this study indicate the extent
to which reviews are used in the decision-making process by employees
at one public university.

Much of the existing literature is concerned with the service which
reviewers provide, or do not provide their readers. Little has been writ-
ten which addresses the actual influence of these critics.

A survey of restaurateurs and reviewers conducted by David Shaw
of the *Los Angeles Times* found that both parties agreed on several mat-
ters:

• Restaurant critics are too often uniformed and simply do not have
the necessary knowledge of the food that they are eating or of the restau-
rant business.

• Critics can often have more influence upon the restaurant in terms
of operational changes than they may have upon its readers.

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• A review may not make or break a restaurant, but it can help to facilitate a restaurant's ultimate fate.[1]

Nancy Ross Ryan states that there exists anything but a positive relationship between restaurateurs and critics.[2] Some of the comments that were made on a survey conducted of restaurant owners and reviewers indicate that most believe a positive review has the potential to increase business while a negative review can decrease it, but each on a short-term basis. A few believe that any publicity is good publicity and that it is no different with reviews. John Schroeder discusses how critics feel about their roles and the methods that they employ in attempting to objectively critique a restaurant.[3] Schroeder maintains that, for the most part, reviewers are a responsible group of professionals who enjoy what they are doing, take pride in their work, and strive for fairness and objectivity in their reviews.

Articles by Schroeder and Lazarus[4] and Robert Spellman[5] have focused on the legal aspects and action that may be taken as a result of a negative review. The fact that the courts often recognize reviews as matters of opinion, the likelihood of a restaurateur winning a suit against a critic is slim. The First Amendment provides protection to the critic who expresses his or her opinion. The cost that is involved, not to mention time and adverse publicity, as well as the slim chance of winning, suggest that there may be better ways of seeking retribution. Letters to the newspaper or magazine, counter-advertising, and community support are just some of the ways that restaurateurs have found to be effective.

Bushman and Jolson focused on the restaurant critique system.[6] Their research attempted, through interviews with consumers, restaurateurs, and critics, to determine whether the system was perceived to be a fair one, how the system impacts on consumer choice, and whether there seems to be a desired alternative to the current critique system. The authors identify the restaurant critic as being an often used third party source of information. They are used in the absence of other sources such as previous experiences, recommendations of friends, and marketer-dominated sources such as advertising. Consumers tend to undertake more extensive information searches prior to the purchase of goods or a service which is either economically or psychologically important to them. Since many of the restaurants commonly reviewed are in the mid-scale and expensive categories, reviews can be a valued source of information.

Bushman and Jolson conclude from their survey that the vast majority of consumers responding read reviews at least occasionally, and that those who read reviews do so primarily for two reasons: as an aid in their decision-making process or out of curiosity, or both.[7] Additionally, they found that reviews are especially helpful to those deciding whether to eat at a restaurant for the first time.

The National Restaurant Association's survey of households focused entirely on consumer attitudes toward reviews and reviewers.[8] Among their findings they were able to determine that over 50 percent read or listen to reviews at least a couple of times a year and that 40

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percent of these readers read at least one a week. They also found that the heavy spenders (over $50 in restaurants a week) were more likely to make use of reviews in choosing a restaurant.

When respondents were asked what it was that influenced their decision to try a restaurant for the first time, reviews were listed less frequently than other factors, including the recommendations of friends, reputation of the restaurant, and advertising and discount coupons. The survey also was able to compare the attitudes of review readers with those of non-readers. Several interesting conclusions were reached, as follows:

- Readers, more so than non-readers, feel that critics are generally knowledgeable about their field.

- Readers feel that reviews are more important to the success of a restaurant than do non-readers[9].

- The information provided in reviews is more salient to readers than to non-readers.

The data introduced in this study were gathered from employees of a large university in the New England region to determine how many read reviews, where the reviews are seen, and how influential reviews are in the dining decision, with emphasis on differences between respondents who read reviews and those that do not.

Study Involves University Employees

A convenience sample comprised of university employees was selected for the study. An on-campus mail survey was conducted, with questionnaires mailed to 1,000 randomly selected faculty and staff members. The population was chosen in an effort to determine how members of the university community view restaurant reviews. The subjects were selected at random from the university telephone directory, and a five-page questionnaire was mailed to each subject, with a brief cover letter explaining the scope of the project. The questionnaire was developed based on an instrument that had been pilot tested using faculty and graduate students in the authors' academic department as subjects.

Of the total of 1,000 surveys mailed, 420 were returned, representing a return rate of 42 percent. Of the returns, 390 surveys were considered usable, representing a response rate of 39 percent.

The first part of the survey was designed to determine how many of the subjects read restaurant reviews, how often they read them, and where they see them. Of the 390 subjects who responded to the question which asked how often they read reviews, 65 percent (n = 254) responded that they read them at least occasionally. Table 1 describes these results. Table 2 summarizes where the reviews are most often viewed.

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Table 1
Frequency With Which Reviews Are Read

Frequency	Percent of Readers	n
More than two per week	8.6	22
Twice per week	7.1	18
Once per week	26.8	68
Once per month	24.0	61
Less than once per month	33.5	85
	100.0	254

Table 2
Where Reviews Are Read Most Frequently

Source	Percent Responding*	n
Local weekly newspaper	59.4	151
Local daily newspaper	49.2	125
Regional daily newspaper	43.7	111
Regional monthly magazines	18.9	48
National monthly magazines	4.4	11

* Percentages will not total 100 percent as multiple responses were allowed.

The next series of questions asked the subjects to indicate the extent to which they felt their dining decisions were influenced by the reviews that they read. Respondents were asked to indicate, separately, how much positive, negative, and neutral reviews might impact upon their dining decisions. Interestingly, it was determined that a perceived negative review is more likely to discourage the subjects from trying a restaurant for the first time, than a positive review would encourage them to try it (see Table 3). The results indicate that a negative review of a restaurant has more immediate impact than does a favorable review.

Next, a series of questions was asked of the respondents who indicated they would be predisposed to visit a restaurant which received a favorable review. This was an attempt to determine the conditions under which they would indeed visit the restaurant, and to estimate the length of time between when they read the review and when they would try the restaurant. When asked if they were likely to wait until an occasion arose before visiting the restaurant, over 60 percent (64.4 percent) indicated that this would likely be the case. The results seem to indicate that the majority of respondents would wait for an occasion to arise rather than making a special trip to try it.

Table 3
Likelihood of Review Readers Visiting
the Reviewed Restaurant

Response	% Favorable Review	% Neutral Review	% Negative Review
Very likely to visit	38.2	5.0	1.3
Likely to visit	38.2	14.0	0.9
Neutral (Undecided)	17.1	47.0	8.7
Unikely to visit	3.5	21.0	19.1
Not at all likely to visit	3.0	13.0	70.0
	100.0	100.0	100.0

When asked how soon after reading the review that they thought they would visit the restaurant, over three-fourths (83 percent) responded that they would visit within six months. This, too, is consistent with the way in which most respondents answered the previous set of questions. It would also support the belief that most reviews are reserved for restaurants with high check averages, where most consumers will indeed wait for a special occasion before eating there.

Reviews Do Influence Patrons

The next series of questions asked the respondents for their opinions of reviewers as well as of the newspaper or magazine for which the reviewers write. The first three questions of the series asked the respondents to assume that they had just eaten a meal at a restaurant that had received a favorable review and that they had an unsatisfactory meal. When asked how likely they would be to change the opinion they had held about the reviewer who had written the review, 50 percent said that they would. When answering whether they would use greater discretion in general when using reviews as a source of information, again, almost one-half (46.3 percent) said that they would; 30 percent, however, indicated they would consider that the restaurant had simply had an off night and retain their original opinion of the reviewer. This would seem to be good news for both reviewers as well as for restaurateurs who received a favorable review since it indicates that some respondents are faithful in their views of both parties and that one or both are entitled to an off night.

The final two questions of this section asked the respondents that

if they were to base their decision to eat at a restaurant solely on a review, how important would it be who the reviewer was, and for which publication the reviewer wrote. In answering these two questions, 48 percent responded that the reviewer's identity did not have any effect upon their decision. For these respondents, one reviewer's opinion would seem to be as reliable as another. Twenty-four percent of the review readers responding to this question believe that knowing the reviewer's identity is important in their decision making. The source in which the review appears seems to have about equal importance to the respondents. Thirty-two percent responded that the source is not important in making their judgment, whereas 40 percent responded that where the review appears is important to them.

Comparing the results of these questions, it appears that, in general, it is more important to the respondents where the review is printed rather than who actually wrote it. Additionally, the results indicate that a review, regardless of where it appears or who wrote it, is likely to have at least some influence on restaurant patrons.

Review Readers Eat Out More

One objective of the study was to separate and compare the attitudes of those who do not normally read reviews with those who do. The two groups were compared on the number of meals eaten away from the home each week, the amount spent on meals eaten out, and factors influencing their decisions on where to dine. Comparison of the results of the two groups may be reviewed in Tables 4 and 5. Respondents were also asked to rate the importance of specific factors in helping them to choose a restaurant for the first time. They answered on a five point scale where 1 represented "not at all important" and 5 represented "very important." Descriptive statistics of the overall group are presented in Table 6.

Table 4
Comparison of Review Readers and Non-Readers
on the Number of Meals Eaten Out

Meals eaten out in past week	Percent Readers (n)		Percent Non-readers (n)	
None	12.9	(30)	18.0	(24)
1– 3 meals	57.9	(135)	55.7	(74)
4– 6 meals	25.3	(59)	21.8	(29)
7–10 meals	1.8	(4)	3.8	(5)
More than 10 meals	2.1	(5)	0.7	(1)
	100.0	(233)	100.0	(133)

Table 5
Comparison of Review Readers and Non-Readers
on the Amount Spent on Meals Eaten Out

Spent on meals eaten out last week	Percent Readers		Percent Non-readers	
Under $5	8.0	(18)	20.3	(27)
$ 5–$10	20.6	(46)	23.3	(31)
$10–$20	24.7	(55)	24.8	(33)
$20–$30	23.3	(52)	19.5	(26)
$30–$50	12.2	(27)	7.5	(10)
Over $50	11.2	(25)	4.6	(6)
	100.0	(223)	100.0	(133)

The survey determined that review readers tend to eat out more often than non-readers; readers tend to spend more eating out; readers dine out more for social purposes than do non-readers; and, finally, review readers rely more upon the combination of personal recommendations and reviews.

When asked how many times they had eaten out during the previous week, more review readers ate out, as well as with greater frequency, than did the non-readers. Only 13 percent of the readers did not eat out at least once, whereas over 18 percent of the non-readers did not eat out. Over one-fourth of the readers report eating out at least four times during the previous week while many of these report eating out in excess of eight times, with one respondent having dined out 20 times in that period. The mean difference between the two groups shows that readers ate out, on average, 20 percent more during the period. When asked how much they spent on meals in the previous week, it was found that almost twice the percentage of readers than non-readers spent $30 or more, with the greatest difference occurring in the over $50 category. Respondents were then asked to report the reasons for which they eat out most frequently. It was determined that a much greater percentage of review readers reported eating out for social reasons.

Collectively, it was found that recommendation of a friend is the most valued factor in determining whether to go to a restaurant for the first time. This was followed by the general reputation of the restaurant, menu offerings, and price. Other factors that were mentioned included specials and discounts, advertising, reviews, and listings in guidebooks. Ultimately, it appears that review readers tend to rely upon the recommendations of friends, more so than do non-readers. There was also a large difference between the percentage of review readers who use reviews in making their decisions than non-readers who do, as was expected. For the readers, reviews rank near the top of the list of important factors.

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Table 6
Factors Considered Important in Choosing a Restaurant

Factors influencing choice of restaurant	Mean	SD
Friend's recommendation	4.10	.919
Restaurant's reputation	3.92	.869
Menu	3.83	1.036
Price	3.60	1.109
Specials and discounts	2.97	1.320
Restaurant advertising	2.67	1.069
Restaurant reviews	2.64	1.163

Additionally, review readers tend to enjoy eating out more than the non-reading group, at least for social purposes. Further research would be well spent in determining on what occasions the non-readers might be most disposed to make use of reviews, e.g., whether a business-oriented meal would be a determinant.

Reviews Are Only One Source of Information

Based on the comments that were made in response to an open-ended question, the majority of respondents indicated that they accept reviews for what they are: matters of opinion. A smaller number of the respondents take them more seriously, but just see them as a source of reference to be used in conjunction with some additional source of information. As was true in the research conducted by the National Restaurant Association, it was found that while most respondents may read reviews, few are likely to rely upon them as their sole source of information when selecting a restaurant.[10]

The feeling among the respondents is that restaurant reviews do serve a purpose. Some mentioned that reviewers could more often show a greater sense of professionalism, citing degrading reviews as examples. It was also mentioned that reviewers could be required to have some common background which might include knowledge of food, restaurant experience, journalism experience, and a greater sense of objectivity and integrity.

When a restaurant receives a positive review in a source with a high profile, it is likely that the review will have an almost immediate effect upon sales. The same could also be true of a restaurant which receives a negative review, only the resulting change in sales might be both more drastic and more abrupt. It appears that reviews and reviewers are here to stay and are in a position of influence, although this may not be as great as was previously believed. The reviewing system itself has come under attack at times and discussions of mandatory licensing are under consideration in some states at this time.

One problem that has been mentioned repeatedly in previous interviews with restaurant owners and reviewers is the apparent lack of communication that exists between the two parties, particularly in this country. There would appear to be a need for further research on this sometimes controversial relationship and its ramifications. Both parties must realize that the review is a potentially useful source of information that the consumer can use to everybody's benefit.

As previous literature has suggested, a positive review is indeed likely to have immediate short term effects on sales, while a negative review is likely to produce the opposite effect, but possibly to an even greater extent. For better or for worse, though, the fortunes of the restaurant ultimately lie with the restaurateur in charge of the operation. Restaurateurs seem to complain most about the critique system that is used, in that it differs from those systems used in other countries, most notably France where reviewers are licensed and panels do the judging. Though attempts have been made to institute such a system in this country, the prospects seem unlikely.

Future research should focus on determining the actual effects that reviews have upon restaurant sales. Also, a comparison of the types of markets in which restaurant reviews appear should be studied. Finally, the influence of reviews appearing in different media could be compared to determine different source effects

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