

A five-star rating on TripAdvisor, but he wants out

By **Megan Woolhouse** Globe Staff, May 3, 2016, 9:02 p.m.



Al and Linda Ballard own a restaurant in Canon City, Colo.

Al Ballard and his wife, Linda, own a homespun restaurant in their sprawling Victorian in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, but the couple has a Massachusetts-based problem.

For more than a year, they have tried — and failed — to get their restaurant removed from TripAdvisor, the popular Needham-based online rating company. Bad rating? Not at all. The Colorado restaurant scores five stars on the site. But Ballard said he feels captive to the effort it takes to monitor his reputation on TripAdvisor.

“We just don’t want to be a part of it, but we can’t get away from them,” said Ballard, 70.
 “And the truth of the matter is no one can get away from them.”

The Wild West nature of online review sites like TripAdvisor has led to a backlash from businesses in Massachusetts and across the country that have quietly filed complaints against the company and other sites with the Better Business Bureau and the attorney general.

Some business owners, like the Ballards, want to be removed from the site. Some just don’t like what they’ve read about their business, or find it unfair.



TripAdvisor spokesman Kevin Carter said the company does not remove listings of any establishment open for businesses. No matter how disgruntled an owner may be over complaints about a rude staffer or tacky furnishings, it’s typically there to stay.

That unfiltered approach has helped the company grow from a small cadre of online reviewers when it started in 2000 into an industry behemoth that offers more than 320 million reviews of businesses around the globe.

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Carter defended the company's practices, saying TripAdvisor helps countless small businesses increase their visibility.

"We built this community by giving customers a platform to share their honest opinions, whether good or bad," Carter said. "We strongly believe in their right to do so."

But Edward Hasbrouck, a travel writer and industry consultant in San Francisco, said many businesses feel as if they've been forced to surrender control to such sites, which can call the shots.

"TripAdvisor has enormous power and they can do whatever they want," Hasbrouck said. "They don't have to be democratic, and they don't have to be fair."

The Better Business Bureau of Eastern Massachusetts, Maine, Rhode Island and Vermont received nearly 20 complaints about TripAdvisor from unhappy business owners in the last three years.

TripAdvisor gets a B- rating from the New England area bureau. That's up from C- in April. The company also received 21 negative reviews, including one from an unnamed business owner who said a malicious review claimed he promoted the KKK and damaged his business.

On another consumer review site, Lake Tahoe-based Consumer Affairs, reviewers gave TripAdvisor one star out of five. That ranking is based on a combination of reviews by consumers and business owners, including a longtime restaurant owner who said a competitor sabotaged him in reviews in order to steal his customers.

Tara Hinckley, owner of the Maynard shop Charmed, which sells incense, candles, and witchcraft supplies, complained to the Better Business Bureau after she said she tried 10 times to get TripAdvisor's customer service to update her businesses location. At one point, TripAdvisor mistakenly changed her account to say that her business had permanently closed, she said, making her want to abandon the site despite her five-star rating.

“It’s almost like they hijack your information,” Hinckley said.

TripAdvisor eventually corrected her listing, but she said she still feels as though TripAdvisor wields too much control over the perception of her business.

The company said it does not comment on specific profiles of companies and users due to privacy concerns.

TripAdvisor is not the only company facing such criticism. Among the most public, Yelp, Inc., the San Francisco-based review giant, was the subject of lawsuits in 2010 by businesses who said its reviews were manipulated to pressure businesses into buying advertising on Yelp’s site. The cases were ultimately dismissed by a judge who said the claims were not proved.

The BBB of San Francisco Bay Area and Northern Coastal California, which has logged more than 1,600 complaints against Yelp, said many are from business owners alleging that there are false or inaccurate reviews on their Yelp listing and that Yelp will not remove them, even when proved untrue or inaccurate.

Yelp said in its response, also posted on the BBB site, that “consumer speech is protected under the law” and that businesses that take legal action and lose may be required to pay Yelp’s legal fees.

In Al Ballard’s case, it wasn’t a low rating that drove him to complain about TripAdvisor to the Massachusetts attorney general’s office. His Colorado restaurant, the Canon City Queen Anne, has averaged a five-star rating since it opened in 2007.

Ballard said the restaurant was the retirement dream of his wife, Linda, an interior designer, who has decorated their 1889 Victorian in pastels and lace and serves meals she cooks herself. Of the eatery’s 192 TripAdvisor ratings, 182 deem it excellent.

Ballard, a retired energy executive, said that at first, the Trip Advisor listings seemed like a great way to get far-reaching exposure. There were glowing reviews until Jan. 8, 2013.

when a reviewer, Maryvonne_9, described his place as a “catastrophe.”

“The husband came and served us water dressed in shorts, as a peasant going to his fields,” Maryvonne_9 wrote. “The hostess had kept her dirty apron.”

Ballard checked his records and determined that the aggrieved diner had actually visited the restaurant a full year before she posted her review. But he did what he and other owners say they feel forced to do when faced with a negative review. He responded to her comment, asking her to give the restaurant a second chance.

“We are sad that someone would carry such anger towards a small business like us, for such a long time,” Ballard wrote in response.

The review did not affect his overall rating, but Ballard said that as other negative reviews appeared, he began to feel tethered to TripAdvisor and feel the burden of monitoring every comment.

Ballard tried to get TripAdvisor customer service representatives to help him leave, without success. When he tried to contact the company’s management, he said, his requests were denied. He then took a different approach, endeavoring to post a notice on his TripAdvisor page that the business was “no longer participating,” but site monitors rejected it, he said.

So he filed a complaint with the Massachusetts attorney general’s office saying he felt trapped.

“We’re a mom and pop shop,” Ballard said. “All we’re looking for is to be removed from their [TripAdvisor’s] listing.”

TripAdvisor declined to comment on the specifics of Ballard’s complaint, citing privacy concerns.

A spokeswoman from Attorney General Maura Healey’s office also said she could not

comment on the complaint. In total, the office has received about 10 complaints since 2010 involving disputed reviews.

Heather Turner, marketing director for the Professional Association of Innkeepers International, based in Wisconsin, said although she does not maintain an official database, she receives calls from business owners who want to be removed from TripAdvisor about five times a year. Most of the time, businesses are unhappy that the site does not require that a person stay overnight at an inn, for example, before reviewing it.

“They come to the conclusion they must grin and bear it, because there’s nothing they can do about it,” she said.

Ballard, however, has refused to accept that answer.

He recently filed a second complaint with the state, sending a notarized copy to the company. TripAdvisor’s legal department responded in a terse letter sent via overnight mail.

“Although it is your prerogative to do so, we are disappointed that you have chosen not to further engage in a positive way with the TripAdvisor website,” the letter said, reiterating that his business listing would remain on TripAdvisor.

Ballard is not backing down, but he is deeply frustrated.

“I understand why a lot of business owners just give up,” he said.

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