

Authenticity and brand trust: Exploring the role of incentivized reviews

A new study from Bazaarvoice and Wakefield Research

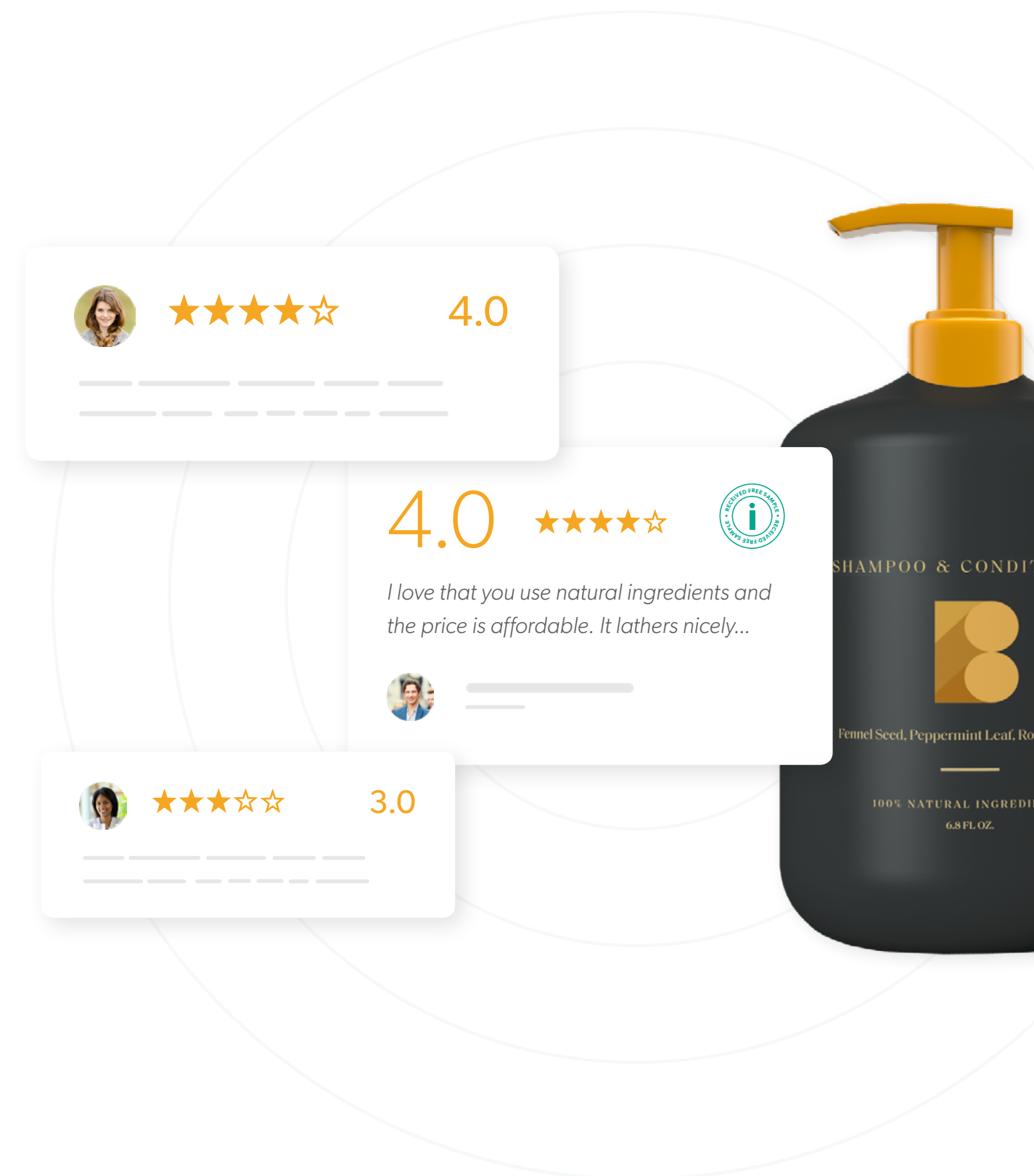
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Introduction

In today's world, trust has become invaluable currency for companies. It's especially true in marketing, as consumer trust is a make-or-break component for brands and retailers. Those who are unable to establish trust with consumers or — worse — who lose established trust, simply will not succeed in an age where consumer opinions, shared on a massive scale, influence virtually every buying decision.

In today's competitive digital landscape, browsing between competitors' products and online stores is as simple as a few taps on your phone. Earning and showcasing ratings and reviews has become a central focus for brands and retailers in order to stand out in today's omnichannel shopping environment. Brands and retailers have begun deploying proactive programs in order to collect reviews and establish that highly sought-after trust and customer validation. In many cases, such as for new product launches or seasonal items, that means offering incentives in exchange for honest reviews via product sampling, coupons, or sweepstakes.



In the trust economy, credibility is key. Are ratings and reviews actually seen as credible at a time when consumers generally don't trust marketing or the media at all? Do consumers value incentivized content derived from product sampling in the same way they value organic content? That's exactly what we wanted to find out.

We commissioned a study conducted by Wakefield Research to understand consumers' perceptions of incentivized reviews and reviews in general, and to evaluate the credibility of incentivized vs. non-incentivized reviews across different product types. In this e-book, we'll take a deep dive into these findings and offer key takeaways that help brands and retailers establish and maintain the hard-earned trust of today's consumers.

Incentivized

5.0 ★★★★★



Love these sneakers! Overall, the shoes are incredibly comfortable and make my feet look and feel great!



Non-Incentivized

5.0 ★★★★★

Love these sneakers! Overall, the shoes are incredibly comfortable and make my feet look and feel great!



Consumer trust is the most critical issue for brands today

According to the 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer¹, we are in “the battle for truth”, finding a drastic decline in trust from the informed public across the board. Businesses saw a 20-point drop in trust in the U.S., and media is by far the least trusted institution of all surveyed. The broad category of media includes brands, social media, and even search — so this finding is sure to keep marketers up at night.

The extensive, ongoing, and global conversation happening around trust means that trust matters now more than ever. PwC’s Global Consumer Insights Survey² validates this, citing that **35% of shoppers** (out of a sample of more than 22,000) **ranked trust among the top three factors that influence them when deciding to buy from one retailer over another**. Brand and retail marketers are aware of trust’s impact in commerce, with 72% of CMOs saying³ that they’re facing pressure from management to secure brand trust. In some ways, unfortunately, securing it may be out of their control.

Consumers are in the driver’s seat of the buying journey, but they still want signposts along the way that give them directions and guide them where they need to go. The fragility of trust is rightly frightening for brands and retailers who are genuinely trying to foster better-informed buying decisions with authentic ratings and reviews.



Ultimately, the voice of our customers instills the kind of trust in L’Oréal Australia and our products that helps us maintain our strong reputation and success in connecting with the customer wherever they are.

Amanda Green

Director of eCommerce
L’Oréal Australia

Shoppers trust one another more than they trust you

Trust works differently in today’s word-of-mouth economy. Social media and other consumer-driven forums have shifted the trust dynamic to one centered on peers, leveling the playing field when it comes to information. As Rachel Botsman articulates well, brands and retailers are now faced with a distributed trust model⁴ as opposed to an institutionalized one — having less control over their brand narrative than ever.

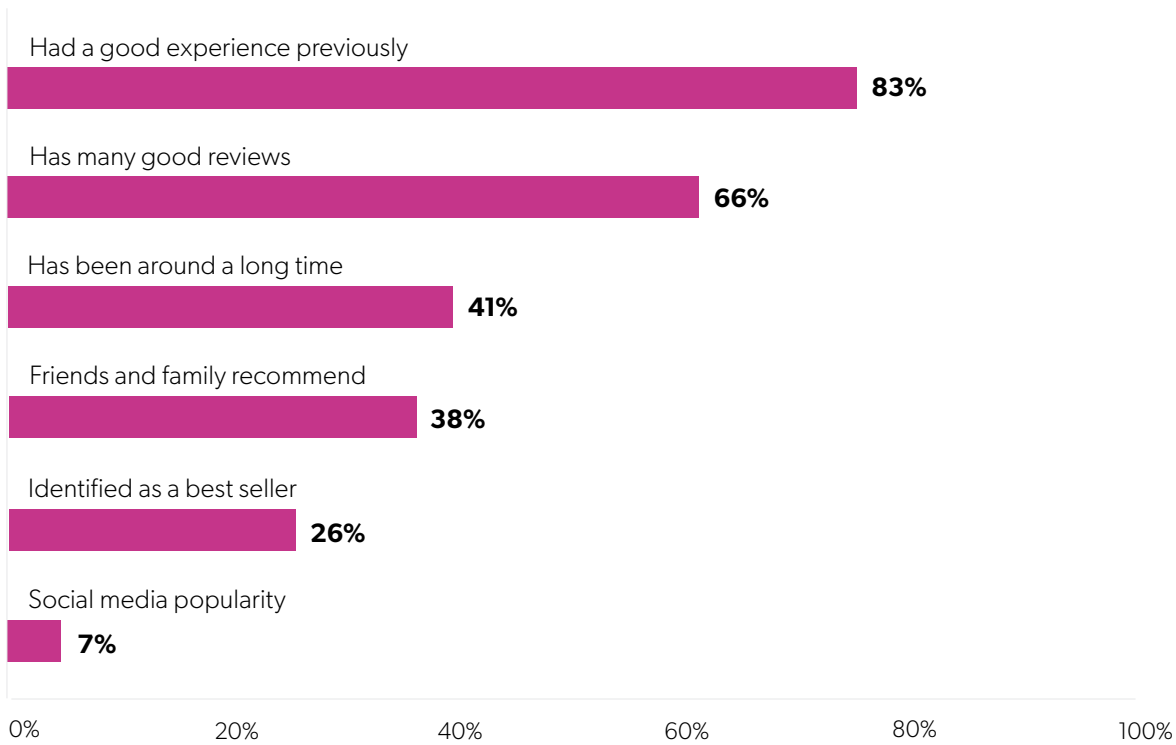
Consumers now trust feedback and opinions from one another more than messaging that comes directly from brands. So how can brands and retailers tap into this dynamic to drive awareness, consideration, and eventually trust? One proven approach: amplify the voice of the consumer, and empower them to control the conversation.



We realize that consumers trust the opinions of other consumers more than they trust advertising.

Werner Hammer
Head of eCommerce
GANT

QUALITIES THAT MAKE U.S. DIGITAL SHOPPERS TRUST A BRAND DIGITALLY, FEB 2018

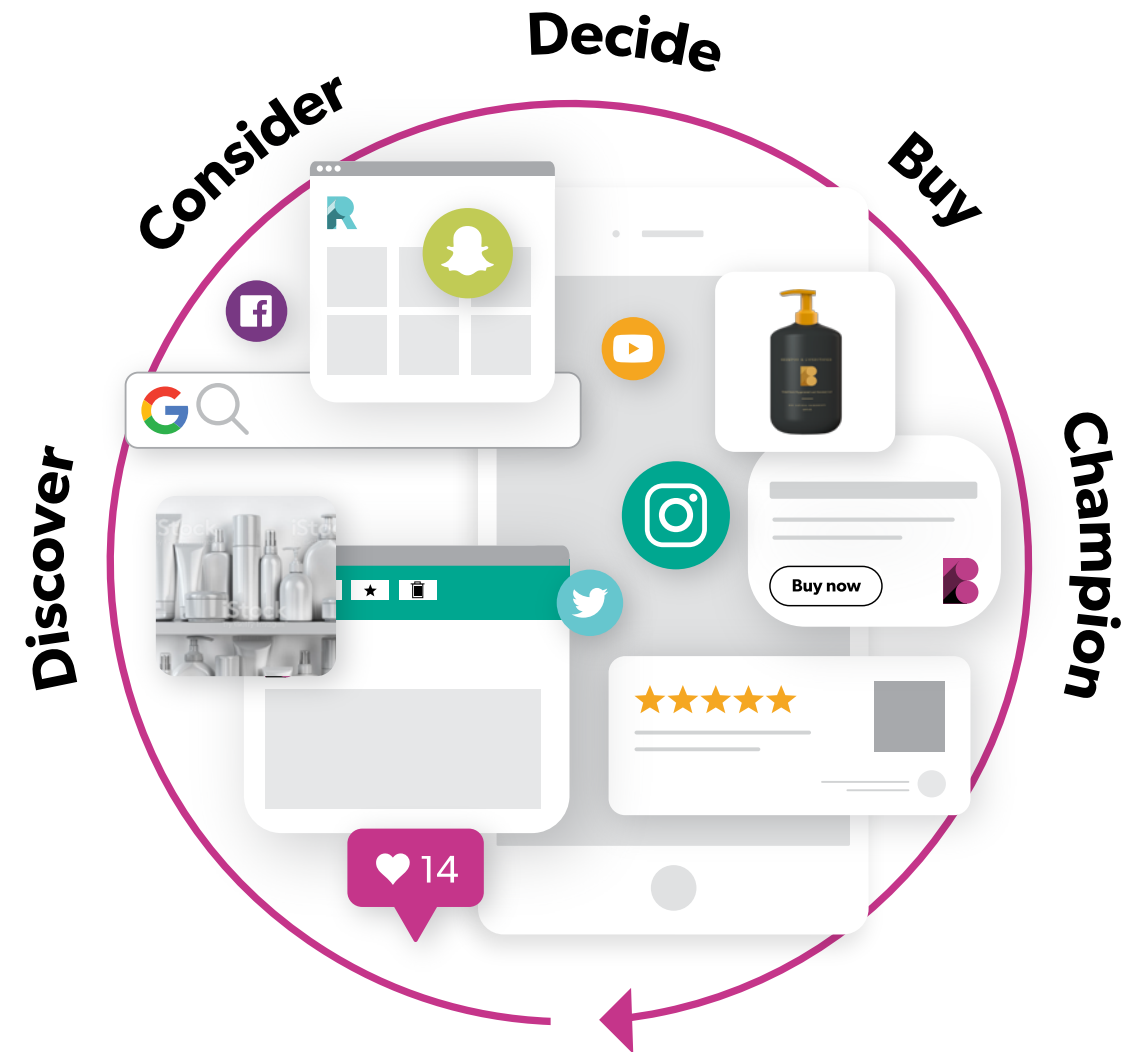


Note: ages 18+ who have shopped digitally at least once in 2017
Source: Satisfy, “2018 Consumer Research: Why Product Experiences Are What Win Consumer Trust in the Digital Age,” March 7, 2018

Ratings and reviews are crucial throughout the entire buyer journey

With the growth of e-commerce and the ubiquity of online consumer-generated content (CGC), the overwhelming majority of shoppers read online reviews before making almost every purchase decision. As part of our study, we surveyed 2,000 U.S. customers and 1,000 French customers ages 18 or older — all who shop online multiple times per month. We learned that **more than three in four U.S. (77%) and French (76%) online shoppers read product reviews before purchasing for more than half the products they buy. Furthermore, only 4% of U.S. shoppers and 6% of French shoppers say they “rarely or never” read reviews.**

From inspiration and discovery to consideration and conversion, ratings and reviews play a significant role at every stage of the path to purchase. The majority of shopping journeys begin with search and, just like consumers themselves, search engine algorithms trust consumers more than they trust brand content. The natural language in review content mirrors that of search queries (think “best running shoes for wide feet”), increasing ranking for pages with large volumes of content.



Reviews instill a lot of trust among consumers and give them the confidence to make a purchase, and we've seen that there's a positive correlation between review volume and number of orders.

Jenna Spivak Evans

Innovation and Digital Capabilities Manager
Unilever USA

Ratings and reviews increase conversion. Shoppers who interact with CGC on a retailer’s site are more than twice as likely⁵ to convert as those who do not. In fact, retailers in the Bazaarvoice Network with CGC on their site reported a **109% year-over-year conversion lift**. But it’s not just online storefronts who benefit from CGC. Shoppers rely on mobile devices to inform purchase decisions, and this dynamic has resulted in a “research online, buy offline” shopping trend. According to a recent Bazaarvoice study, 45% of in-store shoppers⁶ read reviews before purchasing in-store, and many read reviews on their phones while in the aisles.

Ratings and reviews have even more impact with high-consideration products. **88% of U.S. online shoppers and 77% of French online shoppers believe ratings and reviews to be “extremely or very” important when purchasing a high-consideration product.**

This makes sense, as consumers will put more research and thought toward products that matter more to them. Of note, “high-consideration” products don’t necessarily mean products with high price points like appliances or electronics. For example, consumers with sensitive skin will have higher consideration for which moisturizer to purchase, even though this is a comparatively low-cost item. Reviews still matter for lower-consideration products as well, with **about half of online shoppers in the U.S. (42%) and France (50%) labeling them as either “very” or “extremely” important.**



The third-party testimonial provides a more authentic viewpoint that is relevant to the person considering the purchase. We know how important ratings and reviews are from a foundational level, but the real power is in how you activate that content. We’ve received more value out of the investment because of how we’ve activated it.

Pete Brace
VP Communications and Pet Parent Relations
Merrick Pet Care

Brands are finding creative ways to collect consumer reviews

Brands and retailers know that reviews boost confidence (and therefore sales), yet they need to sell products in order to collect reviews. It's a classic "chicken or the egg" conundrum, leading brands and retailers to find creative ways to proactively collect reviews upfront, rather than wait for them to trickle in organically.

Especially with new products, products that don't have recent reviews (fresh content is important to consumers; we'll touch on this later), and seasonal products that are launched during a specific event or time of year, forward-thinking brands and retailers are getting a jump-start on review collection by offering incentives in return. Incentives are typically things like sweepstakes entries, coupons, or free samples of products — all offered in exchange for an honest review.

Regardless of the type of incentive, it's required that any content collected by way of an incentivization be disclosed as such, which leads to an important question...



It's never good to have new products that don't have honest feedback, good or bad.

Allison Grossman
Co-Founder and Creative Director
The Seaweed Bath Co.

Do consumers trust incentivized reviews?

Between organic reviews and reviews with an incentivized content disclosure, do consumers perceive incentivized content as equally credible? **The short answer is yes.**

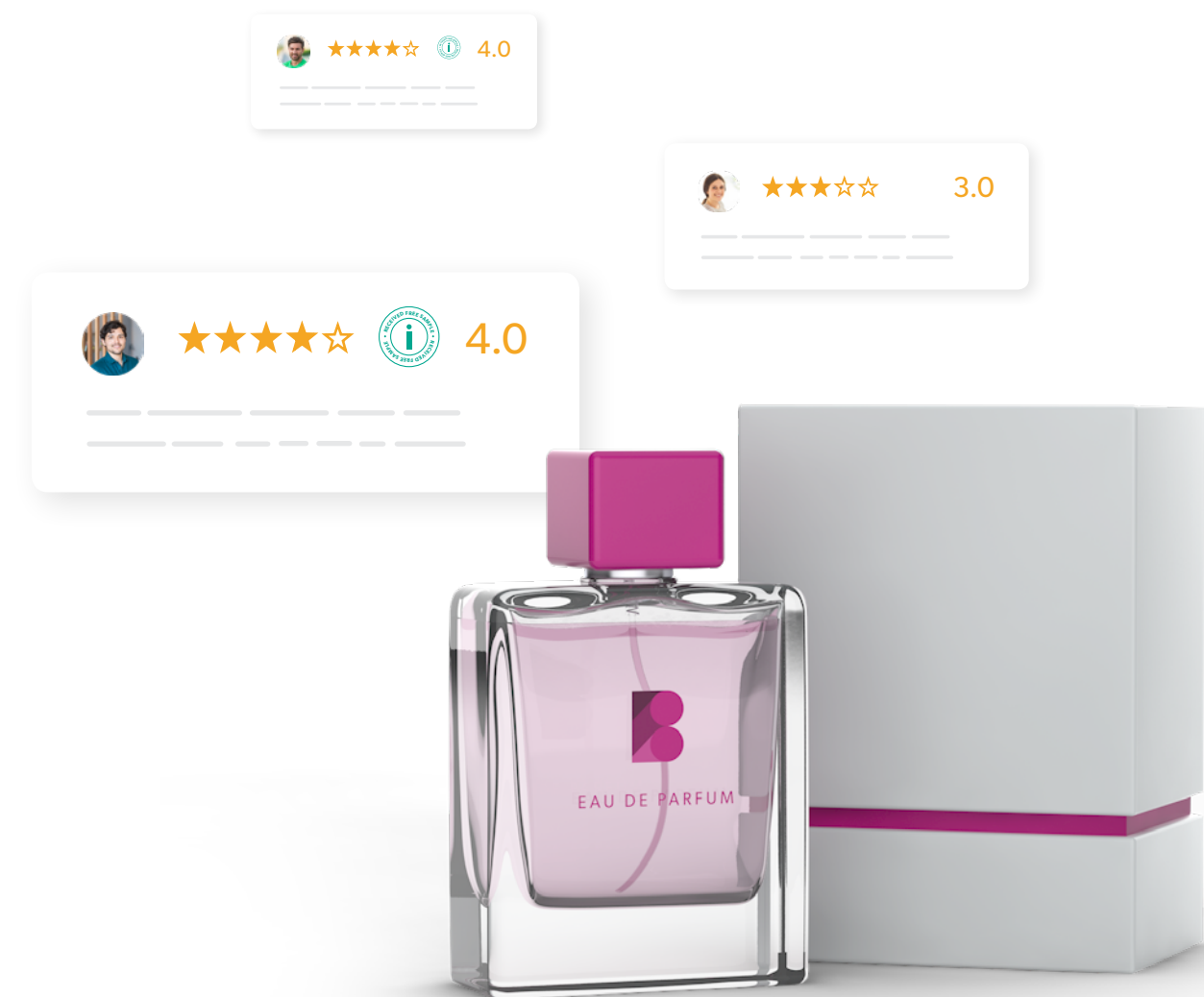
From the same Wakefield Research sample of 3,000 online shoppers (2,000 U.S. and 1,000 French), we designed an experiment to determine the credibility of incentivized ratings and reviews as compared to organic ones. Subjects were divided into a test group and a control group and presented with an online survey. They were then presented with a mock interface in which ratings and reviews were shown for a variety of products, ranging from consumer electronics and appliances to everyday household items.

Both groups saw identical products and identical ratings and reviews for each, but the test group's reviews had a disclosure at the end of the review text that read: "This review was collected as part of a promotion". Respondents in both groups were then asked a series of questions regarding the credibility of the reviews they read. Following the experimental portion of the study, respondents were also asked general questions about their perceptions of organic reviews vs. incentivized ones, which we defined as such:



For the purposes of this study, an incentivized review was defined as a product review written by a consumer that received compensation, such as a discount or free product, for writing that review. Incentivized reviews are typically noted that they are incentivized.

The study's findings are clear — shoppers consider incentivized reviews and non-incentivized reviews equally credible, and brands and retailers can pursue incentivization as an element of their content strategy with confidence.

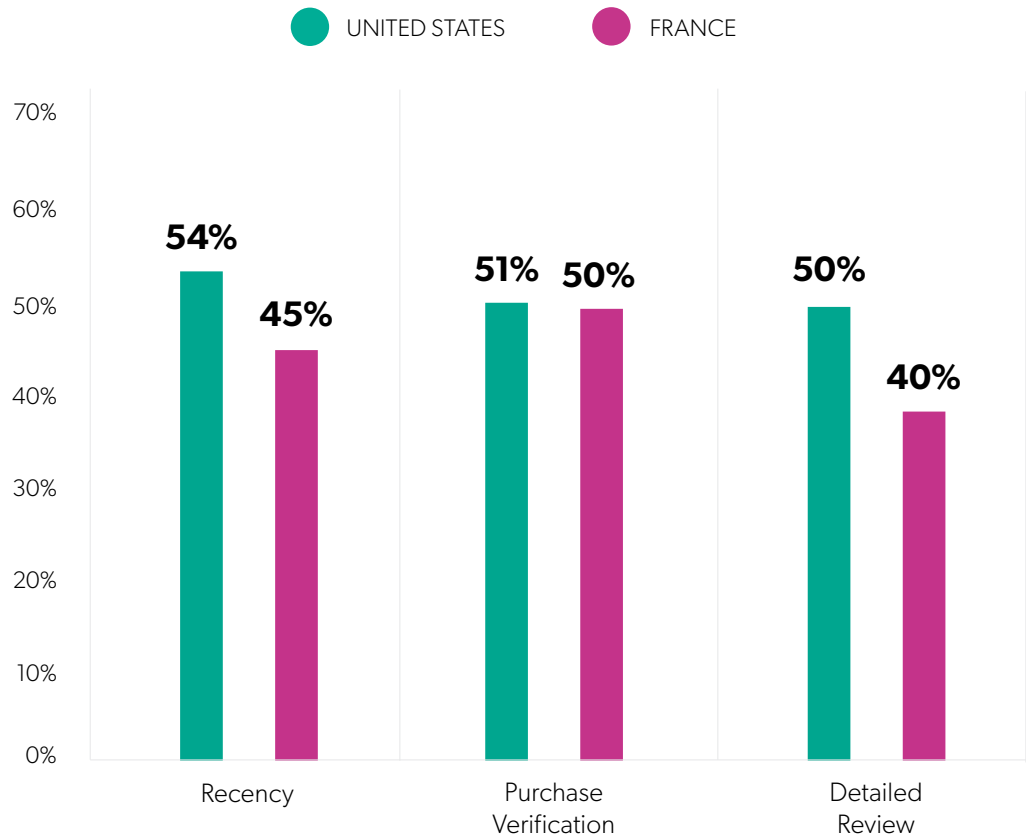


In nearly every instance and across both U.S. and French markets, there was no statistical difference in the credibility of reviews between those presented as organic and those presented as incentivized. These findings were consistent across all products, regardless of whether they were considered high-consideration or low-consideration. The experimental portion of the survey was also supported by the aforementioned questions asking about review credibility in general.

In fact, more than half of U.S. and French online shoppers (58% and 56%, respectively) say that incentivized reviews can inform their purchase decision just as much as organic reviews can. The majority of respondents from both markets also agreed that incentivized reviews would be useful in terms of making a purchase decision if they were written for a product without many reviews yet. Whether or not reviewers were incentivized to offer their opinions, they are trusted by their peers.

Of course, there are other factors to consider for consumers in terms of the credibility of reviews. To name a few, the recency of a review, the amount of detail contained therein, and verification that the reviewer had actually purchased the product they’re speaking to, all are considered to be important credibility factors for consumers.

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING FACTORS, IF ANY, WOULD MAKE A REVIEW FOR A SPECIFIC PRODUCT YOU’RE INTERESTED IN MORE CREDIBLE?



Authenticity above all else

The value of ratings and reviews hinges heavily on how much consumers trust them to be authentic. Nothing should compromise a consumer's confidence in the authenticity of review content. Once consumer trust is lost, it becomes near-impossible to gain it back.

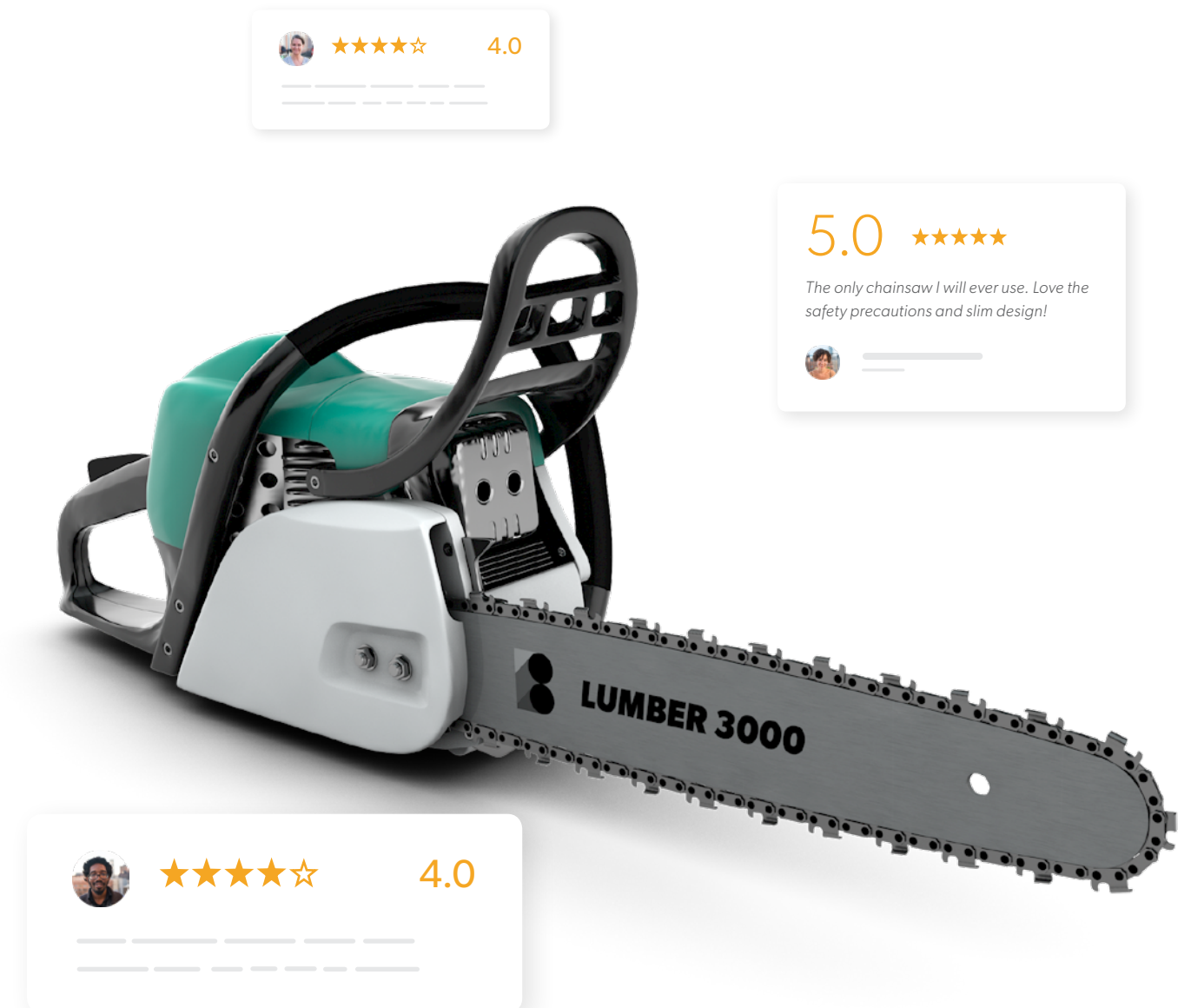
- Never delete less favorable reviews and/or use fake ones. An occasional negative review is far less harmful than consumers learning that they're being shown a dishonest product/brand sentiment.
- When incentivizing reviews via sampling, sweepstakes, coupons, or other tactics, be explicit in the request for honest feedback that will help other shoppers. Aside from being a best practice for authenticity, seeing honest feedback provides important insights which can help you improve your products and learn about your buyers.
- Always label incentivized reviews. Both the U.S. Federal Trade Commission and International Standards Organization have issued [guidelines](#)⁷ requiring that any time a consumer is given something of value in exchange for their review, a disclosure should be displayed.

- Ensure your review providers have strong processes and technologies in place to authenticate reviews before they're published. Your provider should:
 - Ensure that reviewers have actually interacted with the product
 - Filter out spam or automated reviews created by bots
 - Analyze both the review content as well as where/when it was submitted. Irregular trends in sentiment and/or submission sources can surface fake reviews
- Bazaarvoice maintains the industry's highest authenticity standards. In addition to using device fingerprinting to confirm reviews were written by real people, our policy does not allow reviews to be edited or deleted on the basis of negative content. To learn more about how Bazaarvoice stewards consumer trust in ratings and reviews, read the Bazaarvoice [Authenticity Policy](#)⁸.



Best practices for building a highly credible ratings and reviews program

Consumer-generated content, such as ratings and reviews, is not only critical to giving shoppers confidence to buy, but also delivers valuable feedback on ways to improve. Here are some key takeaways for how to implement a proactive review collection strategy.



BOTH ORGANIC AND INCENTIVIZED REVIEW CONTENT IS CONSIDERED CREDIBLE — A MIX OF BOTH IS BEST

Whether for high-consideration or low-consideration products, incentivized reviews matter to consumers. According to the Wakefield Survey, **more than half of U.S. (59%) and French (62%) online shoppers would still consider purchasing a low-consideration product** if up to half the reviews were incentivized. The numbers were similar for high-consideration products, with **51% of U.S. and 63% of French saying the same.**

Complement incentivization with tactics to generate organic review volume. Ask for reviews and photos in post-purchase communications, in on-site reminders, and via social media. Consumers want to help each other, but don't always think to leave a review unless they have very strong feelings about a product. Simply asking can generate content at a much higher rate than counting on consumers to act on their own. Ensure the process and experience of leaving a review are easy, convenient, and user-friendly for shoppers through mobile optimization and implementing features like in-email submission or multi-product submission.

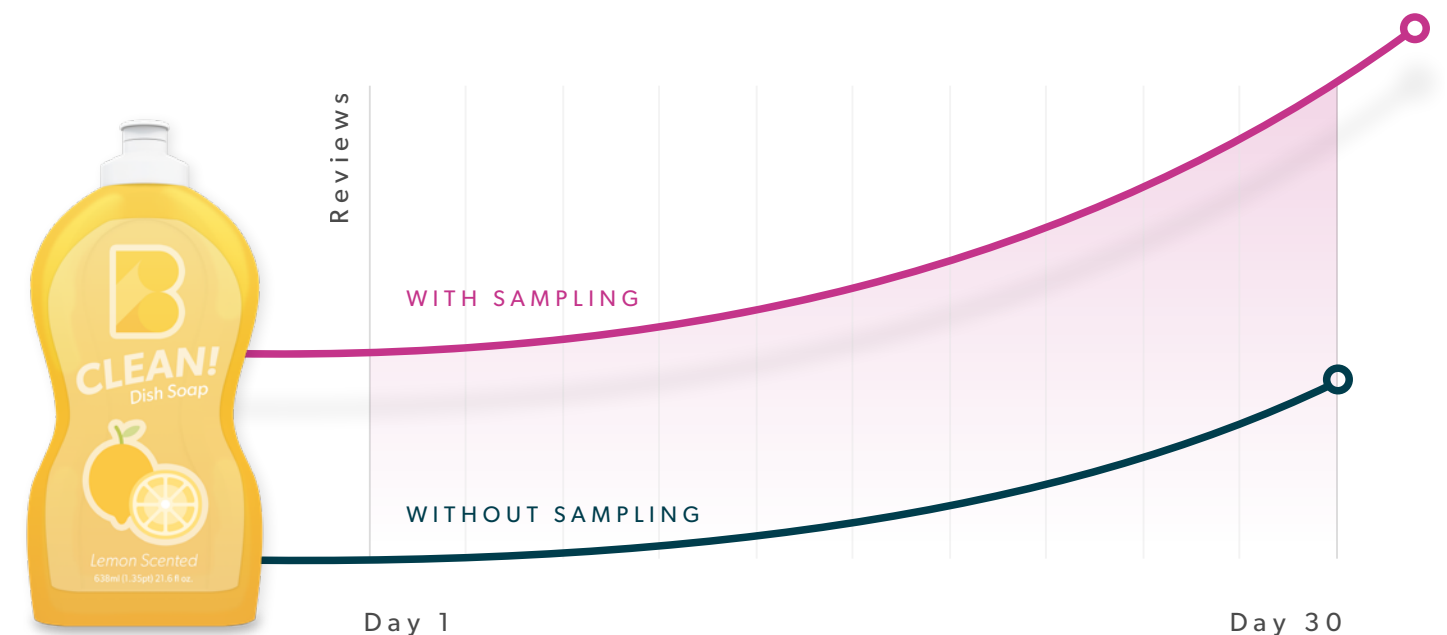
ASK FOR HONEST, DETAILED REVIEWS

Further, emphasize a commitment to trust by asking for honesty and detail. The study indicated that detail is one of the most important factors contributing to a review's credibility, with **half of online shoppers (50% U.S., 46% French) indicating it as such.** And drive home the point of honesty by stating review content's value both internally and to other shoppers.



The sampling campaign helped us launch the brand along with really strong and honest reviews. Reviewers provided really constructive and lengthy feedback, which we know is a big factor in conversion.

Carly Hounsell
Product Review Coordinator
Debenhams



KEEP REVIEW CONTENT FRESH

Fifty-four percent of U.S. shoppers and 45% of French shoppers indicated that a review’s recency significantly factors into its credibility, so be sure to maintain a consistent review collection strategy that ensures a frequent stream of fresh, timely reviews.

TARGET CAMPAIGNS TO SPECIFIC AUDIENCES TO ENHANCE THE QUALITY OF CGC

This goes especially for sampling tactics. Don’t just send samples to any and all consumers who want to receive free products. Be vigilant about selecting an appropriate sampling community that aligns with the products and brands you’re sampling and can give you the valuable feedback and opinions you’re looking for. Reaching the right shoppers will ensure that review content is as high-quality and as relevant as possible.

DISTRIBUTE REVIEW CONTENT ACROSS EVERY CHANNEL, AT EVERY POINT ALONG THE BUYER JOURNEY

Reviews are important to consumers at every point during their path to purchase. Distribute them accordingly to retail channel partners, as part of marketing materials (including offline materials, such as signage or packaging), and across digital channels like social media and email.

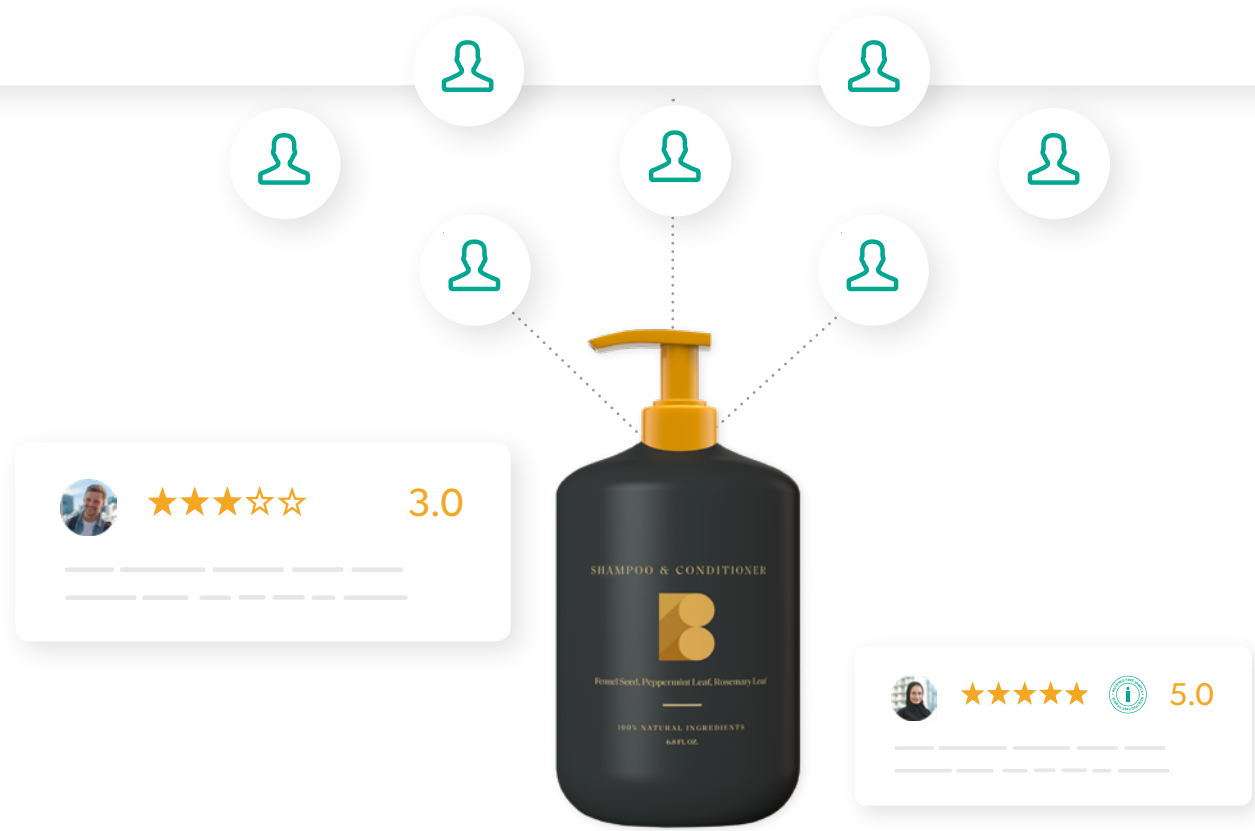
DRAW INSIGHTS FROM REVIEWS AND CONTINUOUSLY IMPROVE

As mentioned, reviews aren’t just for other consumers. Read all of this valuable customer feedback to extrapolate useful insights that can help your business improve. Share them internally to inform ways you can improve branding, product performance/design, marketing and sales tactics, and messaging.



We invite customers to join based on spend and the number of reviews they’ve written previously. We find out as much about them and their lifestyle as possible to ensure relevant products get into the right hands and offer guidelines advising on which features and benefits to focus on when reviewing, encouraging them to submit rich valuable content that will benefit other customers. We collect 30% more imagery this route compared to native review submission.

Carly Hounsell
Product Review Coordinator
Debenhams



The bottom line

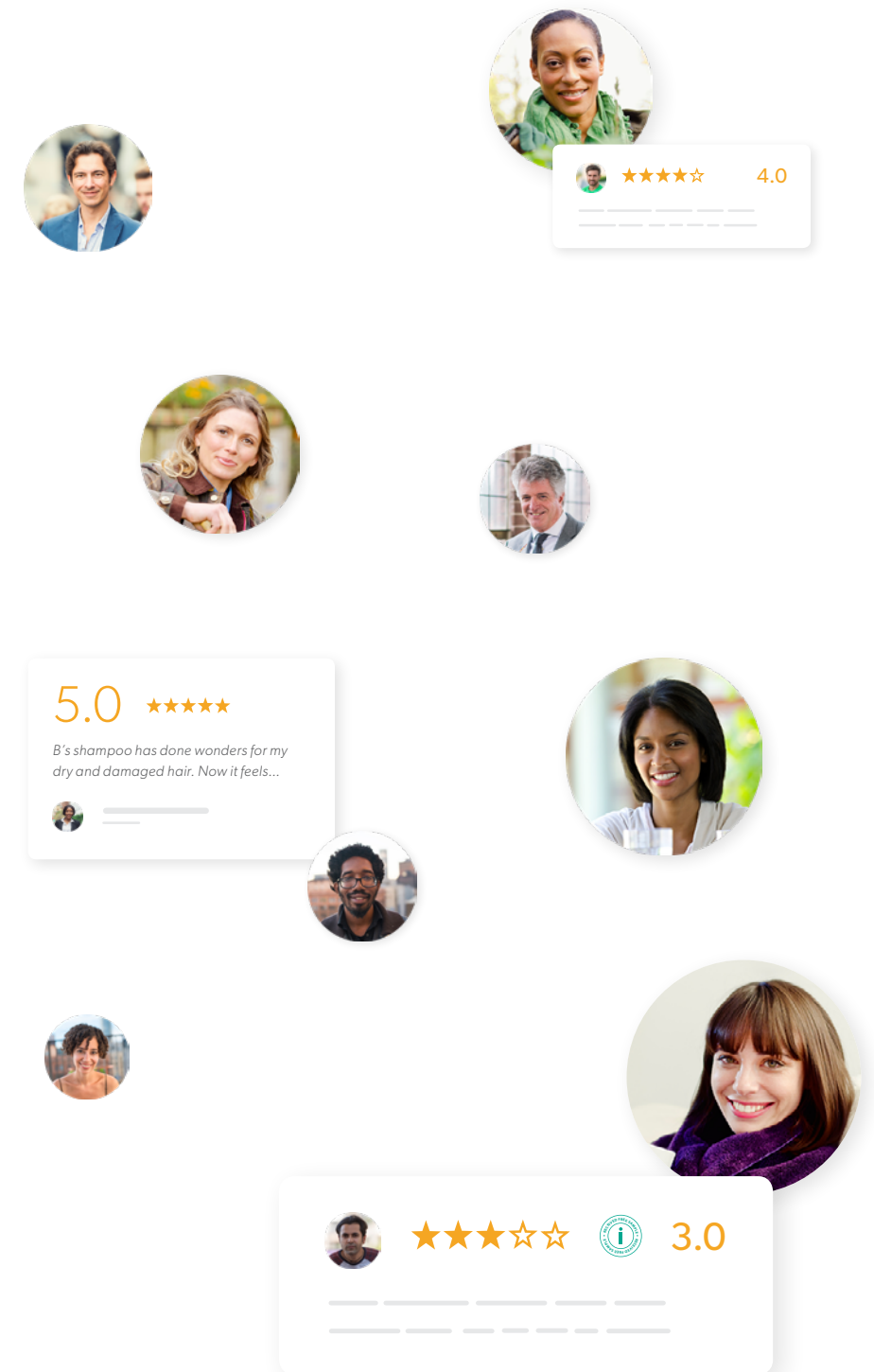
Trust is harder to come by than ever before. Consumers, now equipped with social media and other community-based forums, have learned to trust one another more than the companies they buy from. It's absolutely critical that brands and retailers embrace this trend by relying on the voice of the consumer to gain trust and give them the confidence to buy.

Ratings and reviews are widely considered one of the most powerful tools that brands and retailers can use to gain traction in such a highly competitive marketplace. As our study with Wakefield Research indicates, consumer reviews have a major influence on consumer buying decisions — whether for high- or low-consideration products, and whether the reviews are organic or incentivized.

Brands, retailers, and marketers should focus on review collection strategies that include both organic and incentivized content. Even if labeled as incentivized, reviews that are honest, authentic, recent, and thorough will be considered by consumers as highly credible, and will be used to inform their purchase decisions at multiple points along the buyer journey. While tactics such as product sampling can help generate incentivized reviews, simply asking recent customers for their feedback can ensure that organic reviews are coming in as well. With a centralized focus on empowering consumers to be heard and help one another, brands and retailers will gain the hard-earned trust of their consumers, and stand apart from competitors.



Contact Bazaarvoice to learn more about what you can do to keep ahead of these trends.



About Bazaarvoice

Bazaarvoice connects brands and retailers to consumers, so that every shopping experience feels personal. From search and discovery to purchase and advocacy, Bazaarvoice's solutions reach in-market shoppers, personalize their experiences, and give them the confidence to buy. Each month in the Bazaarvoice Network, more than one billion consumers view and share authentic content including reviews, questions and answers, and social photos across 6,000 brand and retail websites. Across the network, Bazaarvoice captures billions of shopper signals monthly — data that powers high-efficiency digital advertising and personalization with unmatched relevance.

Founded in 2005, Bazaarvoice is headquartered in Austin, Texas with offices in North America, Europe, and Australia. For more information, visit **www.bazaarvoice.com**.

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