

## **The pitfalls of researching contractors and products on the internet.**

**Cyber-Bully: a person or organization that purposely misleads consumers as to the quality of a product or service by manipulating search engines or providing fictitious negative content.**

I know of a company that has had some serious issues which have put them at the disadvantage of their competitors. Instead of resolving the issues, they have spent money to bury the negative issues and complaints so that they don't show up until the 40<sup>th</sup> page on internet searches and therefore are less likely to be seen. On top of it, this same company has been sponsoring websites showing past competitor's product issues and improperly insinuating that these products are still in existence and being sold.

**Some consumer websites are not there to protect the consumer but to provide entertainment and ultimately sell ads.**

Reading negative reviews or gossip is fun. Unfortunately many businesses are unfairly hurt. The hosts of these consumer websites accept no responsibility as they don't write the content. They make their money off of advertisements once the site becomes popular. They have no concerns on the accuracy or the consequences of the content. Legitimate issues are buried in with angry and unreasonable customers, disgruntled employees, or competitors. Anyone hiding under a cloak of anonymity can write whatever they want without recourse.

Angry rebuttals add to the content and ironically may even drive more traffic to these websites. Sometimes the content becomes almost like a soap opera and subsequently may attract a regular following. Even if the content is a lie, the company being negatively reviewed is hopelessly tarnished.

The owners of these websites state they have no control over the content, but consider this: These websites depend on advertisements for their revenue. Do you think they will publish negative reviews of their sponsors? You can draw your own conclusions.

**On the flipside where does the consumer go to find unbiased and legitimate information about products and services?**

You can't always believe what you read and you need to check out several sources to get an idea of the truth. Keep in mind as you are reading reviews that every product has some sort of caveat and all companies make mistakes from time to time. The important issue is if the problem is properly resolved.

There are some legitimate websites that are unbiased. You want to look for the following;

- Absence of Advertisements
- No anonymous contributors
- System for proper resolutions and rebuttals.
- Unbiased Rating System
- Monetary commitment on the part of the consumers and vendors.

**The Better Business Bureau and Angie's List are excellent sources to check out.**

The Better Business Bureau recently came under fire for giving preferential treatment to members and has since reconciled these issues. They have come back as a more credible source. Here are the components to their program:

- Vendors have to pay a significant sum and agree to abide by the BBB rules of arbitration.
- Company background and history is published on the BBB website.
- Consumers don't have to pay to research companies on the BBB website.
- BBB has an unbiased and well explained rating system.
- Report details years in business, number of complaints within last three years, and the resolution of the complaints.
- Complaints are screened for their validity and accuracy.

Angie's List complements the BBB Listing and is a reliable source of information.

- Consumers pay a membership fee for the privilege of making complaints and viewing reports.
- All vendors are allowed to view complaints against them and provide resolution and rebuttal on the website.
- Vendors are rated on a variety of criteria.
- Complaints are screened for their validity and accuracy, and there is no anonymity.