



Builders' website where unhappy customer couldn't have her say

A site that is supposed to help you find reliable tradespeople ought to let you post a bad review - shouldn't it?

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Article history

A website that aims to help homeowners find tradespeople and builders in their area is being accused of mis-handling its own customer feedback system by angry users of the site.

RatedPeople.com enables users to post details of jobs that need doing in their property on the site then provides them with contact details of local tradespeople, such as builders, electricians, plumbers and decorators. Once the work has been carried out, users can log back in to the site to leave their feedback on the quality of service that they received.

The website says that its fair and unbiased ratings system allows customers to select tradespeople independently. The homepage reads: 'Our Rated People directory lets you find impartial ratings for builders, plumbers, electricians and decorators based near you. The tradesmen in our business directory are rated on quality, value and reliability by people that have used them.'

But Suzanne Moffatt from Glasgow says she came a cropper when she used RatedPeople to find a builder to carry out a single-storey extension on her family home last year. 'It was a nightmare,' she says. 'So much went wrong.' She claims the roof was at the wrong angle, the kitchen was poorly fitted and that the decking had to be dismantled.

Suzanne is now in dispute with her builder over the problems. Meanwhile, the builder says he has tried to arbitrate with the Moffatts, and that he has a good record with very few complaints. He says he merely followed the plans for the roof, which were altered after planning permission was granted. He also claims that complaints over the kitchen and decking were about aesthetics; otherwise, they were properly fitted.

The dispute itself is distressing enough, but Suzanne is upset at the way RatedPeople handled her attempts to post a review of the building work. 'I listed everything that had gone wrong in my review, so that if anyone else was thinking of using the same builder, they'd think twice.' But one month after she posted her comments, she discovered they had been removed from the website.

'When I called RatedPeople, they told me it was a technical hitch. It was then reinstated, but when I checked again later, it had again been removed. This time, I complained to the management and they claimed the builder had felt the review was unfair, which is why they had removed the post.'

'I thought the website was about being honest, but the fact that they removed my negative review makes me wonder how many more negative comments they've been taking off - just because they might have upset the tradesmen.'

RatedPeople insists that its records show that her post was removed once, not three times, as she claims. Andrew Skipwith, who founded the site in 2006, says the first removal was an error and admits it should have been reinstated straight away. But he says it is 'ludicrous' to suggest the website is fixing comments: 'If we removed every single negative comment on the site, we'd be completely undermining what we do.'

'We only remove reviews when they cross the line - when someone says either a builder or a customer is a thief, liar, cheat... those kind of comments are designed to cause maximum damage, and we would take a review down in that scenario.'

Suzanne says that at no stage did the website ask her to change her comment: 'I would have written it again if they had given me another chance.' In January the site compromised by allowing the builder to post a reply, which contained equally personal comments about Suzanne. This was removed from the website last week, after Cash intervened.

Another woman hired the same builder as Suzanne but didn't get to read her review because the site had taken it down. She claims she has now been left with a badly fitted cookerhood and a sparking electrical socket. The builder says he has rectified any problems.

'Had the previous rating not been taken down, there is no way I would have used this builder,' she says. 'I don't think that RatedPeople should be able to take off a rating just because a tradesperson objects to it.'

The fact that a customer complains about a builder does not, of course, necessarily make him a bad builder; the whole concept of customer reviews online is difficult and may be flawed.

RatedPeople is free for its customers, but tradespeople must pay a fee to appear on it - £40 a quarter plus referral fees that vary according to the job - but Skipwith is adamant that this does not mean the site is biased toward them. The whole concept is about being straightforward and honest. It would be really stupid of us to fiddle ratings, not least because it shows a total lack of integrity.'

RatedPeople says it is not responsible for vetting tradespeople who register. 'All we do is put people in touch with tradespeople in their area. That is the service we provide and that's what we did for Suzanne,' says Skipwith. 'The environment of our site is such that people who do want to rip off customers would be unlikely to use us anyway. They would only get bad reviews out of it. We have 30,000 tradesmen registered with us, and I can't personally vouch for them all.'

Other websites work on a similar basis as RatedPeople. Both Problemsolved.co.uk and eGenie.co.uk, a new site launched last month, enable users to find tradespeople in their area and write a review afterward.

'People are more likely to trust a public word-of-mouth recommendation rather than anything else,' says Jonathan Peace of Problemsolved. This is why we publish every review, good or bad - and if a bad review does go up, the tradesperson has the right to reply. It's really important that we have good and bad reviews, so that there is a balance of light and shade and ultimately the user can choose. We would only suppress a review if it was defamatory.'

eGenie says it will not let tradespeople claim to have professional qualifications without seeing proof first. 'We check the tradesmen's credentials and this means that we're able to push cowboy builders out,' says an eGenie spokesman.

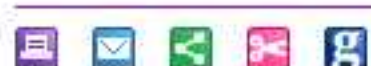
Who can you trust

Consumer Direct, the government-funded advice service, says it has received more than 19,000 complaints about builders and tradespeople in the first three months of 2008 alone.

It recommends that homeowners only use tradespeople who are registered members of the TrustMark scheme, a government-endorsed programme that aims to put people in touch with reputable operators. TrustMark tradespeople have been independently checked through on-site inspections and will have also had their records checked.

All tradespeople have to sign a code of practice, which includes having correct insurance.

To find a TrustMark tradesman, visit trustmark.org.uk



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