

# STAR Watch

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## Can Online Reviews be Trusted?

On July 7 of this year, the Nielson Company released the results of a survey of 25,000 Internet consumers in 50 countries. The study ranked the degree of "trust" that consumers had in various forms of information/advertising about products and/or services. Not surprisingly, the most trusted form of trusted information is recommendations from people known to the consumer. 90% of the respondents to the survey stated that they would put some degree of trust in recommendations received from persons known to them.

The survey also determined that 70% of all respondents "trusted" the opinions posted online by other consumers (not known to them) and an equal number "trusted" the information posted on so-called brand websites controlled by manufacturers or advertisers.

By country, the most trusting of consumer opinions are Vietnam (81%), Italy (80%), and China and France (both at 77%). Least trustful of other consumers' opinions were Argentina (46%) and the Finland (50%). In the United States, 72% trusted other consumers' opinions.

When it comes to trusting brand-sponsored websites, the percentage of

those surveyed worldwide is equally high. China (82%) and Vietnam (80%) were again the most trusting. Finland (36%) and Sweden (33%) were the least trustful. In the U.S., only 62% of survey respondents had some degree of trust the information on those websites.

### What does this mean?

When persons known to the consumer give information about or recommend products and/or services, the consumer can factor in his/her knowledge of that individual to decide whether or not to put any trust into the information provided. That doesn't particularly bother us.

This survey also indicates that 70% of consumers will place their trust in a website that was set up by advertisers for the sole purpose of convincing consumers to purchase the product the product or service. But most upsetting, are the 70% of consumers will accept the word of total strangers who may or may not



### In this issue...

- ★ • *Can Online Reviews be Trusted?* ★
- ★ • *Registry Cleaners: How good are they?* ★
- ★ • *RECAP Plug-in for Firefox* ★
- ★ • *WNYLC Web Statistics* ★
- ★ • *Who We Are* ★





be qualified to make any of the claims found in their product/service review postings.

### **Who are these consumers who post reviews and should they be believed?**

According to a survey conducted by Rubicon Consulting, 80% of the information posted was contributed by 9% of the online population. If this information is accurate, it appears that a small group of people dominate the information that gets posted. Do these “most frequent contributors” have more

or better knowledge of products and services than the rest of us? Is there something that makes the information provided by these reviewers more accurate than information provided by any stranger that we would pass on the street? We highly doubt it. There are many websites out there that allow

anyone to post a review without the purchase of the product or service.

But there is a darker side to online reviews.

In an undercover investigation by Daily Tech, it was found that 20 percent of the sites that evaluated hardware accepted some sort of kickback for posting reviews. While this activity would be illegal in most other broadcast media, it is currently not illegal on the Internet.



It has also been found that an increasing number of companies have been posing as consumers and posting positive online comments about their own products and services. Both the Federal Trade Commission and the European Union are taking steps to curb this practice – but it still exists.

### **Is there any way to get accurate info about products and services?**

We think so. It may seem contradictory, but we think it is possible to extract good information from the very sites that we

have just cautioned you about: Read the information in the comments, but maintain a reasonable level of skepticism.

We discount comments that are written in all capital letters and end with exclamation points (We don't like to be shouted at). We also discount online comments that get overly emotional (Just the facts, please). For a review to impress us, there needs to be a mix of positive and non-positive information about the product or service (Nothing is all good or

all bad).

More importantly, after reading multiple reviews/comments, is there something about the product or service that every reviewer agrees on? If so, we would give that item credibility.

And finally, we understand that ultimately, it will be our decision to purchase the product or service when we are satisfied that it will meet our needs, not the reviewers who wrote the comments.



# Registry Cleaners: How good are they?

The “registry” in a Windows operating system is one of those things that almost all of us have heard about. We have been told that it is something inside of Windows that is very important because it is needed by Windows to do the things that Windows does – and if there is something wrong with it very bad things will happen.

If only we would take heed of what we have been told. While most computer users do not physically muck around with the contents of the registry on their computer, many will allow total strangers to mess around with the registry on their computer by downloading, installing, and running a “registry cleaner”.

## **Which registry cleaner do people use?**

Computer geeks who demand clean registries choose only the best registry cleaner that they can find – for free. Why pick a reputable, well-known software provider who wants money for their product when there are so many free ones to choose from after one Googles “registry cleaner download free”? Imagine the adrenalin rush that one can have waiting for this free product of unknown quality from an unknown provider attempts to work its magic on the computer registry. Will it run to completion or abort? Will the computer ever boot again? If it does

boot, will everything still work correctly? What recourse is available if this free product fails to perform as promised?

## **Windows Registry 101...**

According to Wikipedia.org, “The Windows Registry is a database that stores settings and options for Microsoft Windows operating systems. It contains information and settings for hardware, operating system software, most non-operating system software, and per-user settings... It was first introduced with Windows 3.1, the Windows registry's purpose was to tidy up the profusion of per-program the INI that had previously been used to store configuration settings for Windows programs.”

The registry is used to store static information. Programs typically read data from it when they start up and might update some data when they shut down. Over a long period of time (months or years), the data might get fragmented and according the theory put forth by the vendors of registry cleaning products, this causes registry access/updates to slow down by some horrendous amount.

## **Registry Cleaners 101...**

What exactly does it mean when a product claims to “clean” the registry? In the simplest terms, it means whatever the



developer of the product wants it to mean...

- The product might defragment the file that physically contains the registry. The result is a file that no longer has bits and pieces of itself spread all over the hard drive.
- The product might defragment the contents of the registry file. The registry is a database file and data access speed can be reduced by having related data elements scattered all over the file. Data defragmentation could also remove “holes” in the data space cause by uninstalling applications that stored data in the registry.
- The product may claim to remove junk left over from applications that have been uninstalled, or other undesirable “stuff”.
- Regular use of this product will result in “blistering-fast performance” and ultimately “save the computer user money by avoiding the need for expensive upgrades” (actual vendor claims).

Most of these claims are probably true – But it isn’t the whole truth:

- Data in the registry is not read that often. Cleaning up a fragmented registry will improve data access performance, but accessing registry data never takes more than a few milliseconds. The improvement will never be noticed.
- It is an accepted fact that many applications, when uninstalled, leave a lot of junk behind. Cleaning out this clutter is theoretically desirable, but as

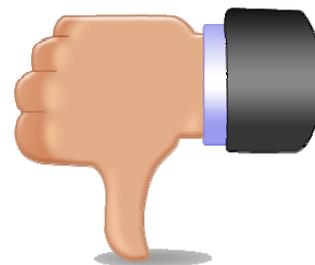
previously discussed, doesn’t result in noticeable performance improvement.

- For the most part, data isn’t added, updated, or deleted from the registry very often. Changes to the registry occur when new applications are installed or existing applications are removed. How often does that happen? Adding or removing a few applications would not result in a noticeable performance degradation to the registry.
- Starting with Windows XP operating system, all currently supported operating systems automatically defragment their registries as needed. It’s already being handled by the operating system
- Based on everything stated above, the claim that regular use of a registry cleaner will avoid the need for expensive upgrades is preposterous.

### In Conclusion...

There are times when a registry cleaner is legitimately needed, but those are rare. Those situations are usually accompanied by other computer problems that make the need for registry cleaning a minor issue at best.

But if you insist on using registry cleaner software on your computer, be sure to use a free one. That way, you are sure to get your money’s worth.





# RECAP Plug-in for Firefox

Recently, a team from the Princeton's Center for Information Technology created a Firefox browser plug-in module that has begun to cause quite a stir in the legal community. The plug-in named RECAP is a free "open source" application that anyone can download and install on their computer workstation. This plug-in only works with Firefox. It does not work with Microsoft Internet Explorer or any other browser product.

Once loaded, RECAP allows users to access [uscourts.gov](http://uscourts.gov) as they always have. When the user attempts to download a document, things begin to happen. If someone else running the RECAP plug-in tries to download a copy of that exact document, this user gets the document for free from a database set up by the creators of RECAP. If this user running RECAP is the first person to download the document, the user pays \$0.08/page as usual, but RECAP sends a copy of the downloaded document to the "free" database. Any user running RECAP that attempts to download the document will not have to pay for the copy they download.

Is it legal to do this? At this point in time, no action has been taken to shut RECAP down, so let's assume that RECAP is perfectly legal. Also, these documents are available to the public.

Is it better than the [uscourts.gov](http://uscourts.gov) site? That depends on whom you ask. Records in the PACER system are un-

searchable while RECAP records can be searched. That certainly is helpful, but what about the other issues?

On occasion, court documents have been found on the RECAP site that did not have certain confidential personal information redacted.



Use of RECAP could have an effect on fee-exempt users of the PACER system. On the PACER web site is a clear warning: "A fee exemption applies only for limited purposes. Any transfer of data obtained as the result of a fee exemption is prohibited

unless expressly authorized by the court. Therefore, fee exempt PACER customers must refrain from the use of RECAP."

To us, the biggest concern is that RECAP is "open source". To many people, anything that is open source must be good. The problem with anything that is open source is that anyone can obtain a copy of the source and modify it to suit their purposes. The resulting modification could be a significant improvement over the original program or a malicious attempt to load bogus information into the RECAP database, thus rendering it untrustworthy.

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At first blush, RECAP appears to be a product without a down side, but after some serious contemplation, we are not so sure. If you choose to use it, understand the issues and proceed accordingly.



## WNYLC Web Statistics For July 2009

Total Hits.....485,364  
 Number of Pages Viewed.....154,964  
 Total Visitors.....61,805  
 Average Hits/Day.....15,656  
 Average Pages /Day.....6,112  
 Top Web Browsers Used:  
 Internet Explorer 8.x.....9%  
 Internet Explorer 7.x.....32%  
 Internet Explorer 6.x.....21%  
 Firefox.....11%  
 Safari.....1%

Top Operating Systems Used:  
 Windows Vista.....14.67%  
 Windows XP.....52.41%  
 Windows 2000.....3.58%  
 Windows 98.....0.40%  
 Mac OS.....1.47%



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