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Here's what I think

Consumer review sites help others give their opinions

By Doug Bedell
THE KRT CAMPUS

After four years of telling the world what he thinks about beer, Mexico vacation spots and Latin music, Mark Stevens of Houston recently experienced an epiphany.

"I'm rethinking things," says the prolific 43-year-old Epinions.com free-lance writer. "I've written 664 reviews. It's a book, and I didn't really get paid for producing it. I should really be getting royalties for all that work."

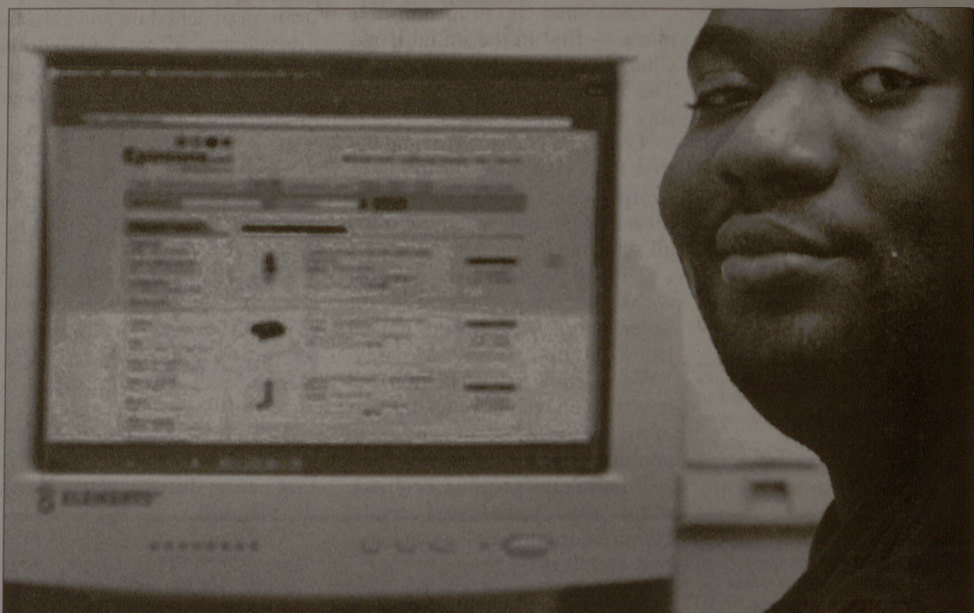
But Stevens and thousands of other Net denizens seem addicted to sharing their thoughts with the world.

Whether it is a \$20 toaster or a \$10,000 plasma television monitor, thousands of people like Stevens spew their views on Web sites such as Epinions.com, BizRate.com, PriceGrabber.com, Amazon.com and ResellerRatings.com for little or no compensation.

"It's part of my life now, absolutely," says Dallasite Chidi Eriken, 27, who has written more than 300 reviews of hip-hop and other music for Epinions.com since 2001. "When I listen to a CD these days, it's hard to listen just for enjoyment. I'm always thinking, 'What do I say here? What am I going to write about this?'"

Both Stevens (www.Epinions.com/user-mrkstvn) and Eriken (www.Epinions.com/user-madtheory) are among the top Epinions.com contributors in their specialties. The two Texans typify the Internet opinion writers in several ways.

First, they are driven. "A lot of them started for the money, but we don't pay them enough anymore to be in it alone for the money," said Alexis Johnson, Epinions.com community product manager. "When you get to the high class, the very prolific, they pick areas that they know the most about.



Chidi Eriken has posted more than 30 reviews of hip hop and other music since 2001 on Epinions.com. "You meet the people who leave comments on your reviews, and it's addictive like that," he says.

They are all very passionate about those things."

In the case of Stevens, his co-workers and family knew he could ferret out a good price on travel.

"For a while, I was really intensely interested in always scarfing the absolute rock-bottom cheapest deal," said the Houstonian, who by day is a writer of technical documents.

Go to PCPhotoReview.com, and you'll find dozens of amateur experts conversing about digital cameras. Hit Tivocommunity.com, and you'll encounter thousands of TiVo users with an almost religious devotion to understanding the personal video recorder's innards.

But the opinionfest isn't limited to pricey electronic purchases. People such as Sara Ascalon of Bayside, N.Y., dash off dozens of reviews.

Her first Epinions' submission blasted faulty service from AT&T for her cell phone. Later, she waxed eloquent on her Bissell Powersteamer carpet cleaner. She followed that with a vicious diatribe on her Proctor Silex toaster.

"Prior to the Internet, if you wanted to get consumer information, you generally turned to people that you knew — your friends or your co-workers," said Andrew Gershoff, associate professor of marketing at Columbia Business School. "Now that available network has expanded all over the world and across the country."

And that leads to the second common component among habitual consumer reviewers: They revel in the two-way communication that their reviews generate. Most consumer review sites allow comments to be tagged onto an author's work.

"I'm continuously shocked by the friendships that form online," says Johnson. "We host these meet-and-greet sessions for our best reviewers. They'll walk in and see a name on a nametag and just go nuts. It's almost as if it was a longtime friend from high school they'd lost track of for years."

"You meet the people who leave comments on your reviews, and it's addictive like that," said Eriken. "It's just an online community to me now.

It's not about profit."

No matter the motivation of the reviewer, consumers seeking information have to learn what reviewers best match their tastes. On Epinions and several other review sites, the Web interface allows users to weight the opinions of those they trust.

Also, consumer reviewers are most likely to write about a product or service they really like or dislike.

"People in the middle are less likely to say anything," Gershoff said. "And if you've evaluated something like a toaster after you've bought and used it, you're more likely to post a positive review. You've already made the commitment. You've jumped."

"It doesn't represent a true sampling of all toasters out there."

Stevens calls review sites another tool in an expanding consumer arsenal. "I think it's one more information source," he said. "I don't think you can rely on them exclusively. I don't think that a consumer review is necessarily as good as a critical review by somebody who does it professionally. You need a critical perspective.

Business group turns over records, no names

AUSTIN (AP) — The Texas Association of Business on Monday turned over to a grand jury all records related to its 2002 elections advertising campaign, minus the names of its individual and corporate donors.

After months of legal battles, the state's largest business lobby turned over the records after the names were redacted as allowed under an order from state District Judge Mike Lynch, association attorney Andy Taylor said. The TAB had been fighting to keep the names secret.

Earlier Monday, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to block Lynch's order to produce the documents.

"We appreciate this opportunity to comply with the district attorney's request for information while protecting the First Amendment rights of TAB and

its supporters," Taylor said. "From the start, that has been our chief concern."

Travis County District Attorney Ronnie Earle had moved to enforce punishments Lynch had handed down earlier this year against three association officials who refused to comply with subpoenas for the records.

The grand jury is investigating whether the group violated state law that forbids corporations from spending money on electioneering. Association lawyers have argued the organization is beyond state regulation because the ads in question did not advocate the election or defeat of candidates and that they were protected speech under the First Amendment.

Taylor said organization officials will testify if called before the grand jury.

Trial

Continued from page 1

severe now than they have been in the past years."

College Station Municipal Judge Edward Spillane, who will be playing the role of judge in the mock trial, said the trial should be a good teaching tool.

"I think the information will be very helpful and it's good for people to understand how seriously the law takes it," Spillane said. "I want the students to understand the consequences and for them to see it is a fair

Gaza

Continued from page 1

the same structure that was hit in an earlier airstrike Monday, residents said. Eleven people were wounded, they said. Israeli military sources said the attack was meant to finish the work of the first one.

The first three air strikes Monday destroyed two weapons labs and warehouses of Hamas, the military said. Four children

system, but while the system is fair, it is also very tough on people in alcohol related accidents.

Four thousand fatalities nationwide per year are attributed to drinking while driving, with Texas leading the nation overall, Thurmond said. Alcohol related accidents are especially prevalent among 18-24-year-olds with driving while intoxicated listed as the number one killer of college-age individuals, Reardon said.

"We know college kids drink a lot but there's a price to pay," Thurmond said. "Is it worth it?"

and a 70-year-old woman were among 25 wounded. Two missiles exploded on a street crowded with schoolchildren.

During three years of violence, Israeli airstrikes in Gaza have caused dozens of civilian casualties. In April, an air attack killed Hamas leader Salah Arabeed and eight other people. In July 2002, 15 people were killed, including nine children, in an airstrike that targeted another Hamas leader, Salah Shehadeh.

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