



Study on the feasibility of possible initiatives at EU level and establishment of a multi-stakeholder platform on quality of tourism accommodation

Principles and recommendations for Good Practice in online consumer reviews and ratings

CONTENT

The Principles are for providers of online marketplaces offering bookings, comparison shopping services, online meta search engine, reviews and ratings for all types of accommodation situated in the European Union (hereafter 'providers'). They should be seen as guidance to providers on best practices. They should however not be seen as legal guidance.

The Principles complement existing legislative requirements, namely:

- Directive on unfair commercial practices 2005/29/EC (UCPD), as amended by Directive (EU) 2019/2161 on better enforcement and modernisation of Union consumer protection rules;
- Regulation (EU) 2019/1150 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on promoting fairness and transparency for business users of online intermediation services

The Principles propose content to enable specific commitments (possibly as options with their pros and cons) that the industry should undertake to improve consumers' experiences with reviews and ratings. The final Principles will be used in the future work of the Commission with the industry.

1.1. The provider should indicate the source of individual reviews.

GUIDANCE:

- It should be possible for consumers to link / identify a review with a booking that has actually occurred.
- Providers aggregating review content from other websites, whether quantitative or qualitative should indicate the original website where the review was first posted.

1.2. Clear information shall be provided on the status of star-rating schemes

GUIDANCE:

- The Star symbol should be avoided for comparisons of accommodation reviews – scores and other graphics may be used.
- Where used, official star rating systems should be mentioned
- Information regarding official star rating schemes, e.g. features and facilities available at the respective hotel(s), should be displayed prominently and not only in the provider's terms and conditions.
- It should be made clear to consumers that there may be slight divergences in official star rating systems between countries, e.g. through a pop-up message, or a link to countries / regions official sites.

1.3. The provider should make their best efforts to ensure that reviews are accurate and fair

GUIDANCE:

- Providers should ensure efficient moderation of fake, abusive or defamatory reviews, through artificial intelligence, human interaction or a mixture of both. Providers should disclose how moderation is conducted.
- Consumers should be guided only to offer reviews on facilities and services actually used / experienced.
- Consumers should be given the opportunity to evaluate through narrative text, pictures, videos as well as ratings.
- Providers should not alter or remove narrative text from consumers' reviews, unless abusive, inappropriate or otherwise unlawful.
- In all cases where a review is posted, positive or negative, providers should automatically notify accommodation suppliers so that they have the opportunity to respond.
- Providers, when possible, should inform users of a change of establishment owner/management where this has occurred in the previous two years.

1.4. Providers should encourage individual accommodation establishments to submit accurate content before publication.

GUIDANCE:

- The provider should take steps to ensure any narrative and/or images and videos reflect the actual establishment.
- A process (which may include spot checks) should be in place to follow up any consumer complaints on inaccurate descriptions.
- To ensure accuracy, a time limit for submitting reviews should be given. This limit should consider and reflect the findings of scientific studies on the accuracy of memory.

1.5. Providers should distinguish between reviews and comments of staying and non-staying guests.

GUIDANCE:

- Invite staying consumers to offer a review shortly after departure to ensure the accuracy of the guest's review.
- Distinguish between input from staying and non-staying guests. In the latter case, make it clear that their contribution is simply a comment and/or provide any other visual/narrative to distinguish between the two types of contribution.

- Non-staying user comments should not form part of the aggregated data which results in overall scores.

1.6. Providers should discourage anonymous reviews.

GUIDANCE:

- Identification of reviewers should comply with GDPR requirements.

1.7. Contact details of users who are not linked to an actual booking should be verified by the site originally posting their comments. Providers should address concerns raised by accommodation providers regarding fake, abusive or defamatory statements made by consumers.

GUIDANCE:

- Have a procedure in place to determine the objective conditions under which a statement can be considered inaccurate, deceptive or misleading.
- Have a mechanism to detect, report and remove inaccurate, deceptive or misleading information.
- Illegal information should be removed without undue delay i.e. in less than 14 days.
- Provide a resolution service for divergences of view between accommodation providers and the consumer.
- Inform and provide reasons to all consumers for rejecting a review as well as an option to appeal such decision.

1.8. Providers should check official star ratings of listed establishments on a regular basis.

GUIDANCE:

- To ensure information is accurate, administrators of official star rating should submit to providers machine-readable data of accredited accommodation on a minimum of an annual basis.
- Providers should highlight where accommodation has achieved additional official norms of interest to consumers (as long as such information is provided by the accommodation supplier) for example, in the field of sustainable tourism, as well as health, hygiene and safety

1.9. Scores should be based on a minimum number of reviews and give more weight to more recent reviews

GUIDANCE:

- A minimum number of reviews should be considered before a score is calculated and published.
- To account for differences in the number of rooms in accommodation establishments, the requirement for a minimum number of reviews should reflect the number of rooms available in the establishment. (So a small hotel will need fewer reviews than a large hotel).
- All reviews should be made available to consumers – unless abusive or otherwise unlawful.
- The most recent scores should be given a higher weighting when aggregating overall scores. The threshold to be considered 'most recent' could be 18 months from the date of stay. Information on this fact should be transparently displayed.
- Consumers should provide a date of stay when completing a review.

[NB - Consumers predominantly use the scoring to make choices so the more up to date reviews will provide the most accurate information].

1.10. Providers should explain how accommodation rankings are calculated. This information should be easily found.

GUIDANCE:

- Prominent, clear and concise narrative should be provided for consumers on how rankings are calculated.
- The explanation should be made available in a specific section of the online interface that is directly and easily accessible from the page where the offers are presented.

FORMAT

GUIDANCE:

- Any future Good Practice should be made available online.
- For any future Good Practice to succeed all major providers should sign up to it.

IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING

GUIDANCE:

- The launch of Principles and Recommendations for Good Practice in online reviews and ratings could be done in two stages.
- **A soft launch** - The Principles could be published online, initially on the Commission's website as part of the pilot project report, so that the agreed principles and recommendations arrangements can receive more feedback.
- The future Code of Conduct could be further developed with a wider stakeholder community, including providers, hosted by the European Commission.
- **The formal launch** can be undertaken, once all issues have been identified and resolved during the pilot period. The Principles should be launched with the support of wider stakeholder community.
- Implementation should be monitored on the basis of a prior agreement with the signatories.
- An evaluation of the first year's operation could also be considered with further refinements made at that point.

The Good Practice can be a significant way to improve the performance of the wider travel and tourism industry but in order for that to happen the Principles needs to be progressive and adapted to reflect new market trends and the future needs of consumers. A 3-year review cycle could be considered.