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After a story on Yelp's heated town hall meeting with L.A. business owners, readers sent a flurry of emails and tweets sharing their own unhappy experiences with the review website.

"We have had the same problems with @yelp over the years especially with their 'filtering' system," read a tweet from a New Jersey eatery.

"86 of my 128 reviews are filtered," read another, from a Southern California tour company. "What are we doing wrong?"

"I too have major issues," an Irvine photographer said in an email.

"Lies, fraud and intimidation," a Beverly Hills medical office wrote.

Accusations about Yelp's business practices and authenticity of reviews have angered scores of small-business owners.

They've also left some consumers feeling confused about what they can and can't trust on the popular site, which features 42 million reviews on bars, restaurants, orthodontists, body shops, gyms, nail salons, hotels and more.

Online reviews are everywhere these days, with the public turning to the Web for everyman opinions on places to eat, products to buy, music to listen to and books to read. For restaurants alone, people can turn to Yelp, OpenTable, Google, MenuPages and more for diner reviews.

As a business writer, self-professed shopaholic and all-around control freak, I turn to

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2. Change the way reviews are sorted. When you first arrive at a company's Yelp page, it automatically shows you reviews that are ordered according to "Yelp Sort," which is "determined by recency, user voting and other review quality factors." Although Yelp says Yelp Sort is applied to all businesses whether they advertise or not, the method raises suspicions that Yelp unfairly manipulates how reviews are ordered. Ordering of reviews is especially important because most consumers just look at the first few reviews. If you want to bypass Yelp Sort, you can re-order the reviews yourself by clicking one of several options, including sorting by date or by star rating. You can also choose to look just at reviews that have been deemed useful by other Yelpers, or read reviews written only by "Elite" Yelpers, people who are extremely active on Yelp and thus are expected to be more credible.

3. Search for what you care about. Yelp allows people to search for specific terms within a business' mass of reviews, which I've found to be especially helpful in situations when a business has hundreds or thousands of reviews. For instance, if I want to know if a restaurant is pet-friendly, I'll search "dog" within that restaurant's reviews; if I only want to know what customer service is like, I'll do a search for that term. That helps narrow down what I actually care about.

4. Look at an individual reviewer's stats. I'm more likely to trust reviews from people who write frequently and who have a good distribution of stars that reflect a mix of positive and negative reviews.

5. Check out the filtered reviews. Many business owners who don't advertise with Yelp believe that their favorable reviews are filtered out, leaving only the negative ones behind. On the opposite end, there have been accusations that Yelp filters negative reviews for businesses that do pay up. Suspicious that what you're seeing doesn't tell the whole picture? Scroll to the bottom of a business' page and click on filtered reviews. Then you can decide for yourself.

## 6. Write your own reviews. One comment I've heard from people who hate reading

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understandably make business owners with poor ratings nervous.

By hosting 22 town halls in major U.S. cities this year, Yelp hopes to smooth things over with business owners and dispel much of the speculation surrounding the San Francisco company.

“Over the last few years we’ve ramped up our efforts,” Yelp spokeswoman Rachel Walker told me the morning of L.A.’s town hall on Tuesday. “There’s just a general misunderstanding.”

The two biggest complaints among business owners: that Yelp’s sales team pressures businesses to advertise and rewards or punishes their star ratings depending on whether they pay up; and bogus reviews (either extremely negative or extremely positive) that are written by business owners’ rivals or friends.

At Tuesday’s town hall in Hollywood, attended by some 85 local business owners, Yelp’s manager of business outreach sought to calm the hostile crowd by insisting that advertising has no bearing on businesses’ ratings. The manager, Morgan Remmers, added that the company’s ad salespeople shouldn’t be abusive or strong-arm businesses into buying ads.

As for Yelp’s controversial filter, she said, it’s an automatic process that is used to separate suspicious reviews, such as shill reviews paid for by a company, or unhelpful ones.

“Authenticity is extremely important and having a review come in organically is key,” Remmers told the audience. Still, she conceded that the filter is an imperfect one that has at times removed reviews from legitimate users.

Not all business owners hate the filter, though. I also received an email from Jered Friedland, owner of Beverly Hills limo service Fetch Me, who said he had “never paid

Yelp a dime and my business gets 90 percent of our customer base from the website.”

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