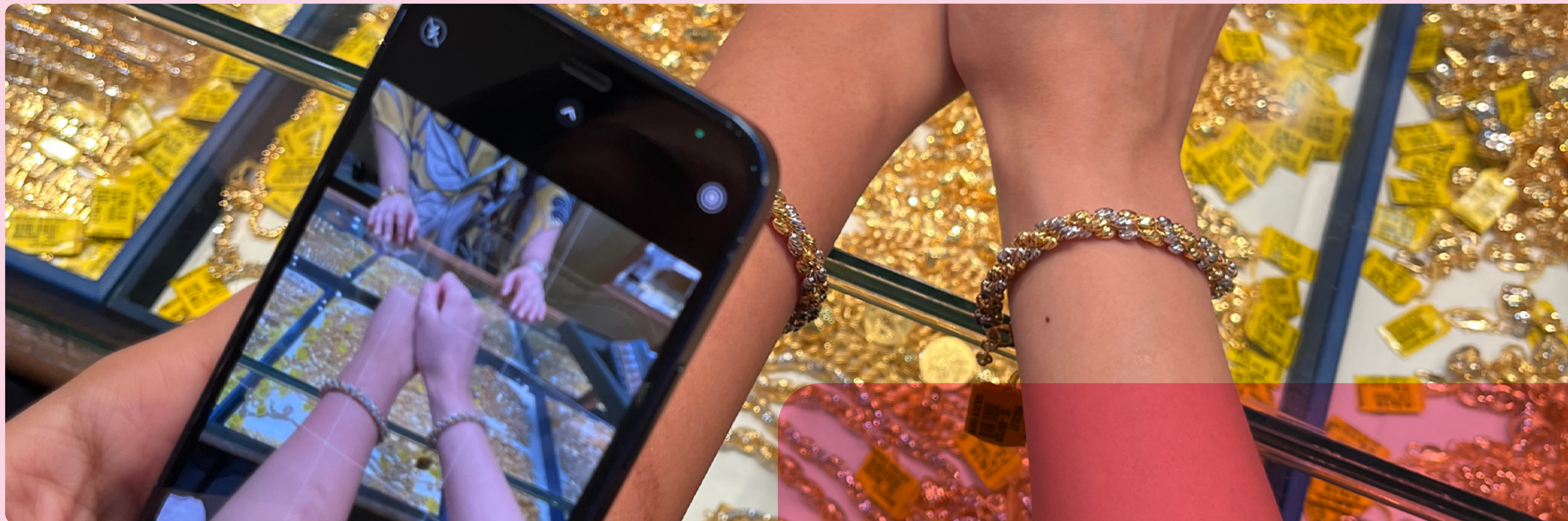# The antidote to purchase paralysis

How too much choice inhibits buying – and what your brand can do about it.

Trustpilot

Ah, shopping online. It's the ultimate storefront for the dedicated shopper; a few clicks and anything that you desire (I mean, within reason) is ready to be shipped to your front door. Bliss. Or is it?

Having that much freedom of choice can be paralyzing. How many times have you decided to watch something on TV before spending 25 minutes flicking through 5 apps, 15 trailers and a few old favorites before giving up and switching off your set?

That's just one of the many areas where we can get overloaded with options in our day-to-day. From retail to relationships, entertainment to exercise, we've never been faced with more choice.

But especially when shopping online, the array of choices feels *infinite*. Trying to find the right option can feel like such a monumental task that consumers get overloaded and end up stepping off the purchasing pathway. The uncertainty and increased cognitive load become too much, so they instead make no choice at all – they're paralyzed.

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The antidote to purchase paralysis

What is purchase paralysis?

This isn't a new concept – the idea of purchase paralysis or choice overload has been around since the late 1990s. (Psst. We explore the research around choice paralysis in a blog you can read here.)

The symptoms of purchase paralysis vary between the afflicted; what might stop one consumer dead in their tracks might just result in a miserable, anxious purchase from another.

Roughly, the symptoms fall into four categories:

Pre-emptive discouragement

Shopping is supposed to be an enjoyable experience. But for many, there is a creeping sense of discouragement to the process, which often manifests as anticipated regret.

Anticipated regret is the feeling that you're going to regret purchasing something before you even hit the checkout – and it's exacerbated by choice paralysis.

Best case scenario when there's anticipated regret in the mix? The purchase pathway is begrudgingly walked by the consumer. The worst case? They give up entirely.

Uncertainty

Do I trust this product? Do I trust these sparkling reviews? What if it's cheaper elsewhere? What if I *do* buy it and then see something much better moments later?

Uncertainty is a product of having too much choice. It not only leads people to struggle to make a final purchasing decision, but also to doubt the choices that they do make. Not exactly the shopping experience that dreams are made of.

Increased cognitive burden

Information overload can fill people to a bursting point. They've got to consider a handful of criteria (price, features and popularity, for example) across thousands of products and shopfronts, all packaged and marketed with a cacophony of statistics and features and messaging and promises – and end up with "the right choice".

A tall ask? It can sure feel like it. It's no wonder increased cognitive burden makes consumers feel like just giving up.

An empty shopping cart

The final symptom of purchase paralysis shows up on the earnings sheet.

Reduced buying activity is the result of customers feeling overwhelmed by the multitude of ways they can be overloaded by shopping the infinite aisle. And who's to blame them?

But, there's some really good news:

If you're a business, you can actually do something about it. And it begins – and ends – with trust.

A paralysis worth curing

Pretty much any business online, minus one or two monoliths, end up feeling the run-down effects of purchase paralysis. But those that face up to the problem and proactively work on helping dazed customers navigate the endless online aisles – they stand to reap *enormous* benefits.

There's a real opportunity here for companies to help create a *confident buying experience* that kickstarts a cycle of rewards for companies and consumers alike.

So, what's the solution?

The antidote to paralysis

Curing purchase paralysis is all about leveraging trust.

(Yeah, we know, a company called Trustpilot recommending trust as the solution to this huge ecommerce problem. Believe me, we've heard it all before.

But trust is bigger than us – it's a central, core tenet to everything businesses should aim to embody. It's deeply involved in the consumer shopping experience in so many ways, from trusting promotional information, to the quality of the goods, to the level of customer support, all the way to customer aftercare.

And when companies leverage trust in the right way, *it unlocks an entirely new purchase path:* ***The trust-powered purchase journey.***

The trust-powered purchase journey

The trust-powered purchase journey is an alternate buying path that revolves around a singular element: trusted, independent reviews.

It's characterized by three different stages:

1. Increasing purchase confidence

It's the uncertainty of the infinite aisle that often slams the door on a consumer purchase.

And that uncertainty stems from not knowing exactly where to begin when you set out to buy a product.

By building a central resource of verified, trustworthy reviews, it's a little like putting the guide rails up at the bowling alley. There's something that keeps you on track and avoids you dropping into the gutter to face disappointment.

This results then in an increase in consumer purchase confidence and trust as they're steered by the trustworthy voices of other buyers. Conversion will increase, the bottom line improves and they are more engaged with your business as a result. But these elements don't happen in a vacuum, which leads us to…

2. Collecting five-star customer insight

Imagine you are browsing to buy a new bicycle, but you're unsure of where your money is best spent. Wait! You spot a site that features unfiltered, verified reviews from real buyers – and that convinces you to make the purchase.

You buy the bike. You *love* the bike.

Pleased with the purchase, you remember how useful the customer feedback and reviews were in making your decision; third-party validation means you're not on your own while journeying online, but following those that have carved a trail before. So you contribute your own feedback, knowing you'll be helping the next person.

(Of course, this additional engagement works both ways. You might think the product is disappointing, but again, you'll want to feedback to possible customers following your lead – 'here be danger'.)

Additionally, the bike company has now created a feedback loop whereby they are getting detailed and interesting feedback on their models. A trend within customer feedback is telling them that their feet keep slipping from the pedals? That's solid gold for the product team, to iterate and continuously improve your offering.

It amounts to raw, organic, Grade-A *insight* straight from the source, which leads to…
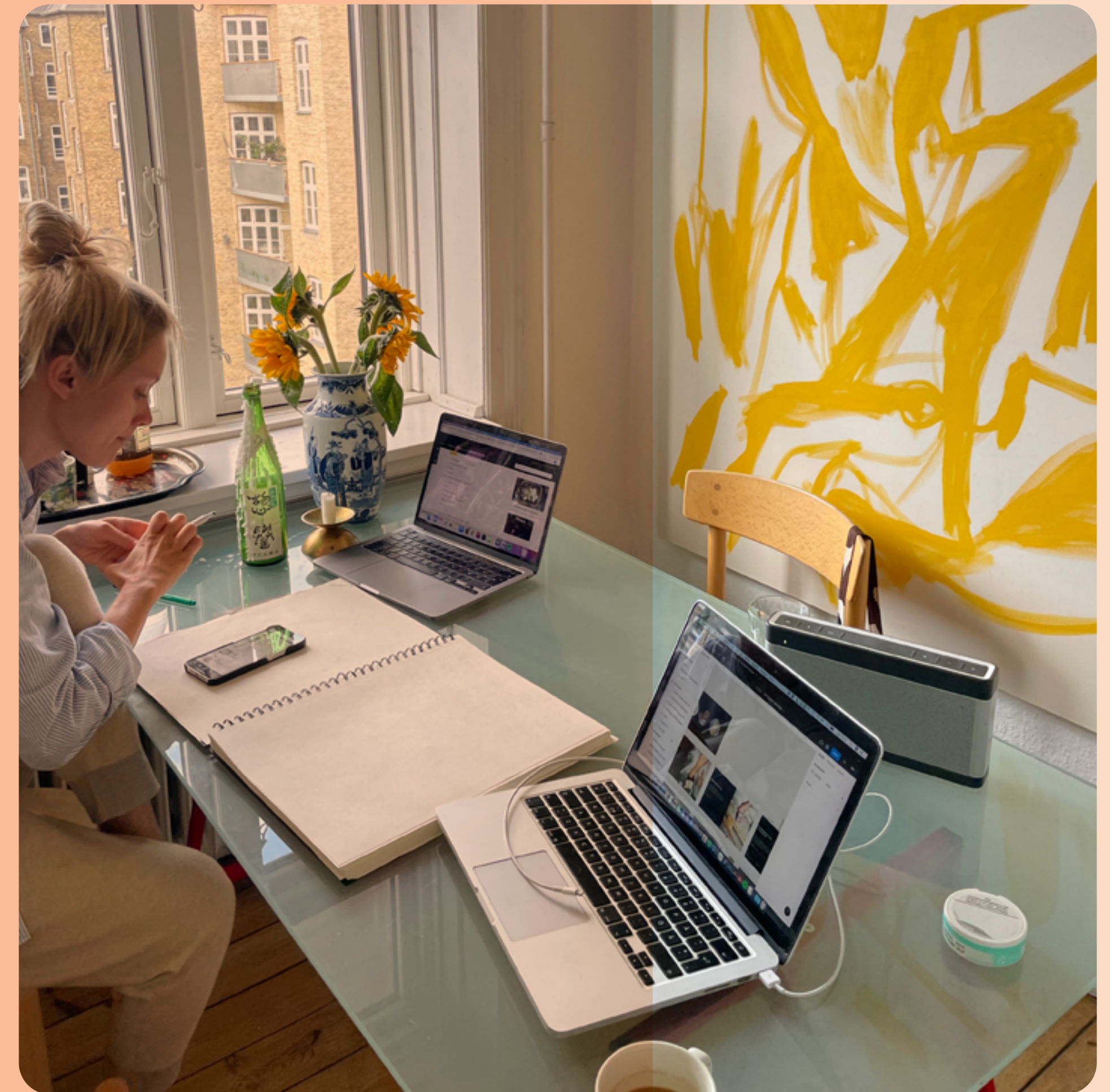
The trust-powered purchase journey

3. Smarter growth

Armed with a verified collection of reviews, you open lines of communication with customers. Their feedback gets captured at a rate you haven't seen before, which can help your business *thrive.*

That insight helps you make better decisions, which helps you make better products/services. That, in turn, will show up your metrics – everything from CSAT to NPS improves with a more responsive, listening-and-learn approach.
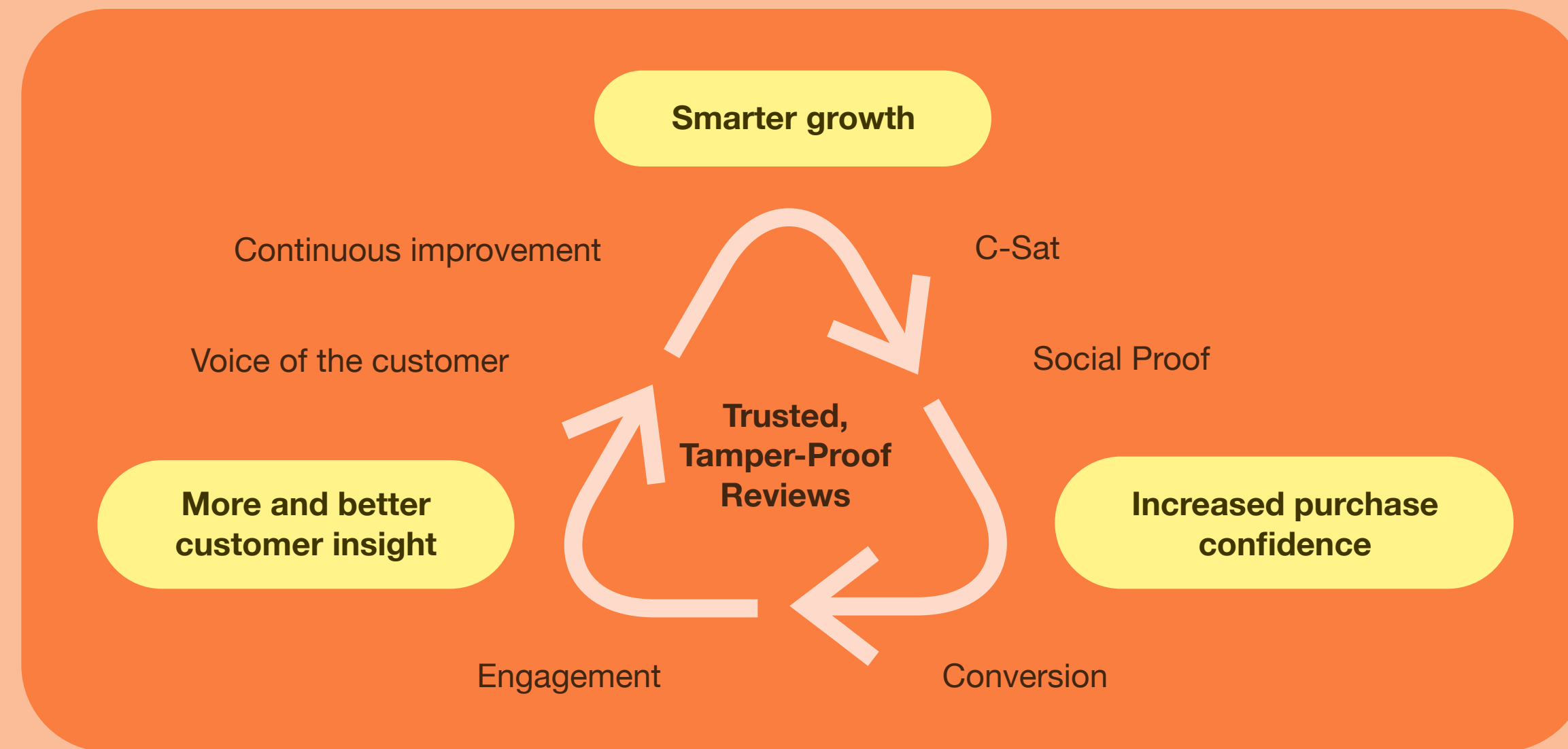
Trust has earned you insight, and that in turn has strengthened your business. Not a bad return.

And your happy customers and five-star reviews? Shout about them! Social proof from trustworthy sources can tip people towards… (here it comes again)… increased purchase confidence.

And here's where the cycle of the trust-powered journey comes full circle. Businesses that gain momentum on it will see the returns feed into each aspect, again and again. Here's what it looks like in sync:

It's all powered by trusted, independent reviews.

One little thing though. What does a trusted, independent review actually *mean?*

[Diagram]

Smarter growth

Continuous improvement

C-Sat

Voice of the customer

Social Proof

Trusted, Tamper-Proof Reviews

More and better customer insight

Increased purchase confidence

Engagement

Conversion

The anatomy of a trusted review

Without a system of reviews that can be trusted, the entire cycle and trust-powered pathway crumble away into nothingness. It wasn't always like this; but as the opportunities to sell online have grown, so have the sophistication of those looking to make a quick buck. Fake reviews, non-existent logistics and even entire phantom businesses have emphasized the importance of trust to consumers.

The easiest way to ensure that reviews are trustworthy is to look for a 3rd party platform that acts as an aggregator of real experiences – positive and negative.

These review platforms aren't all built the same though, so for now, let's explore the journey of a Trustpilot review to showcase how we bake trust into what we do, letting businesses and consumers operate confidently.

Asked or offered?

One of the most widespread issues with review platforms for businesses is that many operate via an 'invite' scheme, whereby reviews are only solicited by sending out requests to customers that have purchased. Great, if not for the elephant in the room: that businesses may well trend towards only sending out review invites to customers they know have had no problems and enjoy the product.

The review platforms themselves should be arranged to keep consumer trust as a priority against this issue; marking and highlighting any of these practices that they see.

Reviews should be elicited through both direct invites, and also an open platform. Businesses would do well to remember that it's a rare consumer that doesn't view 100% sparkling 5-star reviews with some suspicion, so a wider invitation of honest feedback stands businesses in better stead long-term.

Timeliness

"Love this couch – super comfy and fast delivery!" – Beth, February 1998.

Timeliness is important for consumers. It often doesn't take long for a businesses' fortunes to change for good or bad, and so the priority for both ordering and weighting reviews needs to be towards the most recent.

Timeliness also makes a big difference in getting reviews up and online. They need to be checked by fraud-detection software to begin with, but then up and into the public sphere as early as possible. Fast uploads mean that reviews are delivering value to others as soon as possible, and are visible and contactable by the business in question if necessary.

The anatomy of a trusted review

Multi-levelled review assessment

It's true that people looking to cheat the system often are only constrained by the amount of hours in the day. It can be a full time job keeping up with new and subtle ways that fake reviews can be sneaked onto review platforms. So… make it a full time job.

The best of review platforms use a combination of constantly-iterative fraud software, specialist teams and community flagging to triple-lock trust into reviews. If bad actors slip through one net, then the next one will snare them, bringing a little more peace of mind to all.

Verification values

Verification is a double-edged sword. Once on hand it can be used to make it slightly more difficult on some platforms to get your experience heard without a bunch of evidence.

Get it right and it's another string to your bow of reassurance.

Verification shouldn't preclude customers from being able to post their reviews, but instead, it can be used to further boost the validity of those that can. Whether it's evidence of dealing with a business or using a businesses' invite link, reviews should be marked so that you know precisely where they are coming from.

The same applies for businesses too, with even more emphasis. A review profile needs proof that it is being run by a genuine business – cutting off another route for malicious use of the platform.

Transparent processes

Review platforms can often fall into the trap of kicking their proverbial dirty laundry under the bed out of embarrassment.

While the sentiment might be to keep people from seeing what they shouldn't, this can complicate the review process if a review is flagged as having an issue. It's difficult to trust a platform that makes you feel as if anything they or a business don't quite like will be taken down and sent off for interrogation.

Yes, of course, personally identifiable information and harmful/offensive material should be taken offline as soon as possible, but just some validity queries or questions that arise? Those should stay live to give a reassurance of transparency, marked that they are being questioned. Customers therefore know that if they write something that the business has questions about, they won't be ushered out of sight to not influence others.

Communicate and update

A review of a business isn't a static thing; we don't want to see businesses blow a singular chance with a customer and then leave it at that.

A smart review policy is to allow public communication between a business and a reviewing customer. The good, bad or indifferent should all have the option for a business to get in touch and aid the customer in any way that they can.

And reviews need to reflect those conversations too, with the ability to be updated as issues are resolved, feedback is reflected upon and businesses complete the customer journey post-review.

Shifting towards a better buying journey

Through this piece, we've consistently reflected on how the internet has enveloped shopping, initially in order to free it, but then to inadvertently make life more difficult for consumers.

With great choice comes great responsibility, and reviews present themselves as the natural antidote to those shoppers that find themselves frozen in place, miserable and ready to give up.

But moving away from end consumer woes, there is also a huge opportunity for businesses, elbow-to-elbow with one another in the digital market, to differentiate themselves. Why? Even the most jaded of purchasers live in hope that there are trustworthy businesses and platforms out there that will steer them in the right direction.

For businesses that can give this helping hand to their potential customers by embracing transparent, truthful reviewing practices, the sky's the limit.

It's that ethos which powers everything we have set out to do at Trustpilot; on one hand, giving consumers a trustworthy, universal resource to steer them through the online aisles. And on the other, giving businesses the approach and toolset to set them ahead of the competition through radical transparency.

So come along for the journey, as we look to scrub mistrust from the digital shopping experience. For good.

There's no better way to explore Trustpilot than getting started with a free demo. Want to learn more first?
Visit business.trustpilot.com

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Trustpilot was founded in 2007 with a vision to create an independent currency of trust. A digital platform that brings businesses and consumers together to foster trust and inspire collaboration, we are free to use, open to everybody, and built on transparency.

Trustpilot hosts reviews to help consumers shop with confidence and deliver rich insights to help businesses improve the experience they offer. The more consumers use our platform and share their own opinions, the richer the insights we offer businesses, and the more opportunities they have to earn the trust of consumers, from all around the world.

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