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Woman becomes target of bribe on consumer site

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By BYRON HARRIS / WFAA-TV

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If the Internet is a beacon of truth, scammers, crooks and con artists should all be wary of it, right?

Millions of people visit a website called the Rip-off Report every day for information about consumer scams. But a News 8 investigation found that the site itself can be a vehicle for dishonesty.

At her wedding facility in Burleson, Patricia Brast said she tries to give couples who get married at Annabelle Mansion their dream weddings. And according to her, she was succeeding.

"We were doing an average of 30 to 35 weddings a year," she said.

Then came the Rip-off Report, an Internet site that says it uncovers consumer scams.

Brast said she was devastated to find herself described her as "a schizophrenic hillbilly trailer trash bleached blonde." The author wrote under the name "Beenburned2."

Beenburned2 was one of three people who wrote negative comments on Rip-off Reports against Annabelle Mansion, which has been in business for nearly four years.

"This website has taken something that has taken me millions to create and has destroyed it," Brast said.

Brast wrote a rebuttal, which the Rip-off Report encourages on its website. But on Google, the inflammatory headline always comes up near the top of the page when Annabelle Mansion is searched. When someone types in the business name on Google search, "Brides Beware" appears, which could easily push away brides-to-be.

Ed Magedson founded the Rip-off Report 11 years ago. He said he doesn't write the headlines or monitor the content, except for profanity and personal data. He said his staff only verifies the complainants' real names, which are kept confidential, and verifies that they have an actual email address.

"They read them to make sure that somebody is making a complaint about something," Magedson said. "They don't judge. They don't play jury whatsoever."

The complaints against Annabelle Mansion actually contain very little in the way of consumer information. However, a great many derogatory comments are aimed at Brast.

"I just can't believe that in the United States people can assassinate your character and you don't even know who's doing it," Brast said.

But if she felt defamed by the comments on the Rip-off Report, she said she was shocked by what happened next, which she has likened it to extortion.

Brast said she got an e-mail offering to remove her name from the Rip-off Report. A number to call was written in the e-mail.

Magedson said complaints are never removed from his site, unless done so illegally by hackers.

"That's the reason consumers use the Internet today because they want to find information out about an individual or a company before they go out and get screwed," he said.

Brast paid \$499, which her credit card records show. And for awhile, the complaint did disappear. However, it soon popped back up again.

When a second complaint about her came five months later, she paid again. This time she paid \$599.

The e-mail address traces to a post office box in Gallup, New Mexico, which is totally unrelated to the Rip-off Report.

After the second payment, the complaints were still online. Her business, she said, is now a fraction of what it was prior to the posts.

Magedson said a rogue industry has been created promising businesses to remove complaints from the Rip-off Report.

"There are companies that are taking money from people and they're not able to do it," he said.

The Rip-off Report cautions consumers not to believe 100 percent of every complaint on the site.

In her case, Brast said consumers shouldn't believe any of the complaints aimed at her.

It is legal for a website to publish third-party defamatory complaints, even if they're untrue.

But what good does it do? It can be a beginning of a buyer's research.

The Rip-off Report has uncovered many shady businesses, some of the same companies News 8 has independently investigated, over the years. With the Internet, as in commerce, let the reader beware.

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