

Court jails persistent online review fraudster

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An Italian court has jailed a persistent online review fraudster in a ruling hailed by TripAdvisor as a landmark result in one of the first legal cases of its kind.

The Criminal Court of Lecce in southern Italy ruled that writing fake reviews using a false identity constitutes criminal conduct under Italian law.

The owner of an enterprise called PromoSalento, **which sold fake review packages to hospitality businesses in Italy**, was sentenced to nine months in prison and ordered to pay about EUR 8000 (AUD 13,000) in costs and damages.

Paid review fraud – when companies or individuals “sell” fake reviews to business owners – is a violation of the law in many jurisdictions, but this is one of the first cases of enforcement resulting in a criminal conviction,

TripAdvisor vice president and associate general counsel, Brad Young, said: “We see this as a landmark ruling for the Internet. Writing fake reviews has always been fraud, but this is the first time we’ve seen someone sent to jail as a result.

“We invest a lot in fraud prevention and we’re successful at tackling it – since 2015, we’ve put a stop to the activity of more than 60 different paid review companies worldwide. However, we can only do so much alone, which is why we’re eager to collaborate with regulators and law enforcement authorities to support their prosecutions.”

The chairman of UNWTO’s World Committee on Tourism Ethics, Pascal Lamy, commented: “Online reviews play a major role in tourism and consumer purchasing decisions, but it’s important everyone plays by the rules.