

Soap Deceptions to be Exposed by New Product Testing Portal

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A soap bar weighing 10 grams less than it says it does on its label was easily exposed by careful examination.

A Russian product-testing startup, whose goal is to help consumers make educated decisions when buying household goods, has raised about \$1 million and is ready for the official launch later this month.

The Product-test.ru service is similar to the U.S.-based Consumer Reports, and Australian Choice Magazine and the first of its kind in Russia. It has won support from Russian serial business angel Igor Ryabenky and other private investors, and will go live Nov. 26.

The company performs laboratory tests of different products within a category and then employs scientists to interpret the lab reports, before publishing the results online.

For example, when comparing baby foods, the contents are tested for sugar, iron and calcium,

among other things. Testing results often show that it is not the most expensive products that have the best quality, said company co-founder Almaz Ayupov.

The laboratory tests also revealed that some products do not match the description on their label. When comparing different soaps for soapiness, effect on skin and pH levels, Product-test discovered that one particular brand, while rating high on most parameters, actually weighed 10 percent less than what was indicated on the packaging.

"An information source like this will be in high demand on the Russian market," Ryabenky said. "The existing product ratings and product reviews in social networks do not provide constructive and conclusive information about products based on independent tests."

The service will help consumers to make informed decisions, "not connected to the product's advertizing budget or who wrote the reviews," Ryabenky added.

Ayupov said the company uses various market research data to select top selling products for testing. He expects to generate revenue by selling a subscription to the site for about \$10 per year to consumers who have found the service useful and will want regular updates to stay abreast of product reviews.

Alexey Avdei, an executive from Russian online shopping portal Yandex.Market, said that Yandex welcomed the new service.

"According to our observations, every third Yandex.Market user reads product reviews," Avdei said. "Therefore, we work together with websites conducting product tests, and publish their reports in the reviews section on the product page. If the new site has interesting content — we are ready to consider an opportunity to publish it," Avdei added.

Other virtual customer feedback sources welcome the additional source of information.

"Yes, there is a place for a site like this on the Russian market," said Alexander Borisov from Angry Citizen, a consumer support group that voices customer's opinions.

Currently in the Angry Citizen's database there are 230 problems related to low-quality products, Borisov said. Openness and transparency, which are needed to improve customer satisfaction, are only possible when different products within a category can be compared with each other, he added.

While the 79.9-gram bar of soap which was supposed to weigh 90 grams might cast doubt on its manufacturer's trustworthiness, information from the test center that it is comparatively inexpensive and rates high for foaminess may prove useful to customers looking for value.

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