

How to Improve Your Chances of Getting a Good Review

By Cathy Duffy

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I have been reviewing products for the homeschool market since the 1980s, so I have a bit of experience evaluating products and writing reviews. I want to share some suggestions that should help publishers and authors who are seeking positive reviews. In this case, not ALL publicity is helpful.

First, it is important to make a distinction between a review and a consultation. I've had many people ask me to review their products, but I realized quickly that what they really needed was a consultation. If you ask for a consultation, you are asking someone with knowledge of similar products to give you feedback and suggestions about your product, information that will not be shared with anyone else. You will generally pay for a consultation.

In contrast, when you ask for a review, you are asking someone to evaluate your product, with the understanding that that review can be published. You are taking a risk when you ask for a review, so be sure you are ready.

Please don't try to turn a review into a consultation by asking for advice on marketing or other issues.

Here are some of the most important points I want publishers and authors to understand before submitting a product for review.

Be Ready for Prime Time

Don't send a product for review if it's still under development. Exceptions can be made when there will be an ongoing series or more grade levels added in the future, but you should have a substantial product ready for market when you ask for reviews.

I have had requests to review products that did not yet have even one complete course. Some products I have received did not have essential teacher's guides or answer keys. Some web-based products had non-functional navigation or were missing critical instructions. Many products still needed serious editing for grammar and spelling.

When someone asks me to review a brand new product, I now ask for the URL for the website where the product is showcased, because if there's no presence on the internet, the product doesn't exist as far as most homeschoolers are concerned. It doesn't do much good to review a product that people can't find. I have reviewed a few products that are sold only on Amazon, but that's not really enough of a web presence for most products.

First impressions really matter. Even if I get a product for a second look after it's been greatly improved, the first impression has already influenced me. I find myself thinking, "I remember this—the course that had so many spelling errors!" You don't want to make a bad first impression.

All of this leads to my second point.

Be Considerate of the Reviewer's Time

When I've contacted publishers or authors with problems such I've just listed, they are often very appreciative of the feedback, and they say things like, "Please keep jotting down errors as you find them so that we can fix them." Please understand that I am trying to look at the product as a person who is using it, and pausing to record errors breaks my thought process and negatively affects the review. Identifying errors is the job of an editor rather than a reviewer.

During the review process I sometimes send emails asking publishers or authors about issues I've come across. After the third email I've had to write, I've usually lost interest in the product, just like a customer would. If something isn't clear to me, it's not likely to be clear to the homeschool customer. If I have to track down information about critical components and how they fit together or missing information in the instructions, then I'll probably have to mention those issues in my review.

Don't overload the reviewer with too much information since it requires time to weed through it. I have far more products to review than I have time. I am not able to read through lots of promotional material, the author's life history, or the backstory for the product, and I won't read other reviewers' comments before I write my own review. I also can't accept a special, personal walk-through of a product. I need to approach the product just as would any homeschooler. If I can't figure it out on my own, then your potential customers won't be able to either.

Should You Pay for a Review?

I don't charge for reviews, but I am selective about what I review since there are only so many hours in a day and there is a heavy stream of new products vying for the attention of homeschoolers. I am able to monetize my review work through advertising on my website, my mailing list, and affiliate relationships (established only after I've reviewed a product).

I try to write objective reviews for the most part. I will point out negative points only as long as they are outweighed by the positive. However, if negatives outweigh the positives, I usually won't write up a review at all. But you need to be aware that you are risking a negative review when you provide a product for review purposes.

Some people are legitimately concerned that paid reviewers might write positive reviews simply to get paid. While some reviewers charge, I don't criticize that way of operating. Reviewing takes a lot of time, and if the reviewer does not have his or her own way of monetizing their review work, charging those providing products for review is fair. And it seems to me that most homeschool reviewers who charge

are probably not being paid enough to sway their opinions. I would just advise those seeking reviews to ask questions up front so they understand how the reviewer operates.

Don't Ask for Products to be Returned

A reviewer generally spends quite a bit of time going through a product, and even if you pay for the review, it rarely compensates the reviewer for the time involved. Consider that letting them keep and use the product is a form of compensating them for their time. Of course, Apple doesn't give free iPhones to ALL of their reviewers to keep, and the same applies to high-ticket items for homeschooling. You will have to negotiate with the reviewer if you have an expensive product. My personal policy is that I don't return anything sent for review. Unfortunately, I'm no longer homeschooling and can't actually use hardly any of the products I review. (I've used a few with my grandchildren, but they've already got more products than they can use.) Nevertheless, I do not have time to package and return products I have reviewed, and I don't want to have to keep track of which ones need to be returned and which ones don't.

I keep a huge library of products so that I can compare new editions to previous editions—a huge timesaver! But I also pass on products to other homeschooling families at no cost. I don't think that reviewers should be reselling products received for review. Publishers and authors might want to clarify with the reviewer what happens to the product after review.

In Conclusion...

I love discovering great new products and letting homeschoolers know about them. If publishers and authors can present products for review when they are truly ready for prime time, it makes my task easier and improves the likelihood that you will get a positive review.