

To Gaia Group HK, Wang Jia Sha, Greyhound Cafe, Glasshouse, and Isola Bar & Grill:

Recently I was contacted by Mansha at The SWAH Communications, which I am lead to believe is a public relations firm you employ. I was offered the opportunity to try one or more of your restaurants with a redemption letter or a cash coupon. The offer said that “After tasting, we may need your sincere support in writing a review for each of the tasted restaurant in openrice & personal blog.” I have received similar offers before and I interpreted “sincere” as it has been meant in those offers, as meaning **sincere**, i.e. my honest opinion.

To be clear, I have been given vouchers and offers and free drinks to go to restaurants. I have been asked to review those restaurants, but I have never been required to review them, required to agree to review them, or required to agree to give a positive review of them as a conditions of receiving the offers and vouchers and free drinks. I understood that there were difficult ethical issues involved, and I am still navigating best practices in such situations.

But I was severely mistaken in assuming that The SWAH Communications wished for my sincere opinion of any of your restaurants. It was made clear to me that my sincerely held views were neither expected nor even acceptable. In responding to the offer, I was given several “guidelines,” and it was stated explicitly that I needed to “agree” to the guidelines to receive the offer. Some of the guidelines were innocuous, several were presumptuous, but one stands out among the rest as particularly morally depraved. Guideline 4 was: “On your Openrice account, please check the happy smiley face and do not check any box under the ‘special offer’ category.”

To be clear, I was asked to agree, in advance of having visited a restaurant or tasted its food, that I would rate it “smiley”—good—the highest rating, the one used most visibly in the OpenRice interface. Furthermore, I was asked not to tell the truth (that I had received a special offer) and to lie by admission by failing to say that I had.

While I cannot be sure that Gaia Group was fully aware of the methods employed by The SWAH Communications, it is guilty either of complicity with such tactics or at least of a lack of due diligence in determining the scruples of the companies it does business with.

It would be wrong for me to agree to say that I liked a restaurant without having even been there. The fact that I subsequently went there would not mitigate this wrongness. Even if I subsequently liked the food, this would not change the fact that my endorsement was not mine, that it was paid for and negotiated in advance, that it did not causally depend on the quality of the meal or the experience. And the fact that the payment is in food and drink does not make it less a payment.

Such paid reviews are common. You can pay for Twitter followers or Facebook “likes.” It is both dishonest and crude: savvy individuals can suss out the truth. Highly lucrative operations, like those Gaia Group runs, can afford to pay for a higher level of dishonesty that is less crude. You can pay **trusted** reviewers for positive reviews. It saddens me to think that some have probably accepted their 30 pieces of silver for such a task. But I won’t.

It would be wrong for me to agree to not say that I received a special offer, when I in fact did receive such an offer. Lying may sometimes be permissible, but it is not permissible to present a claim as being from a third-party advocate when it is really a claim bought and paid for by one of the interested parties. I’m not Malcolm Gladwell.

It offends morality to ask me to agree to such terms. It would be wrong for me to say and do the things your PR company asks me to say and do, but it is also wrong for them to ask me to say and do those things. The contractor of a contract killer is still morally culpable. The SWAH Communications is culpable, and Gaia Group as well for hiring them for such purposes.

It is offensive in multiple respects to ask me to agree to such terms. First, it offends against the moral law, as I have indicated. But additionally, it offends me that I am thought so little of. That it is presumed that I would abandon all scruple, that I lack any moral compass, that free food is a coin valuable enough to buy my voice.

Finally, there is a deeper way in which fake reviews are insidious. I have spent countless hours of my life writing for OpenRice. I don't have any stake in their business, though my free labor profits them. I do so because I believe I am paid back fully for my labor. When there is a critical mass of people sharing their sincere reviews of restaurants, that puts me in a position to critically evaluate which restaurants will serve and meet my needs. This saves me countless hours, and nets me great amounts of dining pleasure, as compared with some haphazard restaurant-sampling procedure. But the entire edifice is founded on trust. If all the reviews are simply paid advertisements, then they are as informative as a billboard. And I wouldn't spend countless hours of my life for the sake of a billboard.

Allow me an analogy. I'm a professor. I'm saddened by the fact that my students' degrees are not worth what they should be. If you look at the quality of faculty and instruction, HK degrees should be worth a lot. But they are not because of both the high prevalence and the high perceived prevalence of cheaters. Even good, morally upstanding students are harmed by the presence of morally bankrupt students: though their education is excellent and their character unimpeachable, no one can know that this is so. They are harmed financially, and in terms of life opportunities. The same principle applies in food reviews: the presence of cheaters cheapens the entire affair. Even trusted reviewers can't be trusted because these are exactly the people that The SWAH Communications targets. Actually good restaurants are harmed by your forgeries. You wrong everyone with your behavior.

I worry, perhaps in vain, that you will take me to be angling for more or better free food, instead of actually chastising you. I am not. Nothing you do now or in the future will ever redeem my opinion of you. But, if you've read this far (and I doubt it), I will suggest a future course of action that could perhaps redeem your image for other future customers who are not me.

First, extricate yourself from any agreements you may have with The SWAH Communications. I think you have grounds to sue them if you paid them to drum up business honestly, as that is what they have not done (I am not a lawyer and that is not legal advice). I have emails you may use as evidence in such a legal battle, if you wish.

Second, petition OpenRice to remove all reviews for your restaurants that were the result of The SWAH Communications PR stunt. Part of the terms of agreement for their offers were that the reviews be copied and saved by The SWAH, so this shouldn't be hard.

Finally, issue a public statement that you are committed to truth and transparency in reviews of your restaurants, and that you will never engage in the sort of dishonest practices you have until now engaged in, and that you will always take responsibility if the companies you hire do engage in such practices. Some day, that might be enough.

Until then, every moment of silence is damning.

Sincerely,

Michael Johnson

An erstwhile customer, whose respect and business you have lost forever.