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A Bully Finds a Pulpit on the Web

By DAVID SEGAL

SHOPPING online in late July, Clarabelle Rodriguez typed the name of her favorite eyeglass brand into Google's search bar.

In moments, she found the perfect frames — made by a French company called Lafont — on a Web site that looked snazzy and stood at the top of the search results. Not the tippy-top, where the paid ads are found, but under those, on Google's version of the gold-medal podium, where the most relevant and popular site is displayed.

Ms. Rodriguez placed an order for both the Lafonts and a set of doctor-prescribed Ciba Vision contact lenses on that site, DecorMyEyes.com. The total cost was \$361.97.

It was the start of what Ms. Rodriguez would later describe as one of the most maddening and miserable experiences of her life.

The next day, a man named Tony Russo called to say that DecorMyEyes had run out of the Ciba Visions. Pick another brand, he advised a little brusquely.

"I told him that I didn't want another brand," recalls Ms. Rodriguez, who lives in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan. "And I asked for a refund. He got rude, really obnoxious. 'What's the big deal? Choose another brand!'"

With the contacts issue unresolved, her eyeglasses arrived two days later. But the frames appeared to be counterfeits and Ms. Rodriguez, a lifelong fan of Lafont, remembers that even the case seemed fake.

Soon after, she discovered that DecorMyEyes had charged her \$487 — or an extra \$125. When she and Mr. Russo spoke again, she asked about the overcharge and said she would return the frames.

"What the hell am I supposed to do with these glasses?" she recalls Mr. Russo shouting. "I ordered them from France specifically for you!"

"I'm going to contact my credit card company," she told him, "and dispute the charge."

Until that moment, Mr. Russo was merely ornery. Now he erupted.

“Listen, bitch,” he fumed, according to Ms. Rodriguez. “I know your address. I’m one bridge over” — a reference, it turned out, to the company’s office in Brooklyn. Then, she said, he threatened to find her and commit an act of sexual violence too graphic to describe in a newspaper.

Ms. Rodriguez was shaken but undaunted. That day she called Citibank, which administers her [MasterCard](#) account, and after submitting some paperwork, she won a provisional victory. Her \$487 would be refunded as the bank looked into the charge and discussed it with the owner of DecorMyEyes. A final determination, she was told, would take 60 days.

As that two-month deadline approached, Mr. Russo had dropped his claim for the contact lenses he’d never sent. But, she said, he began an increasingly nasty campaign to persuade her to contact Citibank and withdraw her dispute.

“Call me back or I’m going to drag you to small-claims court,” he wrote in an e-mail on Sept. 27. “You have one hour to call me back or I’m filing online.”

A few hours later, Mr. Russo sent details of what appeared to be a lawsuit filed in Brooklyn. It included a hearing date and time, the address of the court, a docket number and a demand for \$1,500, which, the e-mail said, “includes my legal fees.”

Ms. Rodriguez did not respond. A few hours later, Mr. Russo raised the stakes sharply by sending another e-mail, this one with a photograph of the front of the apartment building where she and her fiancé lived.

Then her cellphone started ringing. And ringing. Ms. Rodriguez and her fiancé went to the police station at 1 a.m. to file a complaint.

“At that point,” she says, “I was scared.”

An officer assured her that the police would take the issue seriously. Two days later, she received another e-mail from Mr. Russo. “Close the dispute with the credit card company if you know what’s good for you,” he wrote. “Do the right thing and everyone goes away. I AM WATCHING YOU!”

That same day an e-mail from Citi arrived.

“Thank you for contacting Citi Cards,” it read. “We have closed our investigation since you have indicated that you accept responsibility for this charge.” And there was this: “we have rebilled your account for this charge along with any related fees and interest charges.”

Someone posing as Ms. Rodriguez, she says, had called the bank and said she had changed her mind and no longer wanted a refund.

“I called the bank right away and said: ‘This is nonsense. I never called you and told you I’m withdrawing my dispute,’ ” she says. “I was on the phone with a woman from the fraud department, and it was amazing — she just didn’t care. I asked if they had a recording of the call I’d supposedly made. She said no. When I explained the whole story, she said: ‘Listen, this isn’t our problem. This has nothing to do with us.’ ”

By then, Ms. Rodriguez had learned a lot more about DecorMyEyes on [Get Satisfaction](#), an advocacy Web site where consumers vent en masse.

Dozens of people over the last three years, she found, had nearly identical tales about DecorMyEyes: a purchase gone wrong, followed by phone calls, e-mails and threats, sometimes lasting for months or years.

Occasionally, the owner of DecorMyEyes gave his name to these customers as Stanley Bolds, but the consensus at Get Satisfaction was that he and Tony Russo were the same person. Others dug around a little deeper and decided that both names were fictitious and that the company was actually owned and run by a man named Vitaly Borker.

Today, when reading the dozens of comments about DecorMyEyes, it is hard to decide which one conveys the most outrage. It is easy, though, to choose the most outrageous. It was written by Mr. Russo/Bolds/Borker himself.

“Hello, My name is Stanley with DecorMyEyes.com,” the post began. “I just wanted to let you guys know that the more replies you people post, the more business and the more hits and sales I get. My goal is NEGATIVE advertisement.”

It’s all part of a sales strategy, he said. Online chatter about DecorMyEyes, even furious online chatter, pushed the site higher in Google search results, which led to greater sales. He closed with a sardonic expression of gratitude: “I never had the amount of traffic I have now since my 1st complaint. I am in heaven.”

That would sound like schoolyard taunting but for this fact: The post is two years old. Between then and now, hundreds of additional tirades have been tacked to Get Satisfaction, [ComplaintsBoard.com](#), [ConsumerAffairs.com](#) and sites like them.

Not only has this heap of grievances failed to deter DecorMyEyes, but as Ms. Rodriguez’s all-too-cursory Google search demonstrated, the company can show up in the most coveted place on the Internet’s most powerful site.

Which means the owner of DecorMyEyes might be more than just a combustible bully with a mean streak and a potty mouth. He might also be a pioneer of a new brand of anti-salesmanship — utterly noxious retail — that is facilitated by the quirks and shortcomings of Internet commerce and that tramples long-cherished traditions of customer service, like deference and charm.

Nice? No.

Profitable?

“Very,” says Vitaly Borker, the founder and owner of DecorMyEyes, during the first of several surprisingly unguarded conversations.

“I’ve exploited this opportunity because it works. No matter where they post their negative comments, it helps my return on [investment](#). So I decided, why not use that negativity to my advantage?”

THE World Wide Web handed shoppers a few rounds of new ammo, like a way to compare prices and a big podium for ranting about transactions gone wrong. But it gave retailers some weapons, too, and for years consumers have howled that unscrupulous sellers have used the Internet the way bank robbers use ski masks.

The [Internet Crime Complaint Center](#), or IC3, a partnership between the [F.B.I.](#) and the [National White Collar Crime Center](#), announced two weeks ago that it had received its two millionth complaint since it began in 2000. Consumer losses are estimated at \$1.7 billion.

The story of DecorMyEyes suggests that 15 years after the birth of online commerce, the Internet is still strewn with trap doors, and that when consumers take a tumble, they are pretty much on their own. Mr. Borker is skilled at tunneling under the few obstacles in his way, but he has hardly been hiding. With a few tweaks and added vigilance from an array of companies and public institutions that are supposed to monitor e-commerce thuggery, Mr. Borker’s approach to retail might be impossible to sustain.

But here’s the first question: Is Mr. Borker’s enterprise actually viable now? And the most important question: Is it true, as Mr. Borker says, that Google is unable to distinguish between adulatory buzz and scathing critiques when it scours the digital universe and ranks the best and the brightest?

A call to Google was returned by a member of its publicity team, who initially sounded skeptical that a company could leverage online criticism against it for a better position in search results. Any search of “DecorMyEyes” — the name of the company alone — yields

plenty of alarms.

True, but what about people, like Ms. Rodriguez, who search by using brand names, like “Lafont” and “Ciba Vision”?

A crucial factor in Google search results, the spokesman explained, is the number of links from respected and substantial Web sites. The more links that a site has from big and well-regarded sites, the better its chances of turning up high in a search

Web advocacy sites like Get Satisfaction are vast and score high on Google’s augustness scale. The spokesman surfed the Web as he spoke and said he could see scads of links between [RipoffReport.com](#) and DecorMyEyes. But nearly all of those links, as well as those from other consumer sites, were tales of woe and obscenities.

So, again: Can’t Google separate catcalls from huzzahs?

For competitive reasons, Google won’t disclose whether its algorithm includes “sentiment analysis,” which would give points for praise and subtract for denunciations.

Ultimately, the spokesman sidestepped the question of whether utterly noxious retail could yield profits. The best he could do was decline to call Mr. Borker a liar for saying that it did. Then he recommended talking to Danny Sullivan, editor-in-chief of the blog [Search Engine Land](#).

“Google is just cagey about everything,” Mr. Sullivan explains. That, he said, is because the company is perpetually worried that the more it reveals about the vaunted mathematical formula it uses to drive search results, the more people will try to game it. Mr. Sullivan says he does not believe that Google uses sentiment analysis, and he sees potential pitfalls if it were to start.

“If you have a lot of people who hate Obama, for instance, and you decided to rank on love or hate, you might not be able to find the White House and that would be terrible,” he says.

But Google, he adds, doesn’t need sentiment analysis to help people like Clarabelle Rodriguez. It could simply become better at incorporating consumer reviews on the main page of its search results.

The company has already started doing that in other realms of commerce. Today, after you tell Google your ZIP code, a search for “pizza” yields a bunch of links in the middle of the page for pizza joints near you, along with a rating of one through five stars and a link to review sites, like [Yelp](#) and TripAdvisor.

But this feature hasn't yet been rolled out to online commerce.

"They tend to focus on the squeaky wheel," Mr. Sullivan said, and apparently the local business wheel was squeaking louder than the online commerce wheel.

The strange part is that Google is intimately familiar with the rage inspired by DecorMyEyes. If you type the company's name in a Google Shopping search, you'll see a collection of more than 300 reviews, many of them arias sung in the key of livid.

"Robbery!" wrote one reviewer. Another wonders if primates are running the place. Another quotes a DecorMyEyes e-mail to a disgruntled customer which included this pungent adieu: "do you think I would think twice about urinating all over your frame and then returning it? Common."

In short, a Google side stage — Google Shopping — is now hosting a marathon reading of DecorMyEyes horror stories. But those tales aren't even hinted at in the company's premier arena, its main search page.

"It's fair to say," Mr. Sullivan concludes, "that this is a failure on Google's part."

Google is not the only digital enterprise that inadvertently enables Mr. Borker. EBay does, too — by giving Mr. Borker a large and easily available inventory.

DecorMyEyes doesn't stock the merchandise it sells; it simply takes orders, then buys from an assortment of merchandisers, including several on [eBay](#). Then Mr. Borker instructs those sellers to send products to his customers.

The problem, several sellers on eBay say, is that Mr. Borker often wants glasses sent to customer addresses that have not been "confirmed" by PayPal, eBay's online payments system. (Only items sent to confirmed addresses are covered by PayPal's refund system, which assures sellers that they will get their money back if a transaction goes south.)

When sellers decline to ship to one of Mr. Borker's unconfirmed addresses, they say, he has exacted revenge by leaving negative feedback, which can be reputational poison to an eBay business.

"EBay allows you to block certain people from bidding on your merchandise, but when I did that he would just register under a different name," says one seller, who requested anonymity because, as he put it, "I hear the guy is dangerous."

This seller says he spent countless hours on the phone with eBay reps, persuading them to scrub negative feedback left by Mr. Borker, and then urging the site to banish whatever user

name Mr. Borker operated under at the time. But this seller wonders why eBay has never bounced Mr. Borker off the site for good.

“I still live in fear that I’ll sell a pair of glasses and it will be him,” says the seller, “and I won’t know until after the fact.”

VITALY BORKER lives in the Sheepshead Bay neighborhood of Brooklyn, in a large brick house. His welcome mat is emblazoned with a Russian phrase that roughly translates to “go away.”

I am standing on that mat a day after my first conversation with Mr. Borker, a chat that ended abruptly after a few minutes when, as he later told me, his phone died. He didn’t return a follow-up call. But he was easy to find because his address is posted on DecorMyEyes.

A young woman, an assistant with a Russian accent, answers the door. She fetches Mr. Borker, who emerges a minute later — a lean, 30ish man with light hair, about 6 feet 3 inches tall and wearing a T-shirt, sweatpants and a white baseball cap turned backward. Although it’s noon, he rubs his head as if he’s just woken up. With a day’s worth of stubble, he could be an [N.B.A.](#) point guard recuperating from a bender.

“I slept in for the first time in a while,” he says. He looks wary and begs off a request to continue our interview, saying he’s too busy. But as we discuss setting up another time to talk, he invites me in.

“What do you want to know?” he asks.

We sit on a leather sofa on the first floor of the large brick house and home office where he lives with his wife and 2-year-old child. Toys are all over the floor. Workers are noisily drilling nearby, renovating the garage.

Mr. Borker perks up, explaining his business philosophy like a professor unveiling new research, talking at a frenetic pace, tossing in plenty of profanity and ending sentences with “do you understand?” to make sure I’m keeping up. His accent carries a hint of Brooklyn and only the faintest trace of Russia.

“When I fly to Las Vegas I look down and see all these houses,” he starts. “If someone in one of those houses buys from DecorMyEyes and ends up hating the company, it doesn’t matter. All those other houses are filled with people, too, and they will come knocking.”

Selling on the Internet, Mr. Borker says, attracts a new horde of potential customers every

day. For the most part, they don't know anything about DecorMyEyes, and the ones who bother to research the company — well, he doesn't want their money. If you're the type of person who reads consumer reviews, Mr. Borker would rather you shop elsewhere.

"I'm not a salesgirl at [Macy's](#)," is the way he puts it, "following a customer around the store to make sure you're happy."

It's almost painful to say, but Mr. Borker is amusing company. He is sharp and entertaining, although much of the entertainment comes from the way he flouts the conventions of courtesy, which he does with such a perverse flair that it can seem like a kind of performance art.

When he first heard about Get Satisfaction, it was by e-mail from one of the site's employees, who was trying to mediate on behalf of unhappy customers.

"They wrote to me, 'We'd like to talk to you; we should take a proactive approach.'" Mr. Borker sneers and rolls his eyes. "I sent him a photograph of this," he says, raising his middle finger.

He was born in Russia, he reveals, and moved to the United States as a child, although pinning down how old he was when he emigrated proves difficult. His professional career has been varied, to put it mildly.

He attended John Jay College, graduating in 1997, according to the registrar's office. Afterward, he decided to become a cop and says he walked a foot patrol assigned to public housing on Sutter Avenue in Brooklyn. A woman in the verification department for the area where Mr. Borker says he worked had a different story. She says records show that he was a cadet, which means he worked in an office, not in the field.

Regardless, a career with the police wasn't for him, he decided. So he spent six months at a rather unusual computer programming school. The courses were in English, but all the teachers and students were Russian immigrants, he says. You would learn the bare minimum to land a job, and the school would help you fake a résumé filled with previous experience.

"There were a lot of schools like this," he says. "They've all been shut down."

He gravitated to Wall Street and found work at a variety of firms, he says, including [Lehman Brothers](#), where he handled the back end of computer systems for the company's [mutual fund](#) shareholders. But the pay wasn't great, and a friend with a brick-and-mortar eyeglass store invited him to create and run an online version of the place.

In 2006, court documents show, he was sued by several luxury manufacturers, including Chanel, that accused him of peddling counterfeits. In one case, filed by Chloé and Montblanc, the plaintiffs won a \$300,000 settlement against Mr. Borker and two other defendants.

But litigation did little to impede his day job or his online ventures, and for years he worked on Wall Street and ran DecorMyEyes and other sites — which he wouldn't name — at the same time. A few months before Lehman imploded, he says, he quit to focus on Internet sales.

He stumbled upon the upside of rudeness by accident.

“I stopped caring,” he says, and for that he blames customers. They lied and changed their minds in ways that cost him money, he says, and at some point he started telling them off in the bluntest of terms. To his amazement, this seemed to better his standing in certain Google searches, which brought in more sales.

Before this discovery, he'd hired a search optimization company to burnish his site's reputation by writing positive things about DecorMyEyes online. Odious behavior, he realized, worked much better, and it didn't cost him a penny.

“Look,” he says, grabbing an iPad off a small table. He types “Christian Audigier,” the name of a French designer, and “glasses” into Google. DecorMyEyes pops up high on the first page.

“Why am I there?” he asks, sounding both peeved and amazed. “I don't belong there. I actually outrank the designer's own Web site.”

The only explanation, he figures, is online chatter about his appalling ways. He swears that a vast majority of his transactions are amicable, and he is adamant that all of the customers he verbally attacks deserve it.

“Psychos” is his favorite term for these unhappy shoppers, and when they grumble about reporting him to the Better Business Bureau — nearly 300 have done so in the last three years — he urges them to grumble to Get Satisfaction as well.

When online fury about DecorMyEyes drops off, he dreams up new ways to stoke it. He briefly considered fabricating a story that Tony Russo had committed a murder — where he would have posted this story he doesn't say — which he then planned to link anonymously to Get Satisfaction.

Nah, he ultimately decided. Too far.

The only real limit on his antics is imposed by [Visa](#) and MasterCard. If too many customers successfully dispute charges in a given month, he can be tossed out of their networks, he says. Precisely how many of these charge-backs is too many is one of the few business subjects that Mr. Borker deems off the record, but suffice it to say he tracks that figure carefully and dials down the animus if he's nearing his limit. Until the next month arrives, when he dials it back up again.

In other words, Mr. Borker is perfectly capable of minding his manners. And he does so, right now, with every order that comes through a store he runs through [Amazon.com](#)'s affiliate program. (He declines to provide that store's name.) He handles those transactions like a Boy Scout because Amazon doesn't mess around, he says — the company just kicks you off its site if you infuriate customers.

MasterCard does not inspire such fear, and for good reason. Executives there say Mr. Borker was bounced from its system last year for excessive charge-backs, but he simply signed up through a different acquirer, as the [banks](#) used by merchants are known.

How Mr. Borker eluded the many safeguards that MasterCard has in place to prevent exactly such a round trip is a mystery, says Noah J. Hanft, the company's general counsel.

"No system is perfect," he says. "But there are checks and balances to weed out bad apples. Keep in mind, millions of transactions are conducted on our system every day, with 30 million merchants. But if even one of those transactions is unhappy we want to know about it."

MasterCard will look into DecorMyEyes, he adds, which might lead to additional safeguards.

Good luck, says Mr. Borker.

"There is no such thing as shutting someone down on the Internet," he said during our initial telephone interview. "It isn't possible. If Visa and MasterCard ever shut me down, I'd use the name of a friend of mine. Give him 1 percent."

CLARABELLE RODRIGUEZ is a petite woman with the lean physique that comes from running marathons. She was raised in Spain but has lived in New York for a decade and has worked as a speech therapist, among other jobs. She is sitting in her apartment with her fiancé and their French bulldog, which has had surgery and is recuperating in a red Radio Flyer wagon.

Ms. Rodriguez has a meticulous record of all things Russo. Sitting at a table with a laptop, she reads some of his e-mails and plays several saved messages left by him on her phone. It is unmistakably Mr. Borker.

"I'm stubborn," she says when asked about her persistence in the last few months. "I wasn't going to let this guy push me around."

She recounted the days leading up to and immediately after the unhappy resolution of her Citibank dispute, when her cellphone would ring several times a night, often as late as 3 a.m. Whoever was calling would just hang up, and if she didn't answer, no message was left.

"I contacted T-Mobile to let them know I was being harassed," she says, "but they said there was nothing they could do because it was coming from a blocked number."

Soon after, she posted a message on Get Satisfaction urging anyone who'd been scammed by DecorMyEyes to get in touch via e-mail. Her goal was to buttress her case against the company by forwarding complaints of other consumers to the authorities.

"You must be prepared to sign an affidavit if contacted by a detective," she wrote on the site.

This angered Mr. Russo, and he let Ms. Rodriguez know it. She received an e-mail from him that promised, in a vague but creepy way, that she would end up on the evening news. Another read, in part, "you put your hand in fire. Now it's time to get burned."

Those e-mails left her trembling.

"This might sound like exaggeration, but I feared for my life," she says. "I was actually looking over my shoulder when I left my apartment. Because I had no idea what he was capable of. Psychologically, he had gotten to me."

Back she went to the police. Again, they were empathetic, but, she says, they told her that they were still trying to build a case.

"I wanted them to know," she says, "that if anything were to happen to me, they were responsible."

FOR months, Mr. Borker and Ms. Rodriguez were essentially working opposite sides of the Internet. He operated in the seams and cracks of the Web's underbelly, while she was pleading for help with what is supposed to be the Web's protective layer: a variety of corporations and law enforcement entities that could have intervened.

None did. Not [Hostek.com](http://www.hostek.com), which provides DecorMyEyes' Web hosting service. She wrote to

the company and asked why it would associate with an online seller that has mistreated so many consumers.

She never heard back. More recently, Brian Anderson, the Hostek chief executive, replied to an e-mail request for an interview. He wrote that his company was recently made aware of some of Mr. Borker's business practices and had already told him that it planned to sever ties. On Wednesday, Mr. Anderson wrote to confirm that those ties had been severed.

When contacted by a reporter, a [Citigroup](#) spokeswoman, Janis Tarter, sounded mortified by the treatment that Ms. Rodriguez says she received from the bank. Ms. Tarter said a representative would get in touch with her.

"Naturally, our customers are not responsible for any charges that they have not made or that were not authorized by them," Ms. Tarter wrote in an e-mail.

Two weeks ago, a Citibank representative called Ms. Rodriguez and said that her refund would be restored. Ms. Rodriguez said no apology was offered.

After looking into DecorMyEyes, MasterCard said that Mr. Borker has once again been ejected from its system and this time has been placed on a special list that will make it harder for him to get back in. The company is now investigating why Mr. Borker wasn't placed on that list last year.

EBay has conducted its own review and decided to bar Mr. Borker permanently from the site, having found what it called violations of its policies for buyers as well as accounts that were linked to previously suspended accounts.

A company spokesman, John Pluhowski, said eBay had recently started new systems that would make it easier to track abusive buyers.

"We think the tools we put in place in October will facilitate more aggressive monitoring," Mr. Pluhowski said. He went on: "We are taking aggressive action against Mr. Borker and have taken steps to ensure that manufacturers and law enforcement authorities are aware of his practices."

The New York City detective assigned to Ms. Rodriguez's case, whose name — seriously — is Geraldo Rivera, told a reporter last week that he was still building a case and told Ms. Rodriguez that he couldn't arrest Mr. Borker until he had more evidence.

Ms. Rodriguez says she made a handful of calls to the New York State attorney general's office, and she also contacted IC3. She says that she never heard back from IC3, and that

New York authorities got in touch only after she left a message that recounted some of the most graphic threats she'd received. Eventually, she said, she was asked by a lawyer at the attorney general's office to fill out an affidavit.

When a reporter called the attorney general's office last month, a lawyer there declined to comment. Yet the office has apparently been on the case. New York state criminal court records show that Mr. Borker was arrested on Oct. 27, accused of "aggravated harassment" and "stalking" involving Ms. Rodriguez. While Mr. Borker confirmed that he'd been arrested, he played down the charges, contending that the matter had already been dismissed. But a court document sets an arraignment for next month. When asked last week about the arrest, a spokesman for the attorney general's office said he was unaware of it and was unable to verify that it had occurred.

This will not be Mr. Borker's first encounter with the law. About 18 months ago, he says, a detective showed up at his door and arrested him on an accusation of physically threatening a woman who was a customer.

"She must have known somebody who knew somebody," he says, meaning that this is the sort of trouble you encounter only when you cross well-connected people. He says the case was dismissed but contends that since then, he's been careful not to make physical threats against customers — Ms. Rodriguez included.

I mention that sending that photo of her apartment building sounds kind of threatening.

Nothing but an image he copied off of the Web, from Google Earth, Mr. Borker says. He says he sent it to her only to underscore that when it came time to hire a process server to commence litigation, he'd find her. The "hand in fire" threat? Metaphorical, he says. Then again, he acknowledges with a sly grin, if Ms. Rodriguez thought that Tony Russo seemed a little scary, that was fine.

But in his telling of events, he is her victim, not the other way around.

"She's a psycho," he says, adding that she still has the glasses he sent her.

(Untrue, Ms. Rodriguez says.)

Despite the fear he has inspired, Mr. Borker doesn't regard himself as a terror. He prefers to think of himself as the [Howard Stern](#) of online commerce — an outsize character prone to shocking utterances.

Except that Howard Stern doesn't issue threats, I say.

“People overreact,” he pshaws, often because they’re unaccustomed to plain speaking, New York-style. Anyway, he adds, if somebody messes with you, and you mess back, “how is that a threat?”

DURING our initial phone conversation, Mr. Borker described his business as fantastically profitable. At his home, that seems unlikely. He won’t get specific about his annual income, but he tallies the business from the day before: 120 orders, gross revenue of roughly \$20,000, which yielded perhaps \$3,000 in profit, out of which he had to pay his employees — mostly women who answer phones and e-mail, off-site — and advertising.

“I’m doing fine,” he says.

We had moved upstairs by then, to his office, a small room with a computer and walls lined with hundreds of eyeglasses in their cases. These are all returns, he says wearily. Prada, Oliver Peoples, Cartier, Tiffany. Maybe \$500,000 in inventory, he guesses. Each set of eyeglasses represents lost revenue and a brawl. He looks around the room with fatigue and disgust.

Which gets to the real impediment to capitalism, Borker-style, and the reason it is unlikely to catch on: it is physically exhausting. Mr. Borker typically works from about 10 a.m. until 5 the next morning, spending much of that time feuding with unhappy customers. He describes this grueling regimen of confrontation with a heaviness that is enough to make you want to give him a hug.

“I’m sure this is taking a toll on my health,” he complains. “I probably won’t live as long as you.”

Maybe he should find a more mellow job, I suggest — become a shepherd or something.

“I love this,” he counters, brightening. “I like the craziness. This works for me.”

The craziness is essentially a niche that would be impossible without the Internet. Surely nobody, even a guy nourished by antagonism, could handle DecorMyEyes’ steady flow of incensed consumers face to face. In addition, his overhead costs are tiny because, aside from returns, he doesn’t carry inventory. And thanks to Google Earth, he can faux-stalk his customers without leaving his house.

Mr. Borker’s phone rings as we head downstairs.

“Eyewear,” he answers.

It is a friend. Mr. Borker tells the caller that he is busy today and has to go to court in the

evening. He hangs up, then mutters something about a tussle over \$12,000. He shakes his head in aggravation.

“The customer is always right — not here, you understand?” he says, raising his voice. “I hate that phrase — the customer is always right. Why is the merchant always wrong? Can the customer ever be wrong? Is that not possible?”

We say our goodbyes, and I ask him to sit for a photograph. No, too many psychos out there, he explains. Besides, he doesn’t need his face in the newspaper. What he needs is his company’s name visible for all the world to see — and all the search engines to crawl — in the online version of The New York Times. Along with some keywords, of course.

“Just throw in ‘designer eyeglasses,’ ‘designer eyewear’ and a couple different brand names,” he says, “and I’m all set.”

Toby Lyles contributed research.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: December 5, 2010

An article on Nov. 28 about an online merchant who harassed customers in the hope of improving his site’s rank in Google search results referred incorrectly to a response from Google. An e-mail from a company spokesman was sent to The New York Times but, because of a technical problem at The Times, was not delivered. It was not the case that Google’s e-mail “never arrived.”