

Where does blogging end, plugging begin?

New FTC rules, Chevy partnership with 'mommy bloggers' fuel debate.

BY MATTHEW HATHAWAY

mhathaway@post-dispatch.com > 314-340-8121

Consumers researching a product online can find a trove of insightful reviews and revealing complaints. Or, they can get mired in a snake pit of fake blogs, paid testimonials and word-of-mouth campaigns engineered by marketers posing as consumers.

At the center of it all are bloggers, who find themselves being tugged in opposite directions by big business and federal regulators — with each side claiming the other threatens the vitality and independence of the medium.

Just last week, the Mid America Chevy Dealers announced that six area mothers will spend the next month test-driving new vehicles, and the women won't pay a dime. In fact, the dealers will even cover the cost of gas and \$150 in groceries.

The women, all members of the region's so-called "mommy blogger" community, simply need to write about their experiences and share their opinions about the 2010 vehicles on a Chevy promotional site.

See **BLOGGING** • Page A4

Blog visitors looking for unbiased reviews of Chevy's Equinox and Traverse crossover vehicles might scratch their heads. If the women's reports are positive, are they genuine opinion or paid promotion?

Not to worry, says Danielle Smith, who writes ExtraordinaryMommy.com. One of the local bloggers tapped for Chevy's "Mommy Madness" campaign, she said the organizers want the women to pull no punches.

"They actually said to us, 'It's important to be honest,'" said Smith, 36, of O'Fallon, Mo. "If the car breaks down, they want us to write about that!"

Frankness, however, has its

price — if only indirectly.

Each time one of the Chevy bloggers persuades a reader to take a test drive, the mom-bloggers are rewarded with free massages and the chance to win other perks, including a spa weekend.

A shifting line between content and advertising is nothing new. Some lifestyle magazines sell stories and covers; the late Paul Harvey was famous for seamless transitions between reading the news and promoting advertisers on his national radio broadcast.

But the rules seem murkier online, perhaps because a generation of young consumers seem to have developed a knack for ignoring clearly marked ads and sponsored links.

"Claims that can be identified clearly as exuberant are pretty easily identified," said Timothy Keane, the director of the Emerson Ethics Center at St. Louis University's John Cook School of Business.

Creative online marketing is nothing new. In fact, as technology like TiVo and video on demand encourages the most desirable, upper-income demographic to tune out traditional television commercials, marketers consider Internet marketing a priority. And that hasn't escaped notice from federal regulators.

BLOGGING GUIDELINES

This month, the Federal Trade Commission announced a reinterpretation of its product endorsement rules that, in part, targets bloggers and social media users who vouch for companies and products in exchange for payment.

The FTC said bloggers were within their rights to sell content — even favorable reviews — but that they have to disclose to readers that they've been compensated.

If bloggers try to conceal paid endorsement deals, the commission could sue them.

That interpretation was one of several changes to the FTC's "Guides Concerning the Use of





Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising” that the commission announced on Oct. 5. Those guidelines were written in 1980; the new ones become official on Dec. 1.

To many, the commission’s stance smacked of big government control over commerce and free speech.

SLU’s Keane says the controversy falls squarely into the ongoing debate — fueled by the conversation over health care reform — about the government’s role in everyday life.

Indeed, the New York City-based Interactive Advertising Bureau has described the guidelines as an unconstitutional assault on democracy itself. “This expedition from Oceania — that’s the place Big Brother rules — should be worrisome to all Americans,” wrote IAB President Randall Rothenberg last week in an open letter to the commission.

Many bloggers bristled at the FTC’s broad definition of what should be disclosed to readers as compensation, which the commission has said could include sample merchandise or free services.

Karin McAnaney, who writes a blog that tracks upcoming specials at St. Louis-area restaurants, believes that anger is misplaced.

The advertisements that appear on McAnaney’s site — STLMealDeals.blogspot.com — are independently generated by Google. And McAnaney, a proponent of full disclosure by bloggers, intends to keep it that way.

“Consumers should know whether that long blog post they are relying on ... is only a shill that may be glossing over any negatives of the product,” she said. Disclosing a relationship with a company “is no burden at all, but has the benefit of arming the reader with the proper knowledge.”

The FTC has tried to quell bloggers’ fears that the government will sue them over the occasional free meal, a free book or promotional swag.

“We’re not planning on inves-

tigating individual bloggers,” said Mary Engle, the FTC’s associate director of ad practices. “We work in a target-rich environment, so we’re going to focus on the worst violators.”

The commission, she insisted, is much more concerned with the proliferation of websites designed to look like personal blogs that are, in fact, created by marketers to kick-start buzz campaigns or give shady companies the false veneer of consumer satisfaction.

Ultimately, said Keane, it may be the corporate world that develops the most effective methods to oversee and police the product endorsements that appear online.

‘A LITTLE DIRTY’

There’s nothing about the Mommy Madness campaign that seems to violate the FTC guidelines. Bloggers make it clear on their sites that they’re being rewarded for participating.

Smith said she supports the commission’s revised guidelines, and she’d tell her readers what she’s getting from Chevy even if she didn’t have to.

“It seems silly to me that anyone would have a problem with disclosure,” she said.

Even with the disclosure, the Chevy’s courtship of bloggers is part of a troubling trend, said Mike Sweeney, who blogs about beer at STLHops.com.

“When I see stuff like that, I feel a little dirty,” said Sweeney, 30, of Rock Hill. “Things like this are why bloggers sometimes have a bad name.”

Sweeney acknowledges that others could question the independence of his site, which covers the local brewing industry, beer festivals and what’s on tap at area restaurants and bars. There’s no advertising, because Sweeney feared it might make readers question the credibility of the site’s reviews.

But that will change soon,

thanks to Sweeney losing his job as an IT consultant. To make matters more complicated, Sweeney now works part time at the St. Louis Brewery, the maker of Schlafly beer, and he sometimes is hired by restaurants as a consultant to advise them on what beers they should stock.

“The key is disclosure,” he said. “I think readers are OK with everything I do, as long as I’m upfront about it.”

One thing is for certain, said Keane: Product endorsements by bloggers, corporate sanctioned or not, are here to stay. Blogging, said the former Anheuser-Busch executive, has become the new consumer “bible.”

“It meets the need for shallow and fast gratification,” said Keane. Consumers “can look at it quickly and move out. They assume everything in it is true and don’t do any vetting of reality?”

Steve Giegerich of the Post-Dispatch contributed to this report.



Date: Tuesday, October 27, 2009
Location: ST. LOUIS, MO
Circulation (DMA): 240,794 (21)
Type (Frequency): Newspaper (D)
Page: A1,A4
Keyword: Mommy Madness

'MOMMY MADNESS'

As part of its "Mommy Madness" marketing campaign, the Mid America Chevy Dealers offered free gas and groceries and one month's use of a new Chevrolet to six area bloggers. They are also blogging at mommymadnessstl.com.

- Megan Durham, www.halfpinthouse.com
- Emily Braig, peoplewanttofeelmymagic.blogspot.com
- Kim Julian, www.stlmommy.com
- Elaine Mooney, happylaney.blogspot.com
- Colleen Murphy, crazysoccermom.blogspot.com
- Danielle Smith, extraordinarymommy.com