

The company recruited 20 writers whose blogs are widely read in the information technology sector. "We needed a 'geek-to-geek' marketing strategy," explains Marqui CEO Stephen J. King. "We wanted to influence the influencers, and in this world, the geeks are the new high priests." King says the company encouraged the bloggers to write whatever they wanted about the software—positive or negative—and to tell readers about their agreements with Marqui.

But if bloggers belong to a priesthood, it's only because they've taken an implicit vow of sincerity, argued critics of Marqui's program in their own blogs. One of these was Jason Calacanis, founder of Weblogs, a network of technology-focused blogs. "To take money to blog about something—and disclose it or not—works against the public's expectation that blogs are, first and foremost, up-front and honest," Calacanis wrote.

The hullabaloo has brought Marqui exposure, if nothing else. (A Google search

for "Marqui" turns up far more items about the blogging program than about the company's software.) King says he shares critics' general distaste for product placement, but he believes Marqui's paid-blogging program is different. "When a shot in a movie zooms in on a Coke can, I think that's manipulative to the extreme," King says. "But the line between product placement and what we believe we're doing on the blogs is disclosure."

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Most of Marqui's initial bloggers say they consider the work an interesting experiment. Not all of them, however, have re-upped for the program. "I could not tolerate the feeling of having to post to my blog based on a contractual obligation," says Molly Holzschlag, a Web developer who blogs at

www.molly.com. "I realized my blog is something I want to be more spontaneous with; it's the only way I can write to it properly. I also had no passion for the product itself—but I must add that I have great respect for the people at Marqui, as well as their courageous move to try something new."

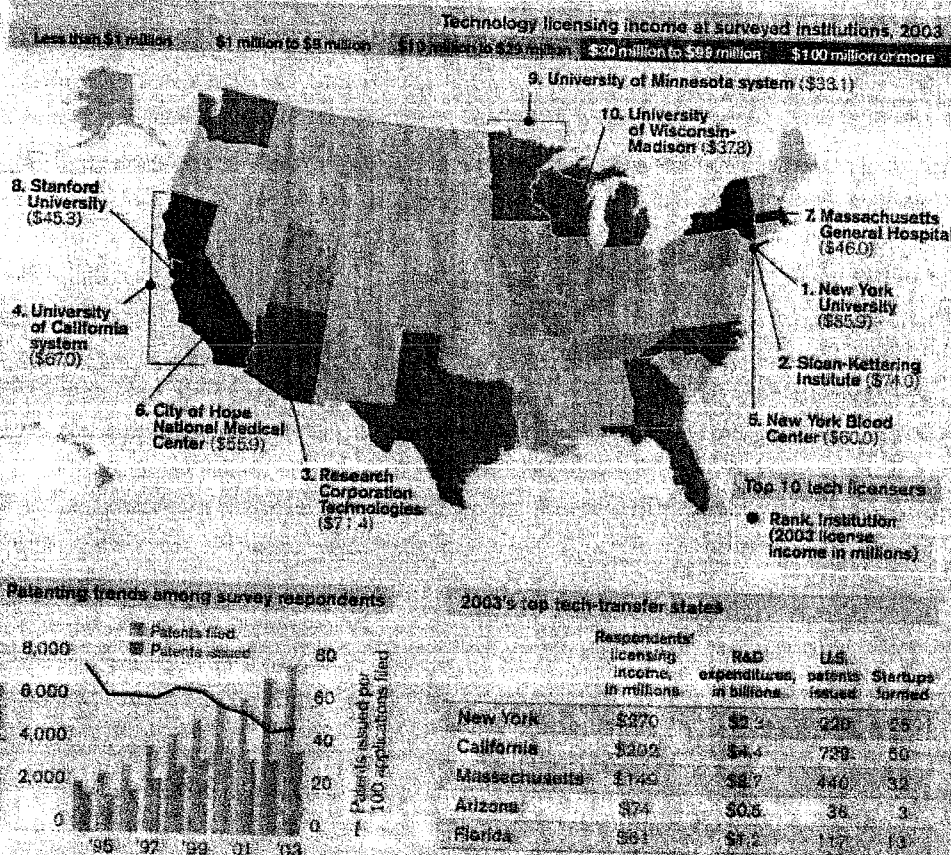
Other companies are trying similar tactics. Finnish cell-phone maker Nokia, for example, recently gave away Nokia 7710 wide-screen smart phones to more than 1,000 "VIPs" around the world, including many bloggers. It's only to be expected that companies will try to exploit blogs as a marketing channel, and that bloggers will face an increasing amount of temptation. Because they're answerable only to their readers—not to editors and publishers, as journalists are—that temptation will be all the greater. The bottom line: readers themselves will have to decide how much commercialism they're willing to swallow as they surf the blogosphere.

Wade Roush

TECH TRANSFER

A Mixed Bag for U.S. Institutions

U.S. academic and nonprofit institutions and technology investment firms that responded to two recent surveys saw their technology licensing revenue grow 7.8 percent between 2002 and 2003, according to the Association of University Technology Managers. The number of patents issued to these institutions also increased, by about 10 percent, but the number of startups they formed dropped from 398 in 2002 to 364 in 2003. Data on all survey respondents for the past 11 years—including irregular participants—show that the number of U.S. patents issued each year, as a proportion of applications filed, is also declining. New York institutions receive the most licensing income, while those in California lead the field in R&D spending, patenting, and startup formation.



SOURCE: ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY TECHNOLOGY MANAGERS