

4. Blogs and Sponsored Conversation

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I almost forgot what I promised to tell you last time, but I remembered just in time. I will continue the story from the previous edition.

“...many blogs, especially blogs popular with women, housewives, etc., are the target of many different companies which are looking for an avenue to promote their product...” Why is a development like that a cause for concern?

In the magazine *Isthmus* an example is the blog called “Domestic Diva”. Conversation on that blog is at risk because of the presence of **sponsored conversation**.

Sponsored conversation refers to a marketing technique which makes use of social media. A company or owner of a product provides cash or commodities in exchange for someone writing about a product or service on a blog, or the company website writes material for the blog directly.

The issue of Domestic Diva began when the writer of the blog missed the opportunity to join the nation-wide meeting of women bloggers, “Blogger” which was held in Chicago in July 2009.

When the writer of the blog missed the conference, she wrote about her feelings about not having attended the Blogger annual meeting in her blog. The Oscar Meyer food company responded in a company blog that they were sorry they had missed the opportunity to meet her as well. That resulted in the company dispatching their Weinermobile, a symbol of the company, to find the woman who was writing the Domestic Diva blog at her home. She was then invited to take a trip in Weinermobile.

Soon after that, she wrote about her experience in the Domestic Diva blog on November 7th. The blog included the passage, “Today was maybe the best day for me. I hardly believe it, but the Oscar Meyer Weinermobile came to my house and took me and my family on a fun trip for the day.”

Isthmus noted that one point the writer of Domestic Diva did not mention for her readers was that her free trip in the Weinermobile was part of an Oscar Meyer marketing plan. The objective was to gain influence among “citizen reporters,” the hot new wave of communicating ideas without restrictions.

The story in Domestic Diva is just one example of behavior which *Isthmus* describes as creating an event so that people will write about it positively. It is a technique of sponsored conversation, a rapidly expanding marketing strategy.

In the case of Domestic Diva and the Oscar Meyer weinermobile, no one realized that it represents an ethical crisis. What should be kept in mind is that compensation such as that might make it difficult for readers to assess the degree of reliability of the material in the blog they are reading.

The lesson learned over there is a good lesson for us to learn as well. Think about it. A sponsored conversation could be used to gain benefits in more complicated situations, such as seeking benefits for specific groups or financial institutions.

Will anyone or anything be able to preserve the balance of information power while traditional media are struggling for survival and having to confront accusations regarding trustworthiness?