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Food companies seek cheap publicity via blogs

By Candice Choi, The Associated Press

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NEW YORK | The "weird, weird meat" inside the steaming bread pocket looked like Band Aid strips, and the cheese was "low rent," "ghetto" and finally compared to government-issue fare.

After reading Abi Jones' review of the turkey and cheese Lean Pockets on her blog about frozen foods, one might think twice before picking up a box at the supermarket. But Nestle SA, maker of Lean Pockets, sent them to Jones despite past pans of its products on her Web site, HeatEatReview.com.

Obsessive Web sites evaluating the newest eats have become must-reads for lovers of every type of food including frozen dinners, potato chips, candy bars and even energy drinks. While the readerships for sites like IAteAPie and Candy Blog are only a few thousand daily, food companies court them as a way to reach an interested audience for the price of shipping a box.

Courting one blog with a couple of thousand daily readers may not have a huge impact, but marketers can easily reach several such blogs with little effort, said Debbie Weil, a corporate blogging consultant based in Washington, D.C.

"Companies are paying attention to the concept of lots and lots of tiny little markets. Added up, it's significant," Weil said.

The single-minded focus of blogs may be in some ways more valuable than traditional marketing since it's easier to cherry-pick an audience, said Daniel Taylor, a senior analyst of digital advertising and marketing for the Yankee Group.

Blogs like HeatEatReview usually spring from personal obsessions. Jones, for example, started her site after nuking countless frozen meals for lunch at the office. Comparing notes with co-workers, she realized there were no resources for people interested in learning about the newest products in the freezer aisle.

Now a designer of user experience for Web sites and computer applications, Jones still tests and rates frozen foods for fun. The site, which gets about 2,000 visitors daily, provides her with a side income from advertising, but not enough to live on.

The proliferation of many food review sites also shows consumers are more likely to turn to the Web before making a purchase, even if the item in question is a 69 cent bag of chips. There's no way to tell exactly how many food review sites there are, but the blogosphere has grown exponentially in the past few years.

And since blogs convey a sense of community, bloggers and experts say readers are more likely to trust their recommendations over a TV ad.

"[Food blogs] may not have the mass reach, but it's a more engaged, specific audience," said Greg Zimprich, a spokesman for General Mills Inc. "Their readers are going to care a lot more about a product of ours."

The Minneapolis-based food giant tracks dozens of small blogs devoted to rating foods. Most don't get more than a couple of thousand daily visits, but General Mills nevertheless sends off its cereal bars, soups and other packaged foods in hopes of a mention.

Keeping track of popular blogs is part of the job for nearly all the company's public relations officers, who use online services like Google alerts, BlogPulse and Technorati to track brand mentions. The blogs are often among the top links returned in online searches for certain brands or categories.

Tanya Taylor knows her blog about healthy foods is on the radar of major companies when they start sending her products unsolicited. When she gave the new Honey Bunches of Oats with Strawberries a good review, representatives of cereal maker Post contacted her saying they'd soon send along a chocolate version for review. Her site, IAteAPie.net, gets about 3,000 daily visits.

Like many other bloggers, Taylor usually notes when a company sends her free samples. Since the site isn't her primary source of income, Taylor doesn't think accepting samples worth a few dollars will sway her opinion.

To generate buzz for its new hot cereals, Amy's Kitchen recently shipped out samples to several bloggers before the item hit supermarket shelves. The organic food maker was subsequently inundated with e-mails asking where the cereals could be found.

Since Amy's doesn't spend money on national advertising, online word of mouth is critical, said Michelle Erbs, the company's marketing manager.



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Many of the 50 or so sites Amy's tracks are about vegan, gluten-free or vegetarian eating, making the readers ideal targets for the company. Amy's even tweaked its Indian samosa wrap recipe after several of the sites noted they were too dry and when HeatEatReview gave its Pesto Tortellini high marks, Erbs left a comment on the site thanking Jones for the review.

The way any given company reaches out to food blogs varies widely. The Hershey Co. invites bloggers to product launches along with the mainstream media. Kraft Foods Inc., which owns Post, makes it a point to keep blogs aware of all its newest products and even advertises on the **more popular sites** like HungryGirl and **Bite of the Best**, said Sydney Lindner, a company spokeswoman.

Smaller companies, meanwhile, are more likely to reach out personally to bloggers and answer inquiries about ingredients or production. In return, being reviewed could make a bigger difference for new companies seeking to gain exposure.

Bonbonbar, a Los Angeles-based maker of handmade chocolate bars and marshmallows, saw an immediate jump in sales after its chocolate bars were reviewed on Candy Blog.

"A lot of people were buying as a direct result of (blogger Cybele May's) review," said Nina Wanat, the company's founder.

Wanat, a food blogger herself, said even a not-so-favorable review can help business. Loyal readers understand that reviews are based on the blogger's particular tastes, and may want to try a product despite a bad review, Wanat said. The important thing is making people aware that the product is available, she said.

Taylor of IAtAPie agrees.

"The only thing that's worse than a bad review is no review," she said.

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