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FOR A FEE, SOME BLOGS BOOST FIRMS

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Jeff Cutler has never purchased anything from Dot Flowers, but you might think otherwise, reading the Hingham resident's blog.

"No more driving to the corner to buy flowers and hand-deliver them," he wrote on his Web page. "Nope. Now I go online to places like Dot Flowers.com and 1-800-Flowers. I like Dot a little better just because of the personal touch." Dot Flowers's ad agency paid Cutler \$5 this spring to promote the florist and put a link to its website on his blog, or online journal, short for web log. Cutler, who does not disclose the payment on his blog, is one of more than 2,000 bloggers whom marketer USWeb enlisted to hawk products and services. That helped the nascent florist double its sales in the first three months and shoot up near the top of Google's search list, according to USWeb.

Yes, corporate America has discovered the blog and found that the grass-roots medium for supposedly unadulterated opinions is also a powerful marketing tool in a country where about 37 million Americans read these online journals. Even the state of Pennsylvania has joined in, offering free vacations to people who blog on its tourism site.

The blog, in many ways, is the perfect marketing tool: original, personal, and cheap. It has grown popular as advertisers find it harder to capture consumers' attention in a fragmented media market that is making traditional television and newspaper advertising less effective. But despite their foray into advertising, blogs remain an unregulated forum.

With a growing number of businesses using blogs to help promote their products, sometimes in ways that are not very transparent, it is increasingly difficult to discern who or what is behind a blogger's pitch, be it for a museum exhibit or flower company.

Concerns about disclosure have even reached the Federal Election Commission, which is holding hearings this week, in part, to discuss whether to require bloggers to disclose funds they receive from political campaigns. Disclosure became an issue in South Dakota's US Senate race between Tom Daschle and John Thune last year, when the Thune campaign paid two political bloggers to scrutinize Daschle, who was defeated. The compensation did not come to light until campaign finance reports were filed.

"People should be trained to take what they read with a grain of salt," said Cutler, 40, who also was paid to promote credit cards and car insurance on his blog, www.jeffcutler.com. "A person is not spending their time to throw something up on the Internet unless they have an objective or an ulterior motive. For me, it was making a few bucks and disciplining my writing."

For other bloggers, the compensation can be a windfall. Somerville resident Susan **Kaup** received \$2,100 this winter for writing a dozen times about Marqui a Portland, Ore., marketing software company and linking to its website on her blog, www.sooz.com. Though Marqui disclosed it was paying bloggers, **Kaup** did not always mention the compensation on her site.

Blogger Linnea Sheldon, 26, of Worcester, has scored nearly \$200 in complimentary tickets to events around Massachusetts in exchange for writing about them on her blog, www.linneadates.com, which details her dating life.

"There are freebies everywhere that all different people take advantage of," said Sheldon, who usually discloses that she receives free tickets. "It is simply a way of getting the word out."

A growing number of companies are also setting up their own online journals and giving bloggers full-time jobs. Earlier this month, Country Music Television disclosed that had it signed a \$100,000 contract with a

fan of "The Dukes of Hazzard" to blog daily about the show.

Though many companies involved in blogging spend a fraction of their budgets on these promotions, Forrester Research Inc. reported last month that 64 percent of marketers surveyed are interested in advertising in blogs, the highest percentage compared with other emerging interactive channels, such as instant messaging or video on demand.

Marketers say that bloggers are viewed as opinion influencers and trendsetters and that getting them to write about a product or service is an effective way to spread the word. The blogosphere also offers access to a key demographic: young people. According to Forrester, young adults between ages 18 and 24 make up one-quarter of all adult bloggers.

"Blogs are the hottest area online," said John Cate, vice president of national media for Carat Interactive, a marketing firm that recently launched a blogging division in San Francisco. "There's real power to be able to speak to and listen to influencers like bloggers."

The more companies can get bloggers to link to their websites, the higher their sites will appear on Google's search list. Google ranks its listings, in part, on how many Web pages link to a website. So paying \$5 to a few thousand bloggers is a small price for companies such as Dot Flowers to move up closer to the first page of results in a Google search. For that reason, some advertisers joke that blog actually is an acronym for "better listing on Google."

Two weeks after Marqui launched its program to pay bloggers in November, the company's Google results skyrocketed to 278,000 from 2,040. Since then, Marqui, which sells software to automate press releases and brochures, has nearly doubled sales, said spokeswoman Tara Smith.

While Marqui remains open about paying bloggers, not all companies are so forthcoming. Though laws exist to protect consumers from deceptive practices and false advertising in other media outlets, there is no formal oversight in the blogo sphere.

For now, self-regulation rules. "We try to be as ethical as possible," said Ed Shull, chief executive at USWeb, the ad agency that pays bloggers to post about Dot Flowers and other companies. "In our opinion, paying bloggers is no different than Tiger Woods getting money to wear the Nike logo."

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