

Digital Life: Ad-sponsored social media updates may have limits

April 8 2009, By Walin Wong

This Facebook status update is brought to you by Tropicana. This Twitter post is sponsored by Neutrogena. Gotta love their face wash!

Advertising is everywhere and I'm largely used to it, even when it's an automated call to my cell phone or a distracting, full-screen online ad.

But there are limits, and I might be getting there as advertising takes on new forms in social media. The hypothetical examples of sponsored [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) updates are anything but far-fetched.

Last week, I wrote a story about "sponsored conversation," or the practice of compensating bloggers for posting content about a brand. Ted Murphy, the chief executive of Izea, a company that links advertisers to bloggers, told me the future of his field will involve a much larger range of content and people.

"Right now it's been focused on bloggers," Murphy said. "But with Facebook and Twitter and all the other social networks, there are other people that have value they can give to brands. I see a world where there's product inclusion in videos, photos, status updates and whatever else it may be."

Social media marketing is built on the premise that conversing about brands is a natural part of how consumers interact. People who love a product or service will recommend it to their friends and family, creating a word-of-mouth chain that's more trustworthy than any

message conveyed on a billboard or TV commercial. With much of that conversation moving online to [social networking sites](#), marketers are looking to jump in and connect with consumers.

My consumer impulses are pretty healthy, and I've touted products on Twitter without realizing that I was acting as an "ambassador" for those brands. I understand why it makes business sense to formalize the creation of that content.

For example, let's say an ice cream shop sees that I've been posting Twitter updates about how much I love it. We strike an agreement where I receive a coupon every time I write about the store, provided I disclose the compensation and don't post more than once a week. The store gets inexpensive publicity and I get a free cone. Everybody wins, right?

Not so fast. In my ice cream example, my Twitter update is reasonably authentic because my online friends know I'm a longtime fan of the store. But if more businesses start offering incentives for Facebook and Twitter users to promote their brands online, consumers could turn into cheap copywriters and transform Facebook's news feed into a scrolling list of promotions. I've already seen many of my Facebook friends become public "fans" of brands, so it's not hard to see how these loyalties could be incorporated into their status updates.

Bloggers who churn out too many sponsored posts or promote brands that are irrelevant to their audience will lose their readers and credibility. In fact, Murphy prefers that the bloggers in the Izea network publish just one sponsored post out of every 10 posts, lest their site become a "splog."

I'm skeptical that similar safeguards could work on Facebook. If one of my friends were to start posting nothing but sponsored status updates, I probably wouldn't de-friend that person. Instead, I would use Facebook's

filtering tools to keep that friend's updates from appearing in my real-time feed. The friend, none the wiser, could keep posting.

Now let's say more than half of my friends are frequently posting sponsored updates. That would make me quit Facebook altogether. Then no one wins, although you could argue that I've just reclaimed some valuable free time.

The concept of sponsored content on social media sites is still in its infancy, so I'm willing to give marketers and advertisers some leeway as they experiment. But if sites such as Facebook get too friendly with brands, I'll take my conversations offline.

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