

Mom blogs dole out advice -- with corporate backing

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Christine Young pauses from working on her blog, "From Dates to Diapers," to admire a drawing by her son, Ben, 3, at her home in Lincoln, Calif., Wednesday April 22, 2009. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)

(AP) -- Bedtime stories and beloved teddy bears? Snack-time silliness and bath-time hijinks? For "mommy bloggers" across the country, the rules are clear: If it relates to your kid, go ahead and blog about it.

But when Christine Young does it - when she writes, say, about how adorably orange her children's fingers get when they gobble down handfuls of yummy Cheetos - things get a bit more complicated.

Young has, in her words, a "relationship" with Frito-Lay, the maker of Cheetos. She isn't paid a salary, but the perks include free snack food for her family of eight and a recent trip to Los Angeles, complete with

parties and pampering at a ritzy hotel.

Like many mom bloggers, Young originally wrote about [products](#) she bought. Then companies came calling. They asked her, "to test products in exchange for a little bit of buzz on my site," she says, and she happily obliged. Raising six kids, she's grateful for the flow of free products, including a [Nintendo Wii](#) and other pricey items. She hopes to keep them coming.

It's become the standard model for successful parenting blogs: Women review products on their Web sites, sometimes mentioning that they've received the items for free. But products also pop up conversationally, amid anecdotes about family life.

"I try to be very natural with my reviews and when I talk about companies and products," Young says. "I don't want it to look like one big commercial."

Readers flock to these blogs for real opinions from real moms whose lives appear to resemble their own. Marie Hulquest, a mother of two who lives near Boulder, Colo., and Stephanie Joynes, a mother of one in suburban Washington, D.C., say they've bought products specifically because they were recommended by mom bloggers.

But can mothers who have relationships with corporate sponsors, formal or informal, really speak without any agenda about these products, unaffected by the flow of freebies?

The [Federal Trade Commission](#) has begun reviewing their advertising guidelines with mom bloggers in mind.

"Those who are compensated to promote or review a product" on their personal Web sites "are not exempt from the laws governing truthful advertising," said Richard Cleland, the FTC's assistant director of

advertising practices, in a recent statement.

Traditional journalists are expected to refuse freebies to avoid any conflict of interest. Magazines and large parenting Web sites do receive product samples for review. But for an individual woman writing a blog from home, a free shipment of diapers represents a huge savings in her monthly budget. It's hard not to get excited about that.

At CafeMom.com, mothers are invited to join the site's Influencer program. If chosen, they receive products to try out and write about, sharing their thoughts with other moms.

Participants aren't required to say anything positive about the products, says CafeMom marketing executive Laura Fortner. But the experience clearly delights many of them.

Tonya Smith-Baker was chosen three times as an Influencer, once receiving a free HP TouchSmart laptop to review and keep. She was informed each time that her review should be unbiased. Her post about the product, which she said her kids loved, is glowing. The page is filled with exclamation points and smiley emoticons.

Getting something so valuable for free was a fantastic experience, she says, and she'd love to participate in more Influencer giveaways. "I'd never had it happen before," she says of receiving a free computer. "It is just so cool."

Even with lower priced items, there's a clear excitement at receiving something for free. In 31 posts about the Influencer program for Hot Pockets microwavable meals, only one included a mildly negative sentence. It was nestled between words of praise: "The kids loved them," one mom wrote, "me not so fond, but i would buy for the kids!!!"

The rest were effusive comments from those who'd gotten free Hot Pockets or hopeful queries from moms praising Hot Pockets and asking how they, too, could qualify for a free box.

Despite the flow of freebies, mothers say they trust that mom bloggers speak from the heart. "There is a loyalty amongst parents," Joynes says via e-mail, "that we have a duty to each other to be straight about how to spend their hard earned money and whether something is worth it or not."

Beth Feldman, who blogs at RoleMommy.com and has received products and free travel from Frito-Lay and many other companies, says transparency is the key issue. It's crucial, she says, that bloggers reveal their relationships with retailers and make clear which items they've been given for free. Most mom bloggers do just that, she says.

The FTC's commissioners are expected to vote on their new guidelines this summer. In the meantime, the marketing juggernaut continues. Next month, Christine Young will be flown to Nestle's headquarters in Ohio and days later to Disney World.

Lavish gifts baskets, she says, will be waiting in each hotel room.

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