

Stores, brands tap into power of frugal bloggers

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Melissa Garcia poses in her storage shed with some of the products she's obtained, at her home in Edmond, Okla., Monday, June 1, 2009. Garcia pens consumerqueen.com, a blog read by at least 30,000 people each month and by corporate America. (AP Photo)

(AP) -- When Melissa Garcia was frustrated by Old Navy's scanty coupon offerings, she didn't just complain to the store. She vented on a message board tied to her blog consumerqueen.com, which is read by at least 30,000 people each month and now, increasingly, by corporate America.

Within weeks, chatter in the so-called mommy blogosphere led Gap Inc.'s Old Navy to begin issuing coupons several times a week, instead of just once a week.

Moms have always had marketplace muscle, but a new frugality driven by rising joblessness, housing woes and other economic problems has them exercising it like never before with the help of the Internet.

In this recession, their talk online encompasses everything from complaints to advice on coupon clipping, low-budget meals and family finance. But it's not just fellow moms who are following every post: Retailers and consumer product makers are listening, too - and responding.

"We see (moms who blog) as a vital force for our brand strategy," said Gap spokeswoman Louise Callagy. "They are the voice of our customers, and we are working harder to develop and maintain their trust and respond to their feedback."

After picking up chatter on blogs that was advocating layaway purchase plans be restored at its namesake department stores, Sears Holdings Corp. brought them back over the holidays after a two-decade hiatus. And Sears' Kmart chain now accepts online coupons and has launched a Web site called [Kmart.com /coupons](http://Kmart.com/coupons) that makes it easier to find specific deals, in response to chatter on mother-oriented blogs.

Companies and the bloggers themselves are mutually benefiting. Consumer product companies like home appliance maker Frigidaire and Unilever, maker of Suave shampoo, are hoping to enhance their brands by giving free samples of their merchandise to key women bloggers to test and chat about on their sites, though many bloggers say it's essential to disclose such freebies to maintain credibility with readers.

Nevertheless, bloggers who focus on penny pinching are helping broaden spending behavior like doubling up on online coupons because of their large collective audience.

The books, magazines, bulletins, newsletters and neighbors mothers relied on for similar advice during the last deep recession, in the early 1990s, and before didn't bring so many people so much information nearly as fast. Money-saving strategies can spread like lightning.

More than 12 percent of all posts on mom-oriented blogs during March and April included mentions of the economy and saving money, up from 8 percent a year earlier, according to Nielsen Online, which has studied 10,000 parenting blogs.

Meanwhile, traffic to blogs written by mothers and devoted to saving money has exploded. Couponmom.com - cited by Nielsen Online as one of the five most influential of that breed - attracted 972,000 unique visitors in March, five times more than a year earlier, according to Internet research company comScore Media Metrix's latest data. Nielsen ranks mother-oriented blogs by how much chatter they garner, their number of followers on Twitter.com and the number of times consumers link to them from other blogs among other criteria.

"Moms are turning to their new set of online friends and families to make all kinds of purchasing decisions," said Kelley Murray Skoloda, a partner at Ketchum's Global Brand Marketing practice and the author of "Too Busy to Shop." "Women are trusting of women bloggers. They do them a real service without commercial interest."

That's why last summer Wal-Mart Stores Inc. created an online community -elevenmoms.com - on its company Web site that spotlights key women bloggers and pulls together the links to their blogs, including those that focus on frugality like dealseekingmom.com, couponcravings.com, beingfrugal.com and consumerqueen.com.

Wal-Mart says the site fits with it's mantra of saving consumers money. Company spokeswoman Melissa O'Brien said the discounter doesn't pay

the 24 bloggers featured, though it does give them free products for review or for giveaway. O'Brien said the retailer requests that the bloggers reveal such disclosure on their sites.

Fans like Melissa Riegert, in Middletown, Ohio, who started using coupons five months ago, say they've learned from parent-oriented blogs how to save thousands of dollars per year.

"I used to run to the grocery store whenever we needed something. Now, I shop according to what's on sale," said the mother of three. She estimates she's cut her weekly grocery bill in half to \$75 by using double coupons to get freebies, a tip she picked up on moneysavingmom.com, which she reads twice a day. With the money she's saving, Riegert hopes to be debt-free in a few years.

The big audiences and newfound influence have led to opportunity for some of the most prominent bloggers.

Among the most influential mother-oriented blogs Nielsen cites is 5dollar Dinners.com, written by Dayton, Ohio, resident and mother of two Erin Chase, 31, who shares daily tips on how she plans and shops for nutritious \$5 dinners such as homemade vegetarian pizza for her family of four. She just signed a deal with St. Martin's Press to publish a book on the subject.

Consumerqueen.com's Garcia has just started making money through advertising, and Advance Brands LLP's Fast Fixin' has hired her to manage online marketing of its line of frozen foods and to develop a presence on social media sites Twitter and Facebook. Garcia emphasized that she fully discloses on her blog that she works for the brand. She was also one of a handful of mothers who have influential blogs who are receiving big ticket home appliances from Frigidaire so she can test them and blog about them, though she said she will disclose such

freebies.

And she still has some very down-to-Earth tips for getting by without brands, including how to make household products like dryer sheets. (Just cut up kitchen sponges and soak them in two parts water and one part liquid softener.)

"You can get triple the amount of the product for the money by using this recipe" Garcia says.

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