

Social-media deals come with a price: Your public endorsement

December 21 2012, by Katie Humphrey

The deals tempt Karen Gunter just seconds after she opens her Facebook page: 25 percent off at the local department store, 20 percent off at Old Navy, a free drink at Caribou Coffee.

When she clicks the links to claim the [digital coupons](#), she automatically shares the offers with all of her bargain-hunting friends on [Facebook](#).

"I love it," said Gunter, of Champlin, Minn., who compiles deals at CreativeCouponing.com. "Just by 'liking' Facebook pages you can find the deals. It's amazing."

There are plenty of bargains to be had on [social media](#) this holiday season, from discounts at Macy's to coupons for free panties at Victoria's Secret. But there's a catch: By claiming a discount, you end up shilling for the company that offered it.

Collect a coupon from a retailer's Facebook page, and a status update of the transaction will appear in your friends' newsfeeds. "Like" a company, and your endorsement might pop up next to a Facebook ad. [Tweet](#) about a brand - prepare for your message to be retweeted, or repeated to other Twitter users.

While many people are perfectly happy to make electronic endorsements or "share" an offer to save some cash, others balk at becoming part of an advertising campaign and get annoyed with the digital [junk mail](#) invading their social-media channels.

"That's not what people want on their Facebook accounts," said Betsy Anderson, who teaches social media in advertising and public relations at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn.

Social-media users embrace companies that reward followers and build online communities, but not those that just pitch products, Anderson said. That's why retailers have been racing to engage shoppers via social networks.

Some companies lure followers by giving out freebies. Melissa Saigh, 30, was among those chosen for a [Target](#) gift card after she tweeted: "Braving the cold to do a quick grocery run. If you see a hot mess walking around @Target with a toddler... yep, that's me."

She didn't know about the promotion when she tweeted, but gladly received the gift card and plans to spend it on more groceries or gifts.

"It was a nice little Christmas surprise," she said.

Savvy social-[media users](#), many of whom carefully cultivate their online image, also consider what their "likes" say about them.

"If you're more conscious about how you're (perceived), you might be more cautious about what you 'like' or don't 'like,'" said Hyunjoo Im, a University of Minnesota assistant professor who studies retail consumer behavior.

That personal connection is a reason Dan Hylton, 41, from Minneapolis, said he keeps his "likes" and deal-seeking focused on local shops or restaurants. He said he doesn't want to annoy his friends with ads that might not interest them.

"If I'm going to broadcast something and put it out to everybody I know,

I take some pride in the content I'm delivering," he said.

Then, there are the opinions of others.

Sarah Luttman, 33, of Eden Prairie, Minn., and Leah Steidl, 34, of Minneapolis, teased another friend for "liking" Wal-Mart, triggering a slew of ads on their pages. Their friend eventually deleted her "like" of the discount retailer.

Luttman said there are too many retail ads to contend with amid friends' status updates on Facebook. "It feels very spammy," she said.

Luttman and Steidl admit that they are sometimes leery of clicking on ads. Hoaxes have been known to travel quickly on social media, just as they do by email, luring people to give up personal information in exchange for free iPads or other prizes that are too good to be true.

"Most of the time I just skim right over those things - I think they're fake," Steidl said.

Still, Luttman recently shared a Facebook deal offering Target's "friends and fans" a \$10 [gift card](#) if they spend \$50. Steidl might claim the offer, as well.

There's little doubt that such deals are attractive to many consumers, as the ads ricochet around virtual social networks, traveling faster than they ever would have through old-fashioned word-of-mouth.

A recent - and rather intimate - offer of free panties with a purchase from Victoria's Secret was "claimed" and passed around Facebook by nearly 245,000 people within a day.

Gunter, the coupon blogger, said she doesn't mind pitching a company's

product in order to get a deal online. To her, it's the same as handing a coupon to a friend. Except that there are more virtual coupons to go around and less work with clicking instead of clipping.

"It really doesn't bother me," Gunter said. "If I 'like' a deal, I might be helping someone else save money."

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