

Brands Tap Web Elite For Advertorial 2.0

Well-connected bloggers are creating content on behalf of sponsors thirsty for buzz BY BRIAN MORRISSEY bmorrissey@adweek.com

NEW YORK Among the hundreds of journalists at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas this week there are five people producing reams of copy, photos and video about the show, new product demos and press conferences. Unlike the reporters, though, they are popular bloggers in Las Vegas courtesy of Panasonic.

The Panasonic program is one of several undertaken by brands carving out a new take on the old notion of advertorial. Rather than relying on magazines, they are contracting with influential bloggers who bring with them their own powerful distribution networks. Rather than a long-form narrative, content is fit for the Web via blog posts, Twitter updates and YouTube videos. And the key differentiator: instead of dictating the content to lead to a sale, brands typically keep their distance to maintain credibility.

Panasonic wanted to build cachet among Internet influencers for its array of tech products. As part of its "Living in High Definition" push, Panasonic new media consultancy Crayon recruited five bloggers to travel to CES on Panasonic's dime. Panasonic footed the bill for their travel and passes to the event while also loaning them digital video and still cameras. The bloggers, which include popular Internet figures Chris Brogan and Steve Garfield, will also meet with Panasonic executives and preview products. The catch: Panasonic has no say on what

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their guests post, according to Greg Verdino, chief strategy officer at Crayon.

"There's not a direct quid pro quo," said Verdino, who also blogged and Twittered about CES for Panasonic. "When you give people equipment and they love it, just like any other consumer they'll evangelize it. We're not looking for them to hit message points and in effect shill."

The program points to one of the many conundrums for traditional media outlets online: how do they compete with bloggers

who have built up sizeable audiences of their own and are free of ethical constraints placed on traditional journalists.

While such "influencer programs" have raised howls of protest in the past, they are now becoming much more accepted as a way for advertisers to gain access to coveted audiences with content integrations that go beyond typical ad placements relegated to the sidelines.

"When you engage these individuals, you're getting customized ad units," said Ted Murphy, CEO of Izea, a company that marries advertisers with independent content creators.

"It's part of the content." Izea has a controversial past. It started its life as PayPerPost with the idea that advertisers would pay bloggers to write about their products. Its early iterations did not require disclosure by bloggers, which made the company a black sheep for many. Since then, Izea has changed its name and disclosure requirements. It now boasts 25,000 advertisers use its platform, including heavyweights like Microsoft.

The promise of creating influencer buzz lured Kmart to strike a deal with Izea last month. It targeted a half-dozen bloggers, and provided them with \$500 Kmart gift certificates. Kmart required the bloggers write about their experiences at the store on their sites. They were not told what to write, according to Murphy, and each post was labeled as a Kmart sponsorship.

While such programs might give journalism traditionalists the willies, they offer advertisers the chance to tap into the groundswell of Internet buzz. Kmart's program, for instance, allowed each blogger to give away a \$500 store gift card to readers. In order to enter, they had to promote the contest (and Kmart) to their Twitter followers or leave a blog comment with the item they most wanted from Kmart. This was done 3,000 times, yielding 600,000 network connections, according to Izea. It also generated considerable discussion.

"Brands are realizing this stuff is happening with them or without them," said Murphy. "They can be a catalyst for the con-

versation they want to have or only react to what others are saying."

Chas Edwards, chief revenue officer at Federated Media Publishing, believes the reality of digital media means advertisers will need to become publishers. While they can create their own content, they are more likely to both aggregate content from professionals and pay for exclusive content.

FMP, which represents several popular Internet writers, has matched up advertisers like Dell and Microsoft with bloggers.

"American Express's competitors are not just MasterCard and Visa," Edwards said. "It's anybody who might have content that might show up in a Google result for a small-business search."

For that reason, AmEx hooked up with FMP to have Internet notables like author Guy Kawasaki contribute content to an AmEx site to promote its OPEN small business service. Thanks to the popularity of Kawasaki's personal network—he has over 45,000 Twitter followers—his posts gain lots of readers.

For it to work, however, brands need to give up on the notion of control since the old model of advertorial won't work well online, according to Edwards. Kawasaki was only instructed to write something that would appeal to small business owners.

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"We're looking to engage the brand in topics that are important to the brand," said Jordan Bitterman, svp of media, marketing and content at Digitas, which works with AmEx. "They're blogging about topics important to them. They happen to be doing it in places we'd like them to do it."

It's a fine line. FMP ran into trouble in 2007 when it conducted a Microsoft campaign that enlisted top bloggers Om Malik, Fred Wilson and Paul Kedrosky to write for a Microsoft site what being "People Ready" meant for their businesses. The program came under fire online with the bloggers accused of parroting an ad slogan and Microsoft for trying to "buy influence." Malik and Kedrosky apologized for their participation.

"There are certain authors that run the risk of crossing the line with content creation that involves brand names," Edwards said.