



Mommy blogs grow up

by: Gary Rusak

The fifth-annual BlogHer conference held at Chicago's Sheraton and Towers this July may stand as a watershed for the event. Along with a crowd of 1,500 attendees, the conference drew its largest corporate contingent yet. Reps from CP heavyweights such as Disney, [Hasbro](#) and retail behemoth Walmart attended, looking for new ways to reach the influential cadre of mothers who have taken to sharing their thoughts with anyone interested in the trials and tribulations of childrearing - the mommy bloggers. Recognized over the past few years as key influencers of the women who usually control a good chunk of discretionary spend among US families, outreach to mommy blogs is now a standard component of most kids marketers' arsenals. However, as mommy bloggers become more established and influential, the rules for courting this crowd are also changing.

Earning the hype

While it is a messy business to pin actual numbers on what is considered a mommy blog community, there are a few good indicators of how popular the movement is and how powerful they have become in the US. BlogHer, the organizer and programmer of the aforementioned conference, estimates that more than eight million women publish their own blogs. Additionally, the company estimates 40% of US moms read those blogs on a regular basis and 49% rely on them for parenting information. You get the picture.

Moreover, when number-cruncher [Nielsen](#) compiled a 50 Top Power Moms list in May and *Forbes Magazine* has named the top-10 "Mommy 'Hood Gurus" in a given year, it became pretty clear we're not talking about just a few adventurous mothers surfing [YouTube](#) in search of cute kitten videos. Instead what has emerged is a widespread and growing group of influencers and their followers who have money to spend.

To illustrate the popularity of these blogs, it's not necessary to dig too deep. Liz Gumbinner - creator of consumer product review site [CoolMomPicks.com](#), which garners about 130,000 unique hits a month and supports a newsletter with a targeted 25,000 subscribers - was also prominently slotted on the *Forbes* and [Nielsen](#) lists.

"When we first started three years ago, if we got a pitch we were excited," Gumbinner says from her Brooklyn, New York home office. "Now we are approached by Fortune 500 companies, all the packaged goods manufacturers, airlines, apparel manufacturers, you name it. We get 100 pitches a day."

Of course, raw numbers don't tell the whole story. Laura Tomasetti, MD at Boston, Massachusetts-based 360 Public Relations, says the high level of reader engagement with mommy blogs and their ability to draw in specific interest groups (i.e. enviro-conscious moms at [www.greenmom.blogspot.com](#) or techno-savvy moms at

www.geekymom.blogspot.com) makes their marketing potential nothing short of astounding. In fact, Tomasetti has been following the space for about three years and believes it is now getting the attention it deserves from big brands.

"I think it's good that moms are being recognized as players," says Tomasetti. "Beyond the hype, there is certainly legitimacy here." And now that seemingly everyone is recognizing the persuasiveness of these blogs, it's a good bet that marketers are going to have to step up their game to get the attention of blog creators.

Rules of engagement

"Marketers are traditionally bad at conversation, and I think it's why a lot of them are struggling with social media," says Kevin Burke, co-founder of Allentown, New Jersey-based Lucid Marketing. The company specializes in creating marketing programs that target the mom demo.

Tomasetti agrees. "It's more about a discussion than a pitch," she says. "It's more about engaging a network of influencers in a discussion that is content-based."

To wit, Burke describes a successful project that Lucid mapped out to promote Electronic Arts' video game *Boogie*. At its launch in 2007, the family-oriented music title met with lackluster reviews from the traditional gaming community (i.e. fanboys), which harped on what it believed were shortcomings in graphics and sound quality.

"We sent [the game] to 50 mom bloggers and told them to describe the experience they had with it and their families," explains Burke. "We suggested that they write about the idea of bringing back family game night as part of the discussion."

The conversations and online give-and-take grew from there and [the game](#) morphed into a modest success. But perhaps more importantly, the effort taught EA the value of the mommy blogs and how to market products through them.

Similarly, [PBS Kids](#) has been on the blog train for a few years, and has even hosted a number of them on its main website. The US pubcaster has also evolved many ways of engaging the community. Recently, [PBS](#) drew together six different focus groups, each comprised of 15 to 20 well-known US mommy bloggers, to comment on an undisclosed [PBS](#) series.

"We shared all our research with them," says Lesli Rotenberg, SVP of children's media at PBS. "They were in many ways engaged - in fact, they were tweeting during the event itself. The conversation went on beyond the focus groups."

The meetings were so beneficial to the series that Rotenberg envisions bringing the bloggers in during series development in order to help shape the content in its earliest stage.

And for companies without the outreach capacity of a PBS, there are now businesses springing up for the express purpose of introducing companies to bloggers and vice-versa. In July, Boyton Beach, Florida-based entrepreneurs

Michael Conner and Julie Wohlberg launched Sheblogs.org, a site and service designed to help companies reach out to the most influential mom bloggers. The website and newsletter also provides companies with a liaison to relevant blogs.

Fine line

With the BlogHer annual conference set to make the jump to bigger digs in New York City next summer, there is no longer an air of mystery surrounding the community and its potential to bolster the bottom line. However, even recognizing the value of engagement and the power of mommy bloggers, brands and the moms must walk a fine line when it comes to the next step in the relationship.

The basis of the blogs' popularity, and indeed where their power lies, is chiefly in the intimacy and trustworthiness of their core communications. The word-of-mouth potential is only as great as the grassroots authenticity that many of the top bloggers share.

"The women that read them trust them," says Marti Barletta, CEO of Winnetka, Illinois-based The Trend Sight Group and author of the book *Marketing To Women*. "So they can be very influential."

Burke echoes the same sentiment. "They are flipping the media world upside down," he says. "There is a trust between moms and now there are these tools that bring them together...It is a supportive, well-integrated group."

As for über-influencer Gumbinner, she's making sure her blog is never perceived as disingenuous by her readers. While overjoyed to be receiving pitches and products from hundreds of different companies, she senses a danger therein. "I think we have to tread lightly," she says. "The most exciting and valuable thing about blogs is the authenticity of voice, and if we lose that in favor of brand relationships, the truth is we aren't going to be valuable to the brand or our readers anymore." That is why she is concentrating on developing best practices and publicly discussing the pitfalls of being too cozy with brands, as she did on the "Brands and Bloggers" panel at this year's BlogHer conference.