

1 MOMTOURAGE

Estimates of the “mommy blogger” population in the United States range from 1.8 million all the way up to 3.3 million. Their clout doesn’t come just from sheer numbers. Their online discussions of parenting, family and home have created tight-knit, passionate and vocal communities that have the power to alter ingredient lists, simplify packaging and even lower prices.

“The consumer has a lot of power now and they are very connected. In the blogging world, they share information constantly,” said Jill Cataldo, a coupon expert and blogger in Chicago. “It’s a very different place for retailers to be working in.”

Early bloggers commented on a product or retailer from the outside, as a customer. That



is changing as a growing number of retailers directly recruit mommy bloggers. Large operators like Wal-Mart — which launched a moms program in 2008 — have led the way for smaller retailers to do the same thing. Raley’s, the 133-store chain based in West Sacramento, Calif., recently issued an appeal for moms to join its Mom’s World Panel.

“I’m committing to act on your feedback — whether it’s the music we play in store to our newest pizza flavor,” wrote CEO Michael Teel.

In December, Lowes Foods, Winston-Salem, N.C., named two moms to its new

Savvy Shoppers program, which also includes official representatives of the chain.

What’s compelling supermarkets of all sizes to pursue moms? If they were once afraid of criticism, retailers now crave authenticity more, notes Jennifer James, a mommy blogger since 2004 and founder of the Moms Blogger Club.

“It’s a risk companies have to take,” she said. “They have to go where the eyeballs are, and the eyeballs are on the blogs.”

A survey by the Nielsen Co. found that so-called “Power Moms” — age 25-54 with at least one child — represent 20% of the active online population. Their universal concern is saving money. Supermarkets eager to establish their credentials offer them shopping strategies, coupons and other deals.

“Companies can’t generate the kind of influence that we do,” noted James. “Essentially we can tell a company’s story better than they can tell their own.”

Smaller operators and manufacturers have come to realize that a product vetted by moms has a better chance of succeeding on the shelf since it’s already been reviewed, talked about and has undergone any necessary adjustments. Even if moms recruited by supermarkets are under no obligation to toe the company line, stores find the real voice behind the blogs is the most effective advertising of all, and worth the risk.

“Their readers will believe them 10 times quicker than they’ll believe anything the supermarket says,” said James.

— ROBERT VOSBURGH



2 H2O CLEAN

Dry cleaning remains one store service that could, itself, use some spiffing up. As consumers adopt more sustainable practices in their personal lives, they’re looking for the businesses they patronize to do the same.

Such expectations may explain the appearance of “wet cleaning,” a laundering process for fine garments that eliminates dangerous chemicals like perchloroethylene in favor of simple water and biodegradable detergents.

“The cleaning processes are very similar,” noted Brian Johnson, director of training and technical services at the International Fabricare Institute, Silver Spring, Md. “But wet cleaning is different in that the agitation is precisely controlled, and the detergents and chemistry used are different from those used in home laundry machines.”

The IFI estimates that there are only several hundred dedicated wet cleaners currently operating in the United States. Most of those are in California, which in 2007 became the first state to mandate the phasing out of “perc.” In other parts of the country, higher prices can be a barrier. However, as other states tighten their environmental regulations, Johnson anticipates that more of the 30 thousand-plus dry cleaners operating in the country will switch over to less-toxic processes.

“Even regular dry cleaners have increased the number of garments they’re processing in water,” he said. “The trend is more towards water and that will continue to grow.”

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