

## Features

### Social Media Disclosure: The Ethics of Reviews and Recommendations

By Matt Alderton

Sunday, February 5, 2012



In 2007, grocery chain Whole Foods landed in the hot seat when the Federal Trade Commission discovered co-CEO John Mackey had spent seven years trawling Yahoo! Finance's online bulletin boards, publishing more than 1,100 posts in which he praised his company and attacked its rival, Wild Oats. The violation: He posted anonymously. Despite Whole Foods' carefully crafted brand touting ethical food sourcing, this disregard for ethical marketing looked especially bad to bloggers, whose reaction was swift and scathing. Under pressure from industry watchdogs, the company's board of directors temporarily shut down Mackey's blog and launched an investigation. Meanwhile, Mackey was forced to make a public apology.

"Transparency is an important guideline to keep in mind for everything that is done online," says Tiffany Gallicano, PhD, assistant professor of public relations at the University of Oregon. "Hiding relationships is shady, and the truth eventually emerges."

The story serves as a cautionary tale to anyone who publicly recommends products or services: Before you publish, post, tweet or like, familiarize yourself with the rules of engagement.

#### The Truth About Testimonials

"The No. 1 topic that people talk about and share on social media channels is restaurants," according to Paul Rand, immediate past president of the Word of Mouth Marketing Association and founder and CEO of Zócalo Group, a Chicago-based marketing firm. "No. 2 is food. So, where and how people talk about food—and how people should share and talk about it through online channels—is really, really important."

It's so important, in fact, that the FTC decided in 2009 to revise its endorsements and testimonials guidelines to extend longstanding government recommendations about "truth in advertising" in traditional media like television, radio and print to digital and social media. As a result, registered dietitians who are compensated in exchange for reviewing or endorsing products online are now subject to the laws governing truthful advertising.

Joy R. Butler, a Washington, D.C.-based attorney and author of *The Cyber Citizen's Guide Through the Legal Jungle: Internet Law for Your Professional Online Presence* (Sashay Communications 2010), elaborates: "The FTC is particularly concerned by people who receive compensation for posting online reviews, recommendations and endorsements. The FTC reasons that the typical consumer might not realize the new media reviewer received compensation in exchange for the review. Since consumers are inclined to place more confidence in reviews written by completely independent people than in reviews written by people who have received compensation, the FTC wants the reviewer to disclose any compensation."

According to the FTC, compensation can mean not only money, but coupons, samples, gifts and anything else of value. Failure to disclose compensation could result in hefty fines, and although the FTC has promised to pursue action only against advertisers, not endorsers, reviewers should take the government guidelines very seriously.

"Failure to adhere to the guidelines can prompt the FTC to review your online activity and initiate an action against you if it determines your failure to follow the guidelines has resulted in a business practice that deceives or misleads consumers," Butler says.

"If an RD doesn't disclose and it becomes discovered, they immediately lose credibility—and that can be incredibly damaging to the RD's reputation," Rand adds. "If, on the other hand, they clearly and accurately disclose, it actually may end up enhancing their reputations that they were thought of well enough by these brands to be a paid consultant for them."

#### Posting Pros and Cons

RDs shouldn't let FTC guidelines discourage them from being active online endorsers, according to Rand, who says ethical Internet marketing relationships offer RDs the opportunity to earn extra income, promote and learn about products they believe in, and even enhance their professional reputations.

Dallas-based nutrition communications consultant Neva Cochran, MS, RD, LD, who regularly posts on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn on behalf of her corporate clients, says the opportunity to enhance her visibility as a science-based expert is a major draw. "I want to be honest and accurate, and someone who is seen as a reliable source of nutrition information," Cochran says. "It's an opportunity for me to get out positive messages about nutrition, and that's what I do as an RD."

But not everyone agrees. "The only reason there's a special outreach to people in this position is exactly the reason [RDs] shouldn't do it," says Robert Weissman, managing director of *Commercial Alert*, a nonprofit organization whose mission is segregating commercialization from culture, education and government. "What's a great idea for marketers is a terrible idea for health professionals. They're being asked to trade in their trusted relationships for a commercial purpose. If you think a product is great and you're touting it because you've come to that conclusion on your own, that's one thing. But if you're being compensated for doing it, I think that undermines and transgresses the relationship of trust with clients and patients."

#### Digital Dos and Don'ts

Whether one engages in paid relationships with marketers is up to the individual. How one should engage, however, isn't always clear. "It's a moving target as far as what people consider appropriate and not appropriate, and what is a best practice," says Cochran, whose clients have given her different—and sometimes conflicting—recommendations about social media disclosures.

## Social Media Disclosure 101

<b>WHAT TO DISCLOSE</b>	Compensation (cash, coupons, samples or gifts), relationships (professional or personal) and conflicts of interest	
<b>WHERE TO DISCLOSE</b>	In every relevant post you make, regardless of platform (blogs, product review sites, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn or YouTube)	
<b>HOW TO DISCLOSE*</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Personal and editorial blogs</li> <li>Comments in online discussions</li> <li>Status updates on social media</li> </ul>	<p>Write one of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"I received product/sample from company name."</li> <li>"Company name sent me product/sample."</li> <li>"I am a representative of company name."</li> <li>"I was paid by company name."</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Product review websites</li> </ul>	<p>Write one of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"I received product/sample from company name to review."</li> <li>"I was paid by company name to review product/sample."</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Microblogs</li> </ul>	<p>Include one of the following hash tag notations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>#spon (sponsored)</li> <li>#paid (paid)</li> <li>#samp (sample)</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Video sharing websites</li> <li>Photo sharing websites</li> <li>Podcasts</li> </ul>	<p>Include one of the following as part of the photo, video or audio content and as part of the written description:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"I received product/sample from company name."</li> <li>"I was paid by company name."</li> </ul>

\*Source: Word of Mouth Marketing Association

The best way to ensure you're complying with current federal guidelines and best practices is by making sure you work only with credible clients, keeping in mind that product publicity and marketing often are handled by public relations firms—and not all PR playbooks follow the rules. "Being an educated and informed person in this area means you know what your [clients'] obligations are and can determine if they're going to meet them," explains Rand, who says the best way to evaluate a client's credibility is to know the rules and ask appropriate questions to establish that your clients know them, too.

Remember: It's a publicity firm's job to promote a client's brand; it's your job to protect your brand. "It would be a good idea for experts to establish a personal pitch policy that outlines what they're willing to review and the fact that offering compensation or free products does not guarantee a positive review," Gallicano says. "This can help professionals keep their credibility intact."

While the line between "ethical" and "questionable" isn't always clear, RDs can avoid crossing it by keeping the following top of mind:

**Transparency:** Always say who you are—never blog or post anonymously—and where you got your information. "When giving reviews, RDs should consider providing information about what they are basing their opinions on," Gallicano says. "If there are unknowns about a product's safety or significant limitations of supporting studies, this information should be noted."

**Disclosure:** FTC guidelines recommend disclosures in every relevant post, wherever you post it—and a single disclosure on your homepage or bio is not sufficient. "If your blog consists of [paid] reviews or if you receive complimentary products, include a brief disclosure sentence on each post as well as a more detailed disclosure on a separate web page," says Butler. "In contrast, if you do paid endorsements only occasionally, it may be sufficient to provide a brief disclosure on the relevant post. On platforms where every character counts, the community often develops its own language. For example, on Twitter, #ad and #spon indicate the person has been paid to tweet."

**Integrity:** "It's not surprising that brand marketers want to recruit RDs to spread positive word of mouth online," Gallicano says. "Brand marketers need to be told, however, that payment and free products or services do not guarantee a positive review. Your reputation is not for sale. The payment is for your time taken to review the product, not the outcome of the review."

If ever in doubt, Cochran recommends consulting the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics' *Code of Ethics*, which states: The dietetics practitioner does not engage in false or misleading practices or communications. "Many Academy members think the Ethics Committee is primarily for reporting dietetics practitioners for unethical behavior," says Cochran, who worked with the Committee to resolve a social media quandary. "I go to the Ethics Committee when I have ethical questions. That's what they're there for."

Tweet 0

+1 0

Like

Email

Rate This Story ★★★★★

### Add New Comment

Like 2 people liked this.

DISQUS

Add New Comment

Login



Type your comment here.

Showing 1 comment

Sort by popular now



Leah McGrath, RD

Great article! Drives me crazy on Twitter/Facebook to see dietitians blogging/tweeting/facebooking about a product/brand, read their profile to find nothing about the fact that they are compensated by same but if I write to them directly find that they are. I know that as a supermarket RD I see, and have an opportunity to sample products and have a lot of latitude that others don't have in terms of commenting on products.

6 days ago

Like Reply

Subscribe by email RSS

Trackback URL http://disqus.com/forum

blog comments powered by DISQUS

## Related Stories

### Ten Rules for Better Blogging

Some are interesting and reputable, others... not so much. Want to be a great blogger? Keep reading ...

### Ten Web Design Don'ts and How To Fix Them

Your site is a reflection of your personality, so be creative. But avoid common pitfalls in website design by following these simple rules.

## MEET OUR HEROES

Diane Imrie



Imrie is passionate about local and sustainable food.

» MORE

## WHAT'S THE WORD

### Recent Reader Comments

gluten free foods restaurants By checking beforehand in a non busy time, you can find if the restaurant is happy to cook your pasta (you bring from home) or whatever gluten...

APP REVIEW: CeliacFeed - 2 days ago

Leah McGrath, RD Great article! Drives me crazy on Twitter/Facebook to see dietitians blogging/tweeting /facebooking about a product/brand, read their profile to...

Social Media Disclosure: The Ethics of Reviews and Recommendations - 6 days ago