

Wal-Mart encourages employees to post blunt comments about products on blog

Michael Barbaro



Alex Cook, a Wal-Mart merchandise manager, blogs about computers and electronics. (Spencer Tirey for The New York Times)

Microsoft is one of Wal-Mart's biggest suppliers. But that did not stop the Wal-Mart employee in charge of buying computers from panning Microsoft's newest operating system, Vista.

"My life has not changed dramatically" because of the new system, he wrote on his blog. "Well, for that matter, it hasn't changed at all."

His public burst of candor was not isolated. On the same blog, a video game buyer for Wal-Mart slammed a "Star Wars" film as a "debacle," even though Wal-Mart still sells the movie.

Known for its strict, by-the-books culture - accepting a cup of coffee from a supplier can be a firing offense - Wal-Mart is now encouraging employees who do the buying to speak frankly, even critically, about the products the chain carries.

An unusual new Web site by Wal-Mart, which was quietly created during the holiday shopping season, has become a forum for unvarnished rants about gadgets, raves about new video games and advice on selecting environmentally sustainable food.

Corporate blogs are nothing new - General Motors, Dell and Boeing have them - but Wal-Mart's site, called Check Out, at checkoutblog.com, turns the traditional model on its head. Instead of relying on polished high-level executives, it is written by little-known buyers, largely without editing.

The result is an intensely personal window into the lives, preferences and quirks of the powerful taste makers at Wal-Mart, the largest U.S. retailer, who have spent years shielded from public view.

Their decisions about what makes it onto Wal-Mart's shelves have enormous effect, earning or costing vendors millions of dollars. It was a blogger on Check Out, after all, who first reported last month that Wal-Mart would stock only high-definition DVDs and players using the Blu-ray format, rather than the rival HD DVD system. The decision was considered the death knell for HD DVD.

On the blog, Marvin Deshommies, a merchandise manager in the lawn and garden department, tells readers that he belongs to the Christian Life Cathedral Church. His favorite quote from the Bible is Luke 12:48 - "To whom much is given, from him much will be required."

Joe Muha, a video game buyer, discloses that Ayn Rand is one of his favorite authors. Danielle Pribbernow, a toy buyer, talks about her cat, Sierra.

Wal-Mart says the Web site helps buyers solicit quick feedback from consumers on the merchandise and shows a softer side of the giant company, which has 5,000 stores, 1.2 million workers and annual sales of nearly \$400 billion.

"We are real people, and that gets lost in the to and fro of business," said Nick Agarwal, a Wal-Mart communications official who helped develop the blog. "It puts real personality out there in a real conversation."

But all that uncensored rambling has potential drawbacks, like irritating suppliers or consumers. Muha, the video game buyer, may have ventured into dangerous territory, for example, when describing "Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare."

"The bad guys are the usual Middle Eastern extremists. I guess they are the new Nazis for the modern era," he wrote.

This is not Wal-Mart's first plunge into blogging. Several years ago, when its public relations problems began to mount, it turned to the Web for relief. It created one blog, Working Families for Wal-Mart, to trumpet the chain's accomplishments and attack its critics. It created another, Wal-Marting Across America, to highlight the good deeds and productive careers of Wal-Mart employees.

Critics dismissed both as thinly veiled extensions of Wal-Mart's public-relations department, and Wal-Mart shut them down.

The lesson seemed clear: Create an authentic blog or do not create a blog at all.

Wal-Mart employees began developing Check Out a year ago and recruited a handful of buyer-bloggers last fall, giving them rudimentary training on how to post their writing, upload videos and create hyperlinks.

The focus of the Web site, the novice bloggers decided, would be electronics, given the reliable appetite for gadget reviews and news on the Web, with a sprinkling of posts on the environment, toys and furniture.

After heeding the lessons of Wal-Mart's earlier blogs and consulting several well-known bloggers from sites like the Huffington Post, the buyers decided the site would succeed only if they wrote in their own voices, free from censorship and corporate review.

"Readers can tell if people are being genuine or monitored," said Alex Cook, the merchandise manager for Wal-Mart's entertainment division, who blogs about computers and electronics - and who wrote the lukewarm review of Windows Vista.

Anil Dash, a blogger at Six Apart, which makes blogging software, said the evolution in Wal-Mart's thinking about blogs was typical.

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