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# FTC to regulate blogger reviews

## Rules call for disclosure of company relationships

By James Dowd  
Posted December 6, 2009 at 12:04 a.m.

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Attention, bloggers!

In case you haven't heard -- and chances are that most of you haven't -- the government just got a lot more interested in what you're saying.

**Poll**

Do you think bloggers should have to divulge any relationships they have with companies providing goods or services for their review, as the FTC now mandates?

Yes  
No

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And in what you're not saying.

Guidelines by the [Federal Trade Commission](#) that went into effect on Tuesday spell out new rules for new media and the potential impact is significant.

In an effort to promote transparency and full disclosure, the FTC now requires bloggers to divulge any relationships they have with companies providing goods or services for review.

In short, if any blogger waxes eloquent about a product - particularly if said blogger received a free copy of the product to test -- the blogger must divulge that connection.



Here's an example from the FTC's Web site:

"A college student who has earned a reputation as a video game expert maintains a personal weblog or 'blog' where he posts entries about his gaming experiences.

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Readers of his blog frequently seek his opinions about video game hardware and software. As it has done in the past, the manufacturer of a newly released video game system sends the student a free copy of the system and asks him to write about it on his blog. He tests the new gaming system and writes a favorable review.

"Because his review is disseminated via a form of consumer-generated media in which his relationship to the advertiser is not inherently obvious, readers are unlikely to know that he has received the video game system free of charge in exchange for his review of the product, and given the value of the video game system, this fact likely would materially affect the credibility they attach to his endorsement.

"Accordingly, the blogger should clearly and conspicuously disclose that he received the gaming system free of charge. The manufacturer should advise him at the time it provides the gaming system that this connection should be disclosed, and it should have procedures in place to try to monitor his postings for compliance."

And that means a new day for many bloggers and advertisers, who heretofore have not been required to publicize their connections. The impact will be far-reaching, predicts social media tracker Amy Howell.

"This applies to everyone, from the mommy blogger discussing a new baby product to the seasoned professional who makes a living by writing online," said Howell, founder and principal of Memphis-based [Howell Marketing Strategies](#). "It gives that government a hammer that hasn't been there before. Whether or not they use it remains to be seen."

And that's a key component.

In an age when it seems that just about everyone in the world has a blog, how can the government possibly enforce such guidelines? According to a [video](#) posted on the FTC Web site, the intent is proactive rather than punitive.

"Is the FTC planning to sue bloggers? Well, let me put it this way. That is not why we issued this guidance. We issued this guidance to make it clear that everybody should be playing by the same rules, whether you're a professional reviewer or an amateur reviewer," said Mary Engle, associate director of the FTC Bureau of Consumer Protection. "Just be up front about the connections you have and any conflict of interest you might have with the company."

Although the rules may alter the way many bloggers present material, no changes are necessary at [The Commercial Appeal](#), the paper's editor said.

"I don't anticipate the new FTC guidelines having much affect on reporters or editors who blog for commercialappeal.com," said Chris Peck, editor of The Commercial Appeal. "The staff journalists who blog for us will continue to operate under the same journalistic principles of accuracy, fairness and transparency as is the norm for our newspaper.

"If significant issues arise about the source of information or products, our journalistic policies would already require our journalists to account for any potential conflicts."

Glen Gilmore, a New Jersey-based attorney and social media advisor who counts

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more than 61,000 followers on Twitter, emphasized that the guidelines were developed to protect consumers and create a greater credibility in online communities.

"It's not as complicated as people may think. Ultimately it's about transparency in new media," said Gilmore, founder of the [Gilmore Business Network](#). "The FTC is charged by Congress to protect consumers and this will help do that by making known any sponsored relationships between bloggers and any companies whose products or services they endorse."

For more information on the FTC and the new guidelines, go online to [ftc.gov](#).

### Federal Trade Commission

Established: 1914

Location: 600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Washington.

Purpose: To prevent unfair competition in commerce

Makeup: Five commissioners, each serving a seven-year term, appointed by the president and confirmed by the U.S. Senate with no more than three being members of the same political party

Contact: (202) 326-2222 or online at [ftc.gov](#)

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