

## Edelman Reveals Two More Wal-Mart 'Flogs'

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**PUBLIC RELATIONS FIRM EDELMAN, WHICH** last week pledged to be more transparent in its involvement with client-related blogs, Thursday revealed it is behind two more 'flogs,' or fake blogs, created on behalf of Wal-Mart.

Until the new disclosures, both blogs appeared to have been created and contributed to by independent supporters of the big box retailer, an Edelman client.

One blog appears on the home page of Working Families for Wal-Mart, the allegedly grassroots advocacy group formed by Edelman last December, which is "committed to fostering open and honest dialogue...that conveys the positive contributions of Wal-Mart to working families." The second blog is on WFWM's subsidiary site Paid Critics.

The Paid Critics blog is devoted to "exposing" links between unions and other vested interests that are "smearing Wal-Mart" through the media. Until yesterday, blog entries on both WFWM and Paid Critics were uncredited. Thursday, bylines were added to blog posts "in response to comments and emails."

Last week, the travel blog "Wal-Marting Across America" was shut down following revelations that it was the work of two writers paid by WFWM.

As a result of the new transparency, every entry on the blogs is now credited to one of three contributors: Miranda, Brian or Kate. A click on these single monikers reveals biographies of Edelman employees Miranda Gill, Brian McNeill and Kate Marshall, whose clients include Working Families for Wal-Mart, the sites say.

While noting that he was speaking in generalities and not to this specific situation, Dave Balter, president of the Boston word-of-mouth marketing firm BzzAgent, said: "Even if you're doing the right thing but you know you're going to deceive people, you have to do everything to make sure it's completely transparent, and any tactic that crosses that line you're doing a disservice to the brand [and] the consumer."

The spokesperson for WFWM, Edelman employee Donna Lewis-Johnson, said the company was now being completely transparent. She said WFWM is a client of Edelman separate from its Wal-Mart account, but could not confirm that WFWM pays Edelman for its work. She said Edelman's employees make up some but not all of the WFWM staff. She said that WFWM accepts funding from Wal-Mart, but did not know how much. In a May *New York Times* article about WFWM, a member of the group's steering committee, Martha Montoya, said she was not aware of any financing that group received outside of Wal-Mart.

A spokesperson for Wal-Mart referred all questions to WFWM.

One observer questioned whether once a flog becomes transparent, its original purpose is

rendered moot.

"Once you make this kind of revelation, you need to question whether [the strategy] is even effective anymore," said Virginia Miracle, director of word-of-mouth marketing for Brains on Fire, in Greenville, SC. "This is a very difficult time. As the media has exploded, the ethical guidelines have not been growing at the same rate."

Another critic called the situation "ridiculous," and pointed out the innate contradiction and paradoxical dilemma Edelman is facing.

"Doesn't anybody at Edelman see the irony behind having their own paid critics writing Wal-Mart's Paid Critics blog?" asks Sean Carton, a blogger, author of eight books about technology and the Internet, and chief strategy officer for Baltimore interactive consultancy idfive. "This was a brilliant idea, in its way, but it was evil and they got caught. It was old media thinking in the new media world, and you can't get away with that [stuff] anymore."

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