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March 14, 2006
BELTWAY BLOGROLL

Bloggers And The 'Big Box' Behemoth

Many Americans love to hate Wal-Mart. They see the "big box" behemoth, with its 3,800 stores in all 50 states, as the epitome of all that is wrong with retail these days: master of the cookie-cutter shopping experience, promoter of suburban sprawl, killer of U.S. manufacturing and mom-and-pop shops, and king of the low-wage, poor-benefits job.

The company has been a regular subject of critical media reports, books, Web sites and even a recent movie, "Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price."

But millions more Americans happen to love shopping at Wal-Mart -- more than 100 million every week, according to a recent speech to the nation's governors by company CEO **Lee Scott**. Some 1.3 million associates work there, too, making the corporation the largest retail employer in the United States. Many of those people arguably would be unemployed were it not for Wal-Mart's presence in their communities.

With that kind of reach and recognition, and with the company being the focus of policy debates at the federal, state and local levels, bloggers are becoming increasingly interested in all things Wal-Mart.

The company is just as interested in bloggers, having picked as a public relations consultant one of the bigger names in the blogosphere, **Mike Krempasky** of RedState. Krempasky works on the Wal-Mart account at the Edelman PR firm with at least one other blogger, **Marshall Manson**.

The relationship between bloggers and Wal-Mart burst into the mainstream last week, thanks to a *New York Times* article about Manson's e-mail outreach on Wal-Mart's behalf. The piece noted that some bloggers had reprinted text from the e-mails exactly as it came from Wal-Mart and had not disclosed their source for the information.

The article sparked a flurry of commentary both before and after publication. **Brian Pickrell** of Iowa Voice and other bloggers defended their dealings with Wal-Mart, and they found plenty of allies.

Others wondered what the bloggers must have been thinking. "Are they not capable of at least taking the information and rewriting it to look like it comes from their brains?" **Jonathan Tasini**, who is challenging Sen. **Hillary Rodham Clinton** in New York's Democratic primary, wrote at Working Life. "Is this a comment on the relative creativity of pro-Wal-Mart blogs?"

But the real story is that the *Times* wrote about bloggers and Wal-Mart at all. Bloggers clearly have made enough of an impression in the debate about big box stores that Wal-Mart feels compelled to pay them heed -- and to try to harness their power to its own benefit.

To a certain extent, that is a break from Wal-Mart's past. The bricks-and-mortar empire that **Sam Walton** built isn't known for its online presence. A 2002 e-commerce case study, for instance, characterized Walmart.com as being "distinctly back of the pack."

Wal-Mart was late to the blogging game as well. Two of the leading anti-Wal-Mart outfits, Wal-Mart Watch and Wake Up Wal-Mart, beat their nemesis into the blogosphere by months. Even more telling, the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet last week recognized Wake Up Wal-Mart as having the best national Internet campaign in 2005.

The Writing On the Wal also has been working diligently to undercut Wal-Mart's reputation. Plus last November, the high-traffic blog The Huffington Post dedicated an entire day to posts against the company. The array of writers included Democratic Sen. **Edward Kennedy** of Massachusetts, independent Rep. **Bernie Sanders** of Vermont, and **Robert Greenwald**, the director and producer of last year's anti-Wal-Mart movie.

When Wal-Mart finally entered the blogosphere last fall, the effort was downright timid. Rather than challenge its foes by creating a forum where officials could vigorously defend company practices, Wal-Mart launched a feel-good, short-term blog that emphasized corporate philanthropy in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and other storms.

By contrast, Wal-Mart's recent attempts to curry friendly coverage in the broader blogosphere show that the company, or at least its PR firm, is not totally clueless about online marketing.

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-- The Market Center Blog

Wal-Mart already has taken the next logical step by inviting bloggers to its annual media day at company headquarters in Bentonville, Ark. And unlike the Arab television station Al Jazeera and the Netherlands tourism board, Wal-Mart will not pay the expenses of any bloggers who make the trip in April -- another smart move.

When asked during a washingtonpost.com chat about the *Times* story, Edelman senior vice president **Steve Rubel**, himself a blogger, lauded the efforts of the Wal-Mart team and added, "We will continue to build relationships with bloggers and strive to make them as transparent as possible."

If Wal-Mart hopes to maintain its standing in thousands of American communities, that's exactly the right strategy.

The company is the target of a class-action discrimination lawsuit and faces criticism over everything from labor practices to in-store banking services. One great way to combat all of that negativity is to send a positive message via blogs.

"They matter," one blog watcher said. "They're a trusted source of information for people."

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"Beltway Blogroll" is K. Daniel Glover's bi-weekly look at the growing number of policy blogs shaping Washington debates. It publishes every other Monday, although additional updates will be made when events warrant.

Glover is the managing editor of National Journal's Technology Daily. He can be reached at dglover@nationaljournal.com.

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