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Notes From Swagapalooza

Why I'm Giving It the Benefit of the Doubt

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Last week I attended the first-ever "Swagapalooza," which was billed as an "experiment in viral media" and allegedly featured the world's most-followed bloggers, twitterers, and digital influencers, all gathered at a nightclub in Manhattan to review new companies showcasing their products and services.

As we know, swag bags (or "goodie" bags) are often superficial aspects of an industry conference, awards banquet, benefit or other event. At Swagapalooza, far from being an afterthought, they're the main event. Nobody in attendance was pretending this was anything more than a series of shameless, promotional plugs by entrepreneurs -- all documented in real-time in a meta, self-referential style by a live Twitter-feed broadcast on a monitor immediately to the right of presenters onstage. The effect was an entertaining social-media Gong Show of sorts. Live tweets ranged from hysterical and often harsh commentary on speakers, products, and audience members... to annoyingly distracting asides -- depending on your perspective.

PR's come a long way, baby. In the New PR, the free stuff is the "pitch" or newshook. The bloggers are the new journos. But for emerging businesses presenting at the event, which included [Switch2Health](#), [Surprise Industries](#) and [Bruise Relief](#) among others, it was an opportunity to introduce and market their products with the goal of creating online buzz via social media channels. It remains to be seen what the impact will be on their brands and bottom lines, but considering the virtually zero level of investment of all involved, it's hard to see a downside. From the perspective of building name recognition and visibility for brands and featured products, any return at all will be a bonus. Can't beat that, especially in the current economic environment.



A fascinating visual map was created by an illustrator in real-time to capture a 'graphic document' of the proceedings.

The fresh-faced organizer of the more than 200 people selectively assembled for this Swagapalooza experiment was 24-year-old Alex Krupp, who conceived the concept with advice from Seth Godin. In keeping with the theme of the event, the keynote presenter was Peter Shankman, a PR entrepreneur who has launched viral experiments of his own, applying a crowd-sourcing type model to connecting reporters with sources for their articles. His [Help-A-Reporter-Out](#) and [@helpareporterout](#) lets anyone on an opt-in email distribution list receive nearly a hundred queries daily from media seeking interview sources. I confess to using the service to promote our clients, as well as securing visibility for our own business where we have a relevant voice to add to a story.

An illustrator from [Image Think](#), also an event presenter, worked in real-time to capture a "graphic recording" to document the proceedings for posting online afterwards. The result was a fascinating [visual map](#) summarizing presenters' products and key messages.

Participants of the swag-meet seemed delighted with the outcome so far. [Voyage TV](#), a travel company giving away a free trip for a winning tweet of 140 characters or less detailing a dream vacation, tweeted: "Home run at #Swagapalooza! Big news soon" before the crowd was barely out the door.

Undoubtedly, Swagapalooza will raise the ethical bar for bloggers who review consumer products (see the [videoblog of one attendee](#)). The blogosphere has been buzzing for months with debates on the ethical implications of accepting corporate "sponsorships" of blog content. Absolute transparency in disclosing when bloggers and other digital cognoscenti receive free products is a must for any subsequent or related commentary referencing said brands and products on blogs, tweets or anywhere else.

This latest tactic aimed at securing positive blog reviews and word of mouth among targeted bloggers and, ultimately, virally among their followers, further muddies the debate over pay-per-post and conflicts of interest faced by bloggers today. One could view the event as a step closer to removing objectivity and credibility from bloggers, who claim to evangelize authentic engagement with the public and consumers. Indeed, the temptation to blog for no better reason than landing more swag looms large.

Yet, when a pediatrician tweeted to her followers how much she loves a new product that monitors kids' exercise habits, it's not all that different than when a consumer electronics brand sends a free product to the technology writer at a major newspaper, subsequently securing a positive review. In both cases, a brand reaches an audience of potential customers via an influential, whether a journalist, or in this case, a digital influencer. The end result is a highly desirable and valuable outcome from the event for presenter Switch2health.

*joannadolgoffmd@musingsfromme I had a blast. I loved this new product called Switch2Health which monitors kids' exercise. Very cool! #swagapalooza
2:04 PM Sep 18th from TweetDeck*

Swagapalooza participants took a leap of faith in coming at all, considering the concept was little more than getting bloggers to show up for free stuff. For now, I'm willing to give this new form of event marketing the benefit of the doubt. You could even say I'm looking forward to its next iteration.

Oh, and full disclosure: I took home zilch in the form of swag.