

P & G Attempts to Quell Pampers Critics, Flies in 'Mommy Bloggers'

DAN SEWELL, AP Business Writer

CINCINNATI (AP) -- Four women who blog about consumer products for young families spent Thursday talking about diapers with Procter & Gamble Co. officials and advisers as the company tried to counter fast-spreading online criticism.

Claims that the new Dry Max version of Pampers -- P&G's biggest-selling brand -- cause severe rashes have triggered lawsuits and a federal safety investigation.

The criticisms picked up steam this month on Facebook and other online social media after national reports of the probe.

P&G has diverted 40 to 50 employees to marketing and research on Dry Max full time, extended its Pampers phone line from five to seven days a week and consulted with more than a dozen outside experts.

It hopes the effort -- including flying in the four so-called "mommy bloggers" from around the country because they can influence parents seeking product reviews, moneysaving tips and other advice -- will deflect undeserved criticism. For instance, P&G said some of the complaints have come from consumers in China, where Dry Max diapers aren't even sold.

Among the bloggers visiting Thursday was Kate Marsh Lord of Niceville, Fla., whose 18-month-old daughter developed a severe rash wearing a Dry Max diaper. She said her pediatrician assured her the diaper didn't cause the rash, and she has continued to use Dry Max without incident.

The company even brought in the same, now-retired company scientist who disproved rumors three decades ago that P&G's Bounce fabric softener sheets caused clothes dryers to catch fire. P&G calls the charges against Dry Max "completely false" and disagrees the company has been dismissive of consumer complaints about the diaper, which launched in March.

"We're walking the fine line of communicating that the diaper is not causing the rash and still being sympathetic to the fact that they're really having a rash, and our heart goes out to them," said Jodi Allen, a P&G Baby Care vice president. "First and foremost, we care about babies' health."

P&G says Pampers sales remain strong and it has found no evidence Dry Max, billed as 20 percent thinner than earlier versions, is more likely to cause rashes. P&G was getting fewer than two complaints of rashes per million diapers sold until this month, said officials who noted that occasional diaper rashes are common.

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Published on Chem.Info (<http://www.chem.info>)

The criticism, highlighted by a Facebook page whose membership has reached 10,000, has P&G officials scrambling to protect the brand responsible for more than 10 percent of the company's \$79 billion annual revenue.

The company has paid for pediatrician and dermatologist visits for some children whose parents complained about the diapers in part so they could learn what the doctors concluded, executives said. P&G even paid for some of the bloggers' family members to accompany them from across the country.

Stacy DeBroff, founder of a Boston-based consulting firm, Mom Central Inc., said P&G's move sounded smart, if a little late.

"There's nothing like a first-person discussion, to open direct dialogue," she said. "Social media is like lightning."

The bloggers said they ended the day feeling confident about the diapers.

And P&G said they didn't receive any compensation other than product samples and the trip to P&G's Baby Care headquarters in suburban Cincinnati.

"It's certainly not going to pay my bills or even keep me in diapers," said Stephanie Manner Wagner, a mother of five who blogs in Joliet, Ill.

Source URL (retrieved on 12/21/2014 - 7:57am):

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