

McDonald's recruits bloggers to super-size its allure

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MCDONALD'S, the fast food chain, is quietly recruiting a private army of friendly bloggers to challenge critics such as Jamie Oliver.

The 400 bloggers, known as the McDonald's Family Arches Community, receive benefits such as all-expenses-paid trips to parties in return for spreading positive stories about the company. McDonald's hopes to roll out Family Arches in Britain within a year.

Starbucks and Disney recruit

fans on open networks such as Facebook and Twitter. But McDonald's feared that this would open the company to attack from animal-rights activists and wanted its own private network over which it could exert more control.

Josh Anisfeld, a McDonald's PR consultant, told a San Francisco marketing conference last week that it was looking for ordinary people it could "teach" to become advocates for the corporation.

Anisfeld told the conference the company had been seeking ways of responding to a wave of

aggressive Facebook posts accusing it of serving "pink slime", a colloquial name for a highly processed food additive.

Oliver popularised the phrase last year on his American television series Food Revolution, describing the "ammonia-soaked centrifuge-separated byproduct paste" as disgusting. McDonald's says it has now decided not to use the additive.

Its previous social media promotions have backfired. In January, a Twitter campaign called McDStories, which was meant to celebrate McDonald's

farmers, was overrun by thousands of users tweeting disparaging remarks about the chain's food, staff and cleanliness.

Anisfeld, who works for marketing consultant Golin-Harris, said the company was fed up with derogatory internet chatter and other claims, such as that working at McDonald's was a dead-end job. So eight months ago it quietly started the Family Arches private network.

It trawled the web vetting influential bloggers who also liked McDonald's. "We looked at their social profiles and found out who they were. Now

we're giving them information so that they can advocate for us. And if they start doing stuff we don't want, we are going to take action," said Anisfeld.

The more positive blog items members post and the more recruits they bring to the community, the more perks they receive.

These range from free food coupons and gift cards to, last week, an all-expenses trip to New York for 10 "super-users" to sample new breakfast items that one blogger described as "incredible".

Other influential bloggers

were recently invited to a party in Los Angeles where they met the female rap group Salt-n-Pepa.

Anisfeld boasted that the approach had been successful before. After being briefed by McDonald's executives, many bloggers had posted comments reflecting the company's line on topics such as "pink slime". "It was almost verbatim what they were told to say. They went out and said it," he said, adding that the corporation wanted to recruit 1m bloggers.

Ira Kalb, assistant professor of clinical marketing at the Uni-

versity of Southern California, said the problem was not lazy blogging but transparency.

"You know Kim Kardashian gets paid \$10,000 a tweet to promote fashions but people will believe an ordinary mom is speaking her own mind. So it has to be clear on the blog she is benefiting from McDonald's," he said.

McDonald's said there were no "hardcore" rules obliging members to disclose freebies, although the bloggers should say they had learnt any information from Family Arches.

Hanson Hosein, director of

the digital media programme at the University of Washington, said McDonald's was taking a risk creating its own private army of influential bloggers while turning away independent voices.

"The rest of us can't see what conversations are taking place between the company and the bloggers, or what incentives are being given out.

"It's dangerous for a company like McDonald's to run this exclusive network that only some will be allowed into — it does not fit well into its inclusive welcoming brand."