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NET WORK

Meet the Queensland mummy bloggers who are riding the web wave and carving out a lucrative career from the comfort of their homes



MOTHERS' DOMAIN

Across the nation, mums are forging a new sphere of influence. Meet the potent force in social media – mummy bloggers

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PHOTOGRAPHY
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It's a picture of suburban normality. A four-bedroom brick veneer like any one of a few dozen brick veneers in a street bending through the flat sameness of Brisbane's outer southwest. There's a greyed paling fence, a thirsty lawn and a dusty, early-model people-mover in the driveway. Ordinary.

It's hard to imagine what might spark the interest of hungry multi-nationals or PR meetings in southern capitals here, in this quiet corner of Calamvale. But they're knocking at the door. And remarkably regularly.

Behind the brick veneer lives mummy blogger Naomi Ellis – a pint-sized 38-year-old with a blonde bob and a childlike timbre to the voice. Ellis's *thing* is that she has seven children. Without a jot of irony, she calls her blog Seven Cherubs. Ellis has 1100 followers. They're not her friends exactly, but they certainly like her. And they definitely trust her.

Companies don't see the pint-sized mum with seven children, battling baskets of washing or hillocks of dishes. They see a blogger who is a potent and trusted channel to their clients. They see in this modest mum a new strata of commercial influence.

And they form a line at her virtual door – cereals, chocolate, baked goods, beauty products, toilet tissue,

fashion and film – they all crave her influence.

Ellis never set out to create a commercial slipstream. She started her blog simply because she loved writing, because she wanted to be a positive role model for big families and impart some of her experience in wrangling seven little lives, all while retaining some kind of order in her life. The commercial whirl just happened.

Unwittingly, Ellis is part of a much larger phenomenon – the burgeoning group of largely women who have formed a new level of media influence. PR companies now have people tasked with monitoring the thoughts of bloggers and assessing their following, the clicks and comments. There are also advertising agencies now dedicated to linking brands with bloggers.

One which started around four years ago now boasts a database of 80,000 bloggers in four countries. A new entity, digitalparents.com.au, has sprouted so that “mum and parent bloggers” can share and swap ideas. And a single blogging conference in Australia last year, grew to three conferences this year.

On laps and at kitchen tables around Australia, there's an army of mums tapping out incomes, mostly modest, sometimes decent, by blogging about parenting, children, beauty or technology.



Arrogant and self-important, she was. What a gall to charge for her website. Who the hell does she think she is? Upstart.

That was pretty typical of the scorn and derision that rained down on Stacey Sullaphen when she first made cyber waves with her Sunny Mummy website last year. But that same scorn only further justified her decision. The decision – a bold one, maybe a presumptuous one – was to create a members-only website to build an exclusive community of like-minded women that was safe, non-judgmental and supportive. Women, she believed, would be willing to pay to have a sanctuary far from parenting forums that can be furnaces of judgment.

“I thought I would set up something where you can join, where it’s safe, where anybody can say anything they want and there will be no judgment,” Sullaphen explains. “I wanted a place where a woman can go and say ‘I’m not going to breastfeed any more’ and other mothers won’t respond with vitriol. I found on other sites, if a mum wrote that, for every person that said it’s OK, there were 10 Nazis attacking her over it. Or they were all about yummy mummies like Elle or Jessica Alba and, ‘ooh don’t they look terrific’.”

Her site was intended, in her words, as “a warm place to be”. But it was more than that – it was an assault on the cult of the yummy mummy.

Sullaphen in the flesh is no upstart. She is no steely eyed mumpreneur with the perpetually buzzing iPhone and chunky jewellery. As she remarks more than once, she’s just a girl from Rooty Hill – the Sydney suburban byword for working class, humble and unfashionable.

At an equally unfashionable Gold Coast surf club, she’s nursing a jumbo-sized coffee and eating neatly cut portions from a slab of banana bread slathered with big licks of butter. She’s in jeans, boots, a simple cotton top, wool cardie and modest make-up. Simple.

She explains her idea sprung from what she freely admits was a breakdown which consigned her to counselling for 18 months. In hindsight she cheerfully calls it her “breakthrough”.

Sullaphen grew up in an unstable home of domestic violence and drug and alcohol abuse. She didn’t do well in high school and married at 21. She saw motherhood as her chance to be good at something. Perfection in her domestic domain became her holy grail, from immaculately dressed children to ribbons tied around the bath towels, all the while trying to be a “yummy mummy”.

It was a self-imposed ideal she increasingly realised didn’t exist. It all came to a head in a tearful catharsis on the laundry floor.

“My husband found me one day curled into a ball on the laundry floor bawling my eyes out,” Sullaphen says. “I was putting all this pressure on myself thinking I had to be a ‘yummy mummy’, and one day I said ‘why do we have to be yummy? Why can’t we just be sunny?’”

“Sure you can be a yummy mummy and your house can look great and you can fit in your skinny jeans and you can have the latest pram, but if you’re dying inside and not enjoying a minute of it, what’s the point?”

Sullaphen vowed to create a community of women who loved being mums, but were fallible and could admit they were fallible. It would be a place where mums could safely

admit they didn’t enjoy being mums *all* the time. A friend suggested she start a blog.

She’d never heard of blogs but did some research and figured there was room in the market for something which encouraged mums to: look after themselves first, because a “tired mum’s a cranky mum”; not compare themselves against ludicrous ideals; and rather than seek perfection just be “perfectly you”. It would be positive and nurturing – sort of *Oprah* online.

Her approach struck a chord – a year after start-up she has almost 500 members and around 7000 likes on Facebook. Sullaphen says she began charging only to raise money to build the site but at \$99 a head that’s grown into a handy turnover. But many of the memberships, she says, are freebies and half of the revenue goes to causes such as Mummy’s Wish. She also has her own “social enterprise” Project Shine, which helps mothers in need and during the summer floods donated hampers and gift baskets to women in the Lockyer Valley. She calmly predicts it will one day be a “multi-million dollar organisation” that will spawn community houses, drop-in centres and even community gardens.

“I don’t want to get rich and wear Prada,” she declares. “I’m a girl from Rooty Hill. I know when enough is enough. If I can get to pick up my kids from school, work from home and have a holiday with my family . . . that’s what I want to achieve.”

Naomi Ellis never wanted to be anything other than a mum. Sure, she did a degree and did some travelling, but ultimately she just wanted a family – a big family. She got her wish. She and husband Matt had seven children in nine years, ranging from four to 13.

But Ellis admits she wasn’t prepared for the physical exhaustion that comes from sleep deprivation, the grinding routine and constant pursuit of children, particularly twin boys who loved to climb and flood the bathroom. Nor was she prepared for the mental and emotional exhaustion of teens and tweens.

People’s fascination with such a large brood in today’s world of neat little families wasn’t lost on Ellis. She was constantly asked how she coped, how she kept the house organised, how she stayed sane.

“Motherhood is my career and just like with any other job you want to be good at it, so I worked hard at it . . . I spent a lot of time reading about it and trying to rework things in our home.”

Ellis had myriad motivations to start a blog. She always had a bent for writing, she believed she had experience and advice to offer other families and she wanted to be an advocate and role model for large families and communicate that while it’s hard work, you *can* “have awesome fun”.

Paramount, though, was that Ellis, like so many others, just wanted to connect and share with other women.

“It was only a few years ago I had these small twin boys, my ‘twinadoes’, so it was also a way to connect with other women, to acknowledge that I wasn’t alone in what I was going through.”



Ellis also suffered post-natal depression (PND) after her second child, Nathan.

"I normally try to keep everything positive on my blog but I decided to share that because I realised there would be a lot of women with PND who would be feeling failures as mothers."

She acknowledges the risk in portraying an ideal of motherhood, the danger of being seen as perfect, so strives for an honest, warts-'n'-all portrayal of daily life.

"I try to be honest and have written posts about the fact that I feel I am at times a lonely mother," she says. "It's awesome having all those kids but it can be very hard. And yes, I've written posts about one of the kids wiping poo on their cots. I do try to be realistic".

From the corner of a Calamvale living room, Ellis's innocent attempt to "create my own little community" in early 2010, has built a respectable audience – almost 1100 followers, 1700 likes on Facebook and 30,000 page views a month. Vitally, her following is deemed loyal, which is gold to companies wanting to sell cereal, chocolate and movie tickets.

Within six months of starting her blog came the first approach by a PR company. Today it's nothing for her to be offered trips around the country to do promotions and be showered with approaches to write "sponsored posts". Recently she was flown to Sydney for the day to film a spot for a shampoo company. She flew south first thing, did the shoot and was home in time to pick the children up from school. But the "very small income", gifts and gratuities are secondary for Ellis. As she says: "It's family first, blog second". Greater satisfaction lies in her ability to express herself through her writing and the immediate and heartfelt response to those ideas and thoughts.

"I love that many other women build upon what I share, that they take my thoughts, comment on it and turn it around to inspire me in my life," Ellis says.

Only 3½ years ago Nikki Parkinson didn't know what a blog was. Last March, her Styling You blog was voted Australia's Best Blog by Sydney Writers' Centre, and she watches with fascination as her blog organically gathers followers and creeps up the ladder of international blog-ranking indices.

In 2008 the former journalist began a styling consultancy business and wanted a simple, complementary website, but didn't want to rely on, and pay, someone to manage the content. A friend suggested using a blogging platform so she could write and add as she wished, with up-to-the-minute news and trends.

"I really had no idea what a blog even was. Then about 1½ years into it I realised there was this whole thing going on in the blogosphere and there was a comment function on other blogs," explains Parkinson, 44.

"I'd been approaching it from a journalistic point of view, I tended to broadcast rather than frame it in ways that would create connection. So I rejigged my site, added a comment function and changed the way I approached it."

It worked, and from a modest home office on the Sunshine Coast, Parkinson built a national profile with the help of solid content and deft use of Twitter (where she has 4800 followers). In April last year her site recorded 4000 unique visits and 12,000 page views a month. By October this year those same measures had soared to 46,000 visits and 112,000 page views – a 1000 per cent increase.

Parkinson found a niche in an area populated by younger female bloggers. She spoke to "busy, time-poor women who just want to know what to buy, how to get it easily, preferably online", women who had finished being mums and could devote some time to themselves.

From not knowing what a blog was in 2008, Parkinson now occupies a kind of mother-hen status among Queensland's female bloggers, she blogs about blogging and next month is off to Malaysia as a guest speaker at a blogging conference.

She's also one of the few making reasonable money from blogging. This financial year, Parkinson hopes to make \$30,000 in blogging-related revenue, that is, advertising, sponsored posts and income from blogging education and speaking.

"I definitely could never have envisaged where it has gone," she says with genuine surprise.

She declines to reveal what she charges for sponsored posts, but estimates an industry range of \$110 to \$1500 depending on readership and whether a giveaway is involved. One industry insider says larger operations have been known to charge as much as \$12,000.

Parkinson believes knowing your readers and creating a connection and trust are the keys to the point of difference that bloggers enjoy over some traditional media, but thinks blogging is far from squeezing traditional media out of the picture.

"Big advertisers will never ignore traditional media. I just think they are having to find a new budget for new media just because of the sheer amount of time women, in particular, are spending online . . . it's not an *or* but an *and*."



With thousands of voices seeking an ear across the blogosphere, it's Kristen Boschma's job to sort the wheat from the chaff. As head of digital and social media with PR outfit Haystac, Boschma has to assess bloggers' influence to direct clients to the best bang for their buck. With the blogosphere blooming, Boschma decided to devise an algorithm combining 26 parameters, and in doing so has given structure to a media domain with a low barrier to entry, awash with names and numbers.

"I did it because our clients and consultants knew that bloggers were important, but we had no idea how to rank or prioritise them," Boschma says.

"This 'Influencer Score' prioritises them which is particularly good for national clients who might want to know which key bloggers are based in Brisbane, for instance."

Boschma says bloggers' cachet is not only in their ability to provide information or insight, but in the trust and connection they foster with followers, which is particularly the case for mummy bloggers.

"They can blog on a wide range of topics, but it's always infused with the kind of connection and friendship that you might find in a mums' group. They don't seek to broadcast, but rather bring people together."

For evidence of that, look no further than the reaction on Naomi Ellis's blog when she shared her journey with post-natal depression.

"Naomi, thank you for being so honest and open with us. I so appreciate your blog. It is always good to know you are not alone, and for you to go on and have five more kids (after PND) just shows that you can get past it."



Naomi Ellis has a blog called Seven Cherubs inspired by her seven children (from left) Harmony, 8, Liberty, 4, Liahona, 10, Chelsea, 13, Nathan, 11, and twins Sam and Eli, 5.

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NIKKI PARKINSON



