



SOCIAL MEDIA UPDATE:

Five Social Media Strategies for Restaurants

KEEPING FOODSERVICE EXECUTIVES CURRENT ON INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENTS

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I met with the creative director at one of the leading “new media” agencies in 1999 in the uncertain months leading up to 00:00:00, January 1, 2000. At the time, ideas about the post-Y2K world and the advent of new media captured the lion’s share of headlines in the tech arena.

Ten years ago, new media began paving the way for what we now call “social media” and Web 2.0. The nearly ubiquitous term “Web 2.0,” coined way back in 1999 by author Darcy DiNucci, envisioned many of the characteristics of today’s social media platforms.

Back in the late-1990’s, there was a surplus of white papers on the future of online media and the new doors that would be open to consumers and businesses alike. Today, a quick Google search for the term “social media white paper” turns up about 177,000 unique hits. A slightly modified search for “social media blog” yields nearly 1.67 million hits—clearly a sign of the times. In 1999, the growing consensus was that the impact of new media on “business as usual” would be immense. Today, in a world where Internet traffic is dominated by social media sites, it is hard to disagree that it has turned out that way.

But, as anyone in the restaurant industry who subscribes to marketing or technology email groups would tell you, the world has enough white papers on social media. With that in mind, the goal of this white paper is to focus specifically on the strategies that today’s operator can use to enhance “business as usual” through social media.

With such rapid technological development, it is not clear whether social media will literally “change everything” as new media did, or if all the buzz will someday be buried alongside the remains of the Y2K doomsday predictions.

What is clear is this—the social media phenomenon is on the move. To put things into perspective, it took radio 38 years to reach a total audience of 50 million. It took television 13 years; the Internet four; the iPod three. Facebook hit an audience of 50 million in two years and has increased 50% to about 300 million users in the last six months alone.

The Social Media Opportunity for Restaurants

The reach of social media is widespread and growing rapidly. The emergence of social media offers restaurants the unprecedented chance to listen in on what others think about your organization—to monitor your restaurant’s “brand pulse” in real time, gain qualitative consumer insights, track responses to marketing programs/promotions, and create a better understanding of your brand champions. Moreover, social media platforms offer restaurants a low-cost alternative to traditional media for promotional and brand-building initiatives.

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Social Media Headlines

Before we explore the five social media strategies for restaurants, let's look at several noteworthy trends in social media currently making the headlines.

- **Transforming employees and customers into partners**—Sites like Facebook, MySpace and Twitter offer a communication platform for those who interact with your restaurant and can impact the brand on a local level.
- **Formalizing social media's role**—Check out any major job board to see the variety of positions available and assortment of goals attached to new roles in organizations—ranging from intern to senior vice president—that address the growing presence of social media. These positions are sure to evolve in step with innovation in social media platforms.
- **Top leadership joining the conversation**—Led in part by early blogging efforts by McDonald's in the area of corporate social responsibility, more top executives are using social media platforms to reach the general public.
- **Explosion of social media monitoring**—Tracking campaign effectiveness is a growing business, with services and applications dedicated to the major platforms. Examples include Inside Facebook (which tracks Facebook metrics), Technorati (focused on blogs) and Twitter Counter (a Twitter tracking application).

Just a few social media examples linked to the food industry:



Strategy #1—Getting the Attention of an expanding User Base

Most operators with a social media presence pursue the goal of growing the number of “fans” or “connections” that they have with consumers. While promotions and links can help build an operator’s social media base, many are also benefiting from the rapid pace of growth of social media penetration.

New survey data released by TNS and The Conference Board show a substantial 16 percentage point increase in just a year’s time in the proportion of Internet users who visit social media sites. In Q2 2008, 26.7% of U.S. Internet users surveyed said that they visited social media sites. The percentage grew to 42.7% in Q2 2009.

The base of users of major social media sites is changing each day. For example, the fastest-growing group of Facebook members is older adults. The base of 18- to 25-year-olds represents more than a third of users, but has only grown 15% in the past year. In contrast, 26- to 34-year-olds are about a quarter of users, but numbers in this age group have doubled within a year. And older age groups (ages 35 to 65) have seen annual growth rates of 300% to 500%—in part due to their relatively small base.

Adults and younger people use social media in somewhat different ways. For every age group, the #1 usage is staying in touch with friends. However, significantly more teens than adults employ social media to make plans with their friends (72% versus 57%). This is directly relevant to the restaurant industry, since many of those plans made in the online world for meetings in the real world involve restaurant occasions.

Strategy #2—Designing a Social Media-Aware Organization

Social media platforms are becoming more than just a consumer trend. A recent study by the Association of National Advertisers (ANA) found that 66% of marketers utilized social media in 2009, compared to just 20% of marketers in 2007. The top social media sites being used by companies include:

- **Facebook (74%)**
- **YouTube (65%)**
- **Twitter (63%)**
- **LinkedIn (60%)**

The reality is that more and more B2B social media opportunities exist today. Developing expertise and fluency in these major social media platforms is a good first step in developing a social media-aware restaurant organization.

Strategy #3—Giving Power to the People Without Hindering Brand Power

In one of the first issues of the tech-savvy magazine *Wired*, the author of an article entitled *Where Is the Digital Highway Really Heading?* mused:

“Life in cyberspace seems to be shaping up exactly like Thomas Jefferson would have wanted: founded on the primacy of individual liberty and a commitment to pluralism, diversity, and community.”

This was back in 1993. The idea that intensification of personal communication—through emails, text messages, tweets, blog posts and YouTube videos—will impact the power of brands is not new. However, the game has changed, from counting page hits to hitting the right social networks. Media mogul Rupert Murdoch recently shared his perspective on this shift:

“Technology is shifting the power away from the editors, the publishers, the establishment, the media elite. Now it’s the people who are in control.”

For restaurants, protecting and promoting your brand in the social media space should not focus on what others say about your brand, but instead on building a strong brand presence on the major social media platforms.

Strategy #4—Dedicating Human Resources

Check out Smokey Bones’ national website at smokeybones.com. It immediately asks visitors to enter their zip code to be directed to a local website. Each unit has its own microsite, Facebook and MySpace page. An employee at each restaurant is designated as “web host” and is tasked with updating the social media sites regularly with photos and news about the restaurant and its events—along with his or her own personal information and opinions.

Identify someone to lead your restaurants’ social media initiatives on a corporate level. Also, consider identifying unit-level leaders. An internal social media expert at the executive level should:

- ***Be fluent in core social media platforms.***
- ***Understand platform development and integration.***
- ***Translate measurements and tactics for integration in strategic planning.***
- ***Guide others in using social media and act as a source to mediate conflicts and assist with execution.***

Although designating individuals in the organization as social media ambassadors represents an investment in both time and resources, the impact is twofold. First, it helps formalize your organization’s strategy around social media. Secondly, this investment allows your organization to connect and interact with customers.

Strategy #5—Providing Guidelines for Success

This spring, Pizza Hut placed a highly publicized ad for a summer “Twintern” tasked with the full-time job of collecting and sharing insights and experiences via blog, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and emerging media.

With more businesses joining the social media conversation and an expanding base of employees empowered to engage in social media activities on behalf of the restaurant (whether chain or independent), the need for guidelines is apparent. Some basic guidelines include:

- **Identify ground rules about sensitive information, including content related to competitors.**
- **Encourage creativity, but give employees specific details about what they can and cannot do.**
- **Focus content on relevant information that reflects positively on your restaurant brand and associates.**

Within large chain restaurants, formalized internal policies are increasingly required. IBM began a formal push in 2005 to encourage its employees to participate in the blogosphere. A useful benchmark for balancing corporate control with the open nature of social media can be found on the IBM social computing website (www.ibm.com/blogs/zz/en/guidelines.html). Another resource is the UK’s Chartered Institute of Public Relations Social Media Guidelines (www.cipr.co.uk/socialmedia/).

IBM’s guidelines are preceded by this statement: *Below are the current and official “IBM Social Computing Guidelines,” which continue to evolve as new technologies and social networking tools become available.* Social media policies should embrace collaboration and creativity while reminding employees, “Don’t forget your day job.”

Final Thought: Develop a Roadmap and Be Ready to “Recalculate Route”

There are four basic questions a restaurant organization should ask when developing a strategic social media roadmap:

- **What platforms make the most sense** for our organization to have a presence? For which ones should we just “listen in?”
- **In what ways can the organization systematically track social media “conversations”** and the effectiveness of social media initiatives?
- **How can we internally implement a system that allows us to continuously learn and adapt** to changes in social media technology?
- **How will our organization define success** in social media?

In an age of widespread use of GPS navigation, the notion of “recalculating” your route is nothing new. The same technique should be applied to social media planning. Rapid growth of one platform may lead to new opportunities to integrate campaigns into another (i.e. linking YouTube content through Facebook). And while Facebook and Twitter rule the roost today, reinvention and redefinition are the very nature of social media technology. In other words, keep an eye out for the next big thing.

NEXT STEPS

To receive a preview of the preliminary results from our upcoming consumer survey research on social media, contact Erik Thoresen at 312-506-3854 or ethoresen@technomic.com.