

Winning "Friends" and Influencing Customers

The Brave New World of Social Media



by Mary Lou Santovec

A beautiful basket of fresh, colorful cherry tomatoes, gleaming peppers and rich green zucchini sit on the shining stainless steel prep table at Becket's in Oshkosh. Within seconds, co-owner Kris Larson is sending the mouthwatering picture to 800 of the restaurant's closest "friends"...

On a cool, rainy Friday, Facebook users in Fond du Lac logging in to catch up with friends, are also invited to brighten their day with a slice of home-made Schreiner's pie and hot coffee... Cousins Subs' marketing manager asks the sub chain's Facebook fans where they would like to see another Cousins and within hours has dozens of people offering suggestions around the country and waxing poetic over their favorite subs ...

Facebook, Twitter and "social media" seem to be the buzz words on everyone's lips these days, and with good reason. Facebook alone has more than doubled its active users in the last year, with more than 250 million people worldwide now on the social media giant. Nearly half of those users log on to the site daily. That kind of reach, combined with minimal investment, is a tasty and tempting recipe for restaurants who want to bring more people through their doors. But while setting up a Facebook or Twitter account is easy, making the most of it does require more thought.

Wisconsin Restaurateur talked to several restaurant operators who have plunged into the social media world about what's working for them. We also talked to some social media experts to find out other ways restaurants can capitalize on the brave new world of social media.

Announcing tonight's specials – to a few hundred friends

"Fresh raspberry pie will be on our menu tomorrow, Friday July 10! This special treat is seldom available and is made right here in our bakery with locally grown

raspberries." –Schreiner's Restaurant on Facebook.

For its immediacy, restaurant operators are finding few outlets can beat social media. With a few keystrokes, restaurant operators are announcing the catch of the day, the night's drink specials or the arrival of fresh raspberries to dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of people who have expressed a keen interest in knowing what is going on at their restaurant.

Kris Larson, co-owner of Becket's in Oshkosh, started the restaurant's Facebook and Twitter accounts immediately when the restaurant opened a year ago and posts specials at least once a day.

"It's really well-watched and well-received," he said. "I'm amazed. If I forget to put up the specials, people comment on it." In addition to food and drink specials, Larson said social media has also been a very successful tool for getting the word out on the restaurant's special events, getting a better response than paid advertising or press releases.

And in the case of Schreiner's raspberry pie? "We knew people came in specifically because they read it on Facebook," said Marcia Haupt, assistant manager. "It's minimal effort," she said "and it's a lot faster to send something out on Facebook than our e-newsletter."

From the experts: "This is an opportunity to connect with customers and many of them are very well equipped

technologically," says Dan Connolly, Ph.D., associate professor at the School of Hotel, Restaurant and Tourism Management at the University of Denver. In addition to just announcing specials, you can offer customers special deals, such as mention this 'tweet' or that you saw this on Facebook, and receive a free appetizer or dessert.

A picture is worth a thousand words. (And a video ...)

"2009 Car Hops doing what they do best!"
– Caption below pictures of car hops in poodle skirts and roller skates from the Rudy's Drive In Facebook page.

For the LaCrosse restaurant Rudy's Drive In, It's not just Rudy's car hops on their photo pages, but also pictures of classic cars and motorcycles from the summer's cruise nights and bike nights. More than just announcing the current frozen yogurt flavor, Rudy's Facebook page is giving visitors a flavor of the classic drive in itself.

In addition to his daily Facebook and Twitter postings for Becket's, Larson is often snapping photos of what's going on in the restaurant. By using his iPhone to take the pictures and access the Internet, "I can walk through the dining room, take a picture and have it up on Facebook in five seconds," Larson said.

For Menomonee Falls-based sandwich chain Cousins Subs, sharing news and images of their Moo Tour and Moo-la-palooza promotion (a statewide contest culminating in crowning a mooing champion at the Wisconsin State

Fair) was the impetus for starting their Facebook page in April, said Senior Marketing Manager Justin McCoy. Since then, with fairly minimal promotion, the page has garnered more than 1,300 fans, many of whom were clicking on the photos and videos of the Moo Tour.

"We had people talking about us and looking



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at what was going on,” McCoy said. The company has also put videos up on YouTube, the video sharing site. “They are a fun addition and they do get traffic,” McCoy said. “When we think we have something fun to put out there, we put that out.”

From the experts: Photos and videos are excellent ways to communicate the feel and image of your restaurant – and photos are often shared with others. Hernandez recommends getting a statement on camera or a signed photo release from any guests or employees you feature in Facebook photos or videos. While the courts have yet to catch up with social media and define exactly what is permissible in this area, Hernandez says it’s a good practice to protect yourself by getting permission from anyone in your photos or videos.

Consider putting up video of an event or a chef doing a brief cooking demonstration. Don’t sweat the quality of the video – social media is the venue of amateurs. “In some cases, the grittier the better,” says Barb Hernandez, public relations director of Hiebing, a Madison-based marketing company. “If they look too staged, they don’t have as much value in the social media world.”

Information, information, information

“Liif teas come exclusively from single estates in the mountains of Sri Lanka. Our chamomile tea comes from Egypt in the Nile region...” – The Pfister Hotel’s Afternoon Tea Facebook page.

When launching a modern revival of a centuries old tradition – the afternoon tea – The Pfister Hotel’s Food and Beverage director, Troy Clarke, turned to Facebook as a way to not just promote, but to educate interested people about their unique teas.

“It’s all trial and error right now. It’s trying to figure out what will pique people’s interests,” Clarke said of their Facebook postings. Clarke has posted information about the origin of different teas and says he plans to post more about the health benefits of tea.

Although Clarke is still experimenting with their Facebook tea page, he has hit upon one of the most successful

strategies among social media users, according to the experts: forgoing pure promotion and instead offering up information.

From the experts: “The social media world is not a place where you should be heavy-handed in promoting,” says Joan Stewart. Stewart, a 22-year veteran of newspapers and self-employed “publicity expert” for the last 13 years, runs the website www.publicityhound.com. Instead of sounding like a commercial, Stewart says, be entertaining, be engaging and be useful.

“If I had a sushi restaurant, I would tweet about the history of sushi; how to eat it; I’d link to a recipe,” Stewart says. “The best way to draw a huge following is to offer useful information.”

It’s all about the conversation

“Pepperoni Melt. Two words that make my mouth water. Such a great combination of hot and cold. Nobody does it better.” – Cousins Subs Facebook Fan.

“Mmmm...great idea. Pepperoni Melt for lunch it is!” – Cousins Subs reply.

For social media users, conversation is key. It’s not just about hearing from a friend, a commercial entity or a restaurant – it’s about interaction.

“I want our fans to feel like there is a voice to Cousins Subs,” McCoy said. McCoy has the Cousins Facebook page up on his computer most of the day and pops in frequently to respond to fan comments. He also tries to spark some conversations, such as asking fans where they would like to see a new Cousins.

However, just because a conversation takes place over cyberspace doesn’t mean that it will always be glowing with positive vibes. Negative comments do get posted on social media sites and that is one of the reasons some businesses drag their feet on getting involved in social media. Once you are having a two-way conversation, you are not controlling all that is being said.

McCoy says while their social media interactions have been very positive, they are mindful that negative comments may be posted. As with complaints received in more traditional ways, McCoy says their policy is to respond to the customer and do what

they can – provide a coupon or reimbursement – to make the situation right. “We do the absolute same with Facebook,” he said.

From the experts: “What’s your favorite dish? What appetizer would you like to see on the menu? Have a contest to name a dish,” says Stewart, offering up ideas for conversation starters. The important thing is to spark some interaction. “Don’t make it only one way,” she says.

As for negative comments, “often what can make the difference is how you recover,” Connolly says. Investigate the comment to see if it has merit and then respond – show you are listening and making improvements. And rather than viewing negative comments with trepidation, consider this your own free focus group. “This is a great feedback opportunity,” Connolly says.

Social Media Do’s and Don’ts

- Do choose a social media venue that is appropriate for your restaurant. Facebook’s over-30 crowd is growing fast, while Twitter still tends to have a younger following.
- Don’t let your page go stale. Old info doesn’t cut it with tech-savvy

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“friends” and “fans.” Your Facebook status should probably be updated at least a few times a week; most Twitter users “tweet” several times a day.

- Do give thought to the tone of your page. A fast food outlet’s page is likely to be very different than the page of a four-star restaurant.
- Don’t be too “sales-y.” Social media should sound more like a conversation than a commercial.
- Do promote your Facebook or Twitter pages in other venues, like print ads, your website and in-store displays.
- Do add photos and videos to your page. Tagging photos is a great way to get your page accessed by more users and potential fans. Get permission, ideally a signed release, from anyone featured in your photos or videos.
- Don’t let social media be an afterthought. If you are having an event at your restaurant, announce it ahead of time and plan to take pictures to share afterward.
- Do monitor the conversation – know what is being said in social media about your restaurant.

- Don’t pull down all negative comments. Social media users do not respond well to being censored and you will lose credibility in the social media world. Unless the post is vulgar, libelous or the like, you are better off leaving it up.
- Do respond to negative posts. Correct any misinformation, apologize for any mistakes on your part and tell your fans how you are going to make things better.

The basics

Facebook – Individuals or businesses can build a personal page with information, photos and videos. Other users become a “friend” of an individual or a “fan” of a business. When you update your Facebook “status” the update is seen by all your friends or fans when they log in to their Facebook accounts.

Twitter – Allows you to send out a 140 character text message – a “tweet” – to anyone who has signed on to follow your account. Tweets can be sent via mobile texting, instant message or the web.

MySpace – Until recently, often spoken of in the same breath with Facebook as the two social media giants. While the older of the two, MySpace is not keeping pace with Facebook’s growth, especially with 30+ users.

However, younger users, entertainment venues and musicians often still pick MySpace as their social media of choice.

YouTube – Allows you to upload videos to be shared. YouTube videos can also be embedded in your website.

Tweet this – more thoughts on social media

On the ease of Facebook: “Think of the amount of time people spent gathering mailing lists and e-mailing lists. This is like a mailing list that builds itself. I can’t see why any restaurant wouldn’t do this.” – Kris Larson, Becket’s, Oshkosh.

Using Facebook’s event feature: “You do find out who’s going to be around and who’s not. It’s not 100 percent true, but it is helpful.” – Troy Clarke, The Pfister, Milwaukee, who uses Facebook’s event RSVP feature to find out who may be coming to an event at Blu, the hotel’s bar, and staffs accordingly.

Being authentic in social media: “Early on there were marketing companies posing as owners of restaurants and it doesn’t come off as real, it comes off as corporate speak.” Barb Hernandez, Hiebing, Madison.

How often to update: “If you go quiet for a couple days, you’re less likely to keep your followers.” – Hernandez on Twitter.

“Facebook has become such a spot for family and friends. When you are too inundated from a commercial entity, I think that can get you dropped by certain people.” – Justin McCoy, Cousins Subs, Menomonee Falls.

Being personal: “People like to feel like they’re in touch with the owner or business, they aren’t just a number. (Facebook) is almost like you and I are talking, just via the Internet.” – Gary Rudy, Rudy’s Drive In, La Crosse and Sparta.

“Make it fun – these are supposed to be social mediums.” – Hernandez **WR**

