

For Restaurants, Social Media Is About More Than Just Marketing

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Social media certainly has its benefits for those who love dining and drinking. From free drinks for [Foursquare](#)(?) checkins, to [Twitter](#)(=D) notifications about happy hours, to [Facebook](#)(=)) messages about free food, there's always something tasty happening online.

But the social web offers a lot more than just discounts and deals when it comes to drinking and dining. Restaurants and bars are giving social media users a backstage pass to the food and the people who make it. Chefs and restaurateurs are using social media to reveal how their dishes are made, generate familiarity with chefs and provide a means for diners to share feedback.

Revealing How Dishes Are Made

While customers go to lower end restaurants looking for value and discounts, higher-end restaurants think that “discounts cheapen the experience,” says [Tom O’Keefe](#), a Boston-based restaurant tweeter and social media-focused marketer.

You can blame it on the rise of celebrity chefs or the success of The Food Network and shows like *Top Chef*, but now more than ever, people want to live vicariously through others who cook. Many restaurants, including Chicago’s [Piccolo Sogno](#) and [The Bristol](#), are posting videos to [YouTube](#)(=D) or [Vimeo](#)(=)) of new dishes being prepared. “The general idea is to pull the curtain back,” says Phillip Walters of The Bristol. “Allow people at home to feel more involved and engaged with that you are trying to deliver.”

But social media does a lot more than just satisfy curiosities. It makes Twitter followers or Facebook fans remember their last visit. [Stu Mitchell](#), marketing director for [Blue 13](#), a Rock and Roll spot in Chicago, says this act of reminding customers about their last visit “prompt[s] them to want to return, to keep us fresh in the minds of those who have yet to visit, but have been planning on it.”

But the behind-the-scenes social media technique sways more toward high-end than fast food restaurants. A behind-the-scenes glimpse of the origins of the McNugget (hint: it's birthed from [pink goop](#)) led to Internet(=D)-wide horror and repulsion.

“A local Taco Bell is going to connect and build community in a very different way versus a Michelin-rated restaurant that brings passionate foodies together,” says Lorrie Thomas, CEO of [Web Marketing Therapy](#).

Getting to Know the Chefs

Instead of attracting customers with deals, many restaurants strive to use social media for a tailored, personal experience. “People love to go into a restaurant or bar and know the owner or the chef,” O’Keefe says. Think of it as instantly becoming a regular.

That’s why chefs like [Joanne Chang](#) of Boston’s Myers and Chang and Flour Bakery personally tweet photos of the kitchen staff at work. “If you’re in a PR firm, you’re not going to get the same feel,” O’Keefe says. “It’s her and you know that it’s her.”

[Grant Achatz](#), the man behind Chicago’s Alinea — named best restaurant in America in 2006 by *Gourmet* — also does his own tweeting. “Who would you rather hear from?” he asks. “Me directly or some weird person I paid to represent me?” When Achatz is not in the restaurant, he continues to tweet — from where he’s eating in Chicago to where he’s visiting in Japan. It lets people get to know him better and maintains a base, he says. “I’m not a celebrity, but I have a following.”

Achatz’s approach to helping his audience learn more about him is spot on. “Who we are” is the primary message of any effective marketing campaign, says Syeed Mansur, CEO of Sentrana, a firm that uses mathematical models to determine the most effective marketing strategies for companies.

Opening Communication Between Diners and Chefs



The restaurant experience has traditionally always been divided between front of house and back of house. Customers sat in the dining room and enjoyed their meals, completely disconnected from the people preparing the meals. The success of open kitchen designs, the farm-to-table movement, and books like Anthony Bourdain's [Kitchen Confidential](#), show that diners want a deeper connection to the food that's being prepared for them.

Not only does social media let customers view what's behind that "Employees Only" door, but it gives customers access to the people behind it. Twitter allows [Tony Priolo](#), chef of Piccolo Sogno, to connect with customers before they even come to the restaurant. And diners plugged in with social media receive special treatment. "If we tweeted with them beforehand I'll usually come out of the kitchen and thank them for tweeting with us or send over something special," he says.

Achatz likes to hear complaints from customers and says he actually responds. Sometimes he'll refund a meal, but more importantly, "the more we know about who is coming into our restaurant, the better we'll be able to fulfill our obligation to do what will make them feel happy," he says. A couple had flown into Chicago from New York to eat at his restaurant and expected not only excellent food but also excellent service. The wife was escorted to the bathroom the first time she got up, but not the second. Achatz thinks the front of house staff just assumed she knew the way and could help herself. But the husband indignantly tweeted about the incident and then Achatz knew that his customers had different assumptions of service. The restaurant has tweaked its service accordingly since then.

"When people know, like and trust us, they buy," Thomas says. "Pushing propaganda will freak people out."

While restaurants are unable to quantify the exact monetary impact of their social media campaigns, the responses they receive assure them that somebody is listening. "We hear enough feedback to know that we're reaching people and that they enjoy it," says Amy Mills Tunnicliffe of 17th Street Bar and Grill in southern Illinois.

Before social media, it was difficult for the average person (even a person spending \$200 for dinner) to have access to that ornery bartender or three-starred Michelin chef, but now, dishing complaints or compliments has become as easy as a tweet or a Facebook post.