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Have Restaurants Altered Their Social Media Approach?

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The COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on the hospitality industry and every sector within it. An industry built on the desire for face-to-face, tangible interaction was forced to evolve to accommodate an ever-growing virtual world. The need and want for safety remains prevalent despite the innate human desire to socialize, and companies must be cognizant of fluctuating consumer preferences and concerns moving forward.

The pandemic has brought with it confirmation that digital transformation is not only necessary but essential to business longevity. In a contactless world, preference for digital experiences has superseded the desire for physical ones. Research conducted by AI-powered personalization platform Kameleoon and leading experimentation agency Widerfunnel found that while time spent online has skyrocketed by 37%, consumers “won’t go back to offline channels.” Nearly a third (29%) said “they’ll be using digital channels increasingly more post-crisis.”¹ To remain competitive, companies must look to implement new strategies and practices. Consumers, now more than ever, have become entirely more reliant on digital channels for entertainment, social interaction,

¹ K. (2020, May 13). *29% of US Consumers will Increase Long-term Use of Digital Channels Because of COVID-19 Pandemic*. PR Newswire. <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/29-of-us-consumers-will-increase-long-term-use-of-digital-channels-because-of-covid-19-pandemic-301058495.html>

and basic news and information. Accordingly, businesses will adopt digital technologies to obtain, maintain, and retain customer relations. As the utilization of digital technologies grows, companies must navigate how to be hospitable in a digital world. The solution lies in the ability to innovate and adapt, to merge the old way of thinking with the new.

The restaurant sector in particular has been impacted severely, with nearly 70,000 restaurants across the United States alone permanently closing their doors since the beginning of the pandemic.² Amidst the chaos, the restaurant sector has been forced to strike a careful balance of strict safety standards, efficiency-focused tactics, and strategic marketing spend to survive. The utilization of effective digital marketing strategies for restaurants is not just an option anymore; it's a necessity.

Social Media Modifications

Although digital strategy options for businesses remain expansive, social media marketing has gained significant traction with its surge and reliance during the pandemic. According to The Harris Poll, one of the longest-running research and analytics companies in the United States that tracks public opinion, motivations, and social sentiment, between 46% and 51% of American adults are using social media more since the outbreak of COVID-19 began. More recently, the same survey conducted by The Harris Poll found that 51% of total respondents – 60% of those ages 18 to 34, 64% of those ages 35 to 49, and 34% of those ages 65 and up – reported increased usage on particular social media platforms.³ Head of Restaurants and Chief Operating Officer of Birdcall Restaurants Anthony Valletta (SHA '05) indicated that “the expectation of engagement and connectivity to the digital world has grown tenfold. Once people realized how easy the digital world was to engage, there was no turning back.” Social media has become an integral part of everyday life, and as such, marketers should look to capitalize on it with the utilization of social media platforms for marketing purposes. Yet, the pandemic has brought with it an abundance of change. As restaurateurs have had to pivot operationally, the use of social media has had to pivot too.

The sheer increase in the amount of people using social is just one of many fluctuations brought about by the pandemic. Other changes have been observed in consumer expectations. As Valletta explains, “One of the biggest shifts I’ve seen is in the user.

² Andrews, C. U. T. (2020, August 13). *Restaurants closing: 35 of the most popular that won't reopen after the coronavirus pandemic*. WLST. <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/money/2020/08/13/the-35-most-popular-restaurants-that-wont-reopen-after-the-pandemic/42198639/>

³ Samet, A. (2020, July 29). *How the Coronavirus Is Changing US Social Media Usage*. Insider Intelligence. [changedhttps://www.emarketer.com/content/how-coronavirus-changing-us-social-media-usage](https://www.emarketer.com/content/how-coronavirus-changing-us-social-media-usage)

Increased amounts of downtime have shifted activity times greatly. Peaks have disappeared and engagement has become entirely more consistent throughout the course of the day, with down periods almost non-existent.”

Stephen Martino, SHA '16 agrees. Martino, Group Marketing and Events Manager of Cushman Concepts, a multi-concept, hospitality-focused restaurant group located in Boston notes, “The actual time of day when people are active on social media has changed. Commuting times have changed, and people are not on their phones in the same way they were previously.” Thus, “there is a totally different calendar of when companies should be optimizing posts.” According to recent studies conducted by social media management and optimization platform Sprout Social, the optimal time for Facebook engagement has shifted from Wednesday between 11 AM and 12 PM to Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 10 AM to 11 AM. In the same study, Sprout cited a shift in Instagram use, with optimal post engagement shifting from Wednesday at 11 AM and Friday from 10 AM to 11 AM to Mondays, Tuesdays, and Fridays at 11 AM and Tuesdays at 2 PM⁴. From these findings, it is quite evident that opportunity for engagement through social has greatly expanded. Increased time at home has ultimately led to an increased use of social and companies must continue to remain cognizant of these changed consumer preferences to drive sales and success.

An uptick in screen time and reliance on social has also led to an increase in consumer expectations regarding social media content. According to Valletta, consumers are looking for “more” when it comes to online engagement with brands with which they choose to conduct business. This “more” takes shape in the form of an increase in need for creative engagement. At Birdcall, Valletta and his team host weekly live music shows on their Instagram. During these shows, different artists are provided an opportunity to showcase both the restaurant’s food and their talents to a wide online audience. This type of engagement is two-pronged as it provides the business a way to increase its customer base and create long-lasting and memorable experiences for all involved.

At The Smoke Shop, acclaimed Boston chef and restaurateur Andy Husbands and his team have also adopted increasingly creative approaches when it comes to engaging with their consumers through social. The brand’s popular series of virtual BBQ classes and whiskey tastings provide customers the ability to engage with the brand on an entirely more personal and memorable level.

⁴ Hutchinson, A., & Hutchinson, A. (2020, April 28). *The Best Times to Post on Social Media During COVID-19 [Report]*. Social Media Today. <https://www.socialmediatoday.com/news/the-best-times-to-post-on-social-media-during-covid-19-report/576850/>

While the need to digitally connect, and digitally connect at all times was prevalent this past year, there were other marketing elements that surfaced, repositioning how restaurateurs would approach their social content moving forward:

1. Platform of Choice. Instagram is King.

Although Facebook remains the most utilized social network globally, Instagram is now the fastest growing with 5% growth per quarter⁵. With over one billion monthly active users, engagement rates that are 84 times higher than other platforms, and a visual-first nature, Instagram remains the preferred platform of choice for many restaurant marketers⁶. According to Social Media Today, 30% of millennial diners actively avoid restaurants with a weak Instagram presence.⁷ As such, restaurants should seek to optimize their digital presence on the platform to drive engagement and sales.

Companies have sought to devote attention and dollars to platforms that will produce the most bang for their buck (Martino). Those with success, have focused their attention on optimizing platforms where the majority of their customers choose to spend their time. In an increasingly digital world, marketers must continue to remain acutely observant of new platforms to keep up with competition. Yet, companies must not be too quick to jump on the bandwagon of utilizing these new apps without first preparing to dedicate an immense amount of time and manpower (Martino). According to Andrew Freeman, founder of San Francisco-based hospitality consultancy AF&CO, “Brands must figure out a way to break through the clutter, get their posts seen and build their brand; Instagram provides the perfect opportunity to achieve all three.” Emma Chan of the Instagram account @bostonfoodgram agrees. With almost 53.7k followers Chan’s page beautifully displays a vast assortment of different foods, restaurants, and experiences around the city of Boston. In her opinion, two restaurant Instagram pages that stand out from the competition are Committee and Mistral. According to Chan, Committee’s “moody high-quality photos, featuring their special drinks of each season” and Mistral’s “classy, sophisticated photography of their dishes” are aspects that set their pages apart from the rest. Both restaurants, Chan continues, “have Instagram photography that perfectly reflects the ambiance.”

With a potential advertising reach of 1.16 billion users and 50% of Instagram users saying that they are interested in a brand after seeing an Instagram ad, investment of

⁵ Osman, M. (2021, February 8). *20+ Mind-Blowing Instagram Stats and Facts*. Kinsta.
<https://kinsta.com/blog/instagram-stats/>

⁶ T. (2019, October 16). *Why Use Instagram? 9 Statistics That Prove Your Restaurant Needs It*. Targetable.
<https://www.targetable.com/blog/why-use-instagram-9-statistics-that-prove-your-restaurant-needs-it>

⁷ Boyarsky, K. (2021, April 22). *Social Media Marketing Guide for Restaurants + Examples of Restaurant Social Media Marketing*. On the Line | Toast POS.
<https://pos.toasttab.com/blog/on-the-line/examples-of-awesome-restaurant-social-media-marketing>

capital into paying for posts has become an expectation.⁸ “Many restaurants that never paid for posts on Instagram prior to the pandemic now find the investment well worth their dollar,” says Birdcall’s Valetta.

2. The Customer Also Expects Restaurants to Voice a Stand.

The pandemic has pushed consumers to place a sizeable emphasis on trust. A groundbreaking 2020 global study commissioned by the Zeno Group analyzing the business of “brands having a well-understood purpose” reveals that consumers are almost four to six times more likely to “trust, champion, and defend companies with a strong purpose.”⁹ Consumers of today are looking to invest in brands that show that they genuinely care; that brands they choose to buy from are willing to overlook profit for the betterment of the world and the people within it. “The trend of brand voice had been emerging more visibly in the last decade, but with the pandemic also witnessing a period of social unrest in the United States in particular, over a variety of issues – societal, political and moral – the expectation of brand voice has emerged even more rapidly and publicly,” shares Boston University Associate Professor of the Practice Leora Lanz.

According to Cory Schisler, SHA ‘06, principal and founder of Urchin Workshop, a marketing consultancy for hospitality-minded companies, “What is resonating with consumers now more than ever are brands that support causes, brands that are doing something to support their communities, and ultimately brands that utilize their platforms for social good and a clear standpoint.”

There has been an observable shift in the message and tone of many restaurateurs’ social media posts and pages during and as we recover from COVID. Surface-level content has been supplanted with posts that take a stand and, content with substance that can regain and rebuild consumer trust. Many large restaurant chains such as McDonald’s, Taco Bell and Starbucks amongst many others, have chosen to break their silence and issue public statements through their social media pages condemning racism and violence and supporting social activism. McDonald’s president Joe Erlinger writes, “Our actions matter, and so we must recommit to our shared values of diversity

⁸ Newberry, C. (2021, February 3). *44 Instagram Statistics That Matter to Marketers in 2021*. Social Media Marketing & Management Dashboard. <https://blog.hootsuite.com/instagram-statistics/>

⁹ Aziz, A. (2020, June 17). *Global Study Reveals Consumers Are Four To Six Times More Likely To Purchase, Protect And Champion Purpose-Driven Companies*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/afdhelaziz/2020/06/17/global-study-reveals-consumers-are-four-to-six-times-more-likely-to-purchase-protect-and-champion-purpose-driven-companies/?sh=319bc85f435f>.

and inclusion. At McDonald's, our doors are open to everyone, we exclude nobody."¹⁰ Excerpts from an article titled *Black Lives Matter: Starbucks Update on Standing Against Racial Injustice*, published on their website, outlines the different ways in which the restaurant is "taking a stand." An excerpt from the post reads, "Starbucks stands in solidarity with our Black partners, community and customers, and understands the desire to express themselves...this is just one step in our journey to make our company and our communities more inclusive."¹¹ Posts like these work to humanize the brands, connect the brands with consumers on an entirely deeper level, build trust, drive customer engagement, and ultimately increase long-term customer loyalty.

Taking a stance can manifest itself in various forms. For example, The Smoke Shop has chosen to maintain consumer trust by utilizing their social platforms to portray who they are behind the scenes. Smokeshop prefers to show the heart and soul of who they are as people. Stories on their Instagram provide insight into the innerworkings of the restaurant and the people that make it happen. Making consumers feel like they're "home" is of the utmost importance to the brand. According to Rice Wales, Chief Marketing Officer of The Smoke Shop BBQ, "We want to be the place where you come and feel comfortable, a place where lifelong memories can be made, and be made safely." For owner and chef Andy Husbands, taking a stand means protecting his work family and sharing their stories.

For Zahav Restaurant in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, taking a stand means social action and supporting local restaurants as well as motivating people to vote. On their Instagram feed, motivational videos with the captions, "What we're Voting for" and "#SaveRestaurants" portray beautifully curated and meaningful messages to their 63.7k followers. "What we're voting for" depicts individual employees holding signs with the reasons to vote, along with the message, "Let's all get after it and put into action one of our most sacred rights! VOTE." A sole Instagram highlight straightforwardly dubbed "Let's Vote" directs viewers to the video as well. In "#SaveRestaurants" messages calling for unity and solidarity of local restaurants in Philadelphia flash across the screen. Although the videos are in support of two entirely different causes, they both work to show people that they care and connect with consumers on a more "purposeful" level to ultimately build trust with their community and those within it.

3. Re-allocation of Marketing Dollars: In-House.

¹⁰ *McDonald's U.S. President "Appalled by Recent Events."* (2020). QSR Magazine.
<https://www.qsrmagazine.com/news/mcdonalds-us-president-appalled-recent-events>

¹¹ *Black Lives Matter: Starbucks update on standing against racial injustice.* (2020). Starbucks.
<https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2020/starbucks-shares-update-on-standing-together-against-racial-injustice/>

Re-allocation of marketing dollars pre- and through the pandemic is another shift that has been observed. Some restaurants have chosen to cut back public relations and email marketing initiatives and instead invest their time and resources into organic and paid social media. “Now, more than ever, every dollar counts, and brands must remain extraordinarily vigilant about allocating dollars into marketing tools that will move the needle,” says The Smoke Shop’s Rice Wales. For Wales and her team, moving the needle meant cutting public relations monies significantly during the pandemic because “every dollar counted.” Instead, time, focus, and capital at the restaurant shifted towards building a strong social media presence. Social media, according to Wales, “was the businesses lifeline to their customers” and as such, marketing dollars were shifted entirely into digital. Similarly, the team at Birdcall restaurants in Denver, Colorado, also found themselves moving capital from traditional marketing tactics to social media to increase sales and overall success. For Valetta, utilizing paid boosts and geofencing were “groundbreaking” like never before.

Another way that restaurants have both saved capital and improved the quality of content is through utilizing in-house staff to execute their social rather than outsourcing the job. For Cushman Concept’s Martino “a different level of personalization and insight can be achieved by utilizing someone on the inside. Guests can tell when content comes from someone who is not physically there. Social media coming from the inside allows for “beautiful moments to be caught in real time.”

Valletta agrees, “A third-party company isn’t going to be able to grasp the intimate ins and outs of a brand, to understand a brand and create consistent, clear, and passionate content in the same way that someone on the inside can.” Companies are investing an increasing amount of capital into training those on the inside, rather than allocating dollars towards those on the outside. Using in-house staff and maximizing their individual strengths, passion, and knowledge allows companies to create unparalleled content that drives customer engagement and sales in the long run.

What’s Next for Restaurant Social Media Marketing?

The pandemic has compelled restaurants to think creatively about their marketing outreach. “Flexibility, open-mindedness, and innovation are crucial in the post-COVID era,” adds Martino. As an industry that is comprised of people who are resilient by nature, restaurants have been able to pivot quickly and efficiently. With crises comes the opportunity for growth. According to AF&Co’s Andrew Freeman, “As we’re coming out of this, we must look to adopt a more integrated marketing approach. We must combine the tried and trues, old way of doing things and blend them with lessons learned from the adversities of the last year to fine-tune an overall strategy.”

Valletta adds, “As much as COVID was one of the worst things to happen to society and to our industry. It’s forced us to become more innovative than ever before.”

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