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Social Networking hits the hospitality industry

Every day there are thousands of people joining the already millions on any number of social network sites.....so why not spread your reach to them

It's hard to resist a captive audience of millions who are all online and that could be potential customers. If you don't have an account on one, or all three of the major Social media players, and you have a business, you could be missing out on customers, all with money to spend. Nearly all the social networking sites are targeted at creating some form of viral effect. Ultimately that is what makes the Facebook platform so appealing currently to many business's. Social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter are not just for posting pictures of your weekend antics. They have become a powerful marketing tool that if used correctly, can drive business to your website and translate into sales.

The key word here is used correctly. People who use social networking sites do not want to feel as if they are being used by some company that is simply trying to make money. Facebook has several features that are a marketing experts dream. For one thing, it's free. It allows its users to upload videos, news, start fun contests, etc, which can entice viewers to your profile and customers to your website.

Remember what social networking sites are and what their purpose is: to make friends, get in touch with old friends, and connect people who have a common interest. To that end, social networking can work if you are subtle about your marketing efforts. Some people who use social networking sites may say that they don't want to be marketed to, a large number of users are doing just that, some without even realising it.

Nearly every "celebrity" chef in Australia is on twitter, speaking about what they are preparing, launches of new menus, arrival of truffles etc These smart and savvy chefs are gaining some serious momentum and followers, whilst at the same time sending powerful but subtle, "come and check us out" messages to all that follow.

Restaurant owner Craig Macindoe uses Facebook, Twitter and blogging to have conversations with people about his Mumu Grill restaurant in Crows Nest, Sydney. First, he formed a Facebook group, where people could comment on his posts and blogs.

"[Topics included] what's good at the markets on Wednesday mornings to recipes I'm using," he says. "It didn't take long before people engaged in what was going on at Mumu Grill." Then Macindoe started hosting business networking dinners at his steak house by inviting people who were following him on Twitter (he now has 3795 followers). Today, he credits 30 percent of his business' growth to social media.

With numbers like that it is a hard medium to ignore, especially when it costs nothing to engage with your listener/viewer.

There's been a number of studies and surveys on the internet looking at the demographic of Facebook users, and there is significant evidence that business people are joining the social network in droves. There is a

strong chance that a good percentage of your existing customers are already on Facebook. This demographic can be very hard to market to as a restaurant as they are busy people and many don't engage in usual media as they are generally time poor, With this in mind Facebook is a good platform to reach that certain demographic as they are actively engaging in social networking.

Social networking traffic gives you better visibility for the business, and that is valuable traffic. Having profile pages is another way of getting your name out there, giving potential customers more ways to discover the business and to purchase from it. With more traffic, word of mouth can spread, boosting sales and online brand recognition of the business. With that in mind, ACA research recently conducted an independent survey to 5000 diners nationally.. The results showed that 80% of customers will visit your web page to look at updated menus prior to making a booking. So not only should you ensure that it is up to date but by simply adding a face book link, you have the potential to capture more traffic when someone visits the page. Almost instantaneously you are reaching that person and all of their friends.

Twitter

Like Twitter, Facebook also includes an instant update feature. If Facebook can do what Twitter does, why would anyone need a presence on both networks? The answer: not everyone has both a Twitter and Facebook account. While some do, some of your customers won't. Each network functions differently with advantages and disadvantages to both. Having a presence on both networks gives your restaurant guarantees a higher brand visibility than if you only choose one.

Twitter extends your restaurant's presence online by giving your business a voice that is often lost in direct advertising and best of all it is a real time network. A personality behind a brand leads to improved customer engagement and paves the way for new followers. So in a lot of ways this network relies somewhat on Wit! If you have the ability to post comments that are fun, factual, engaging and of interest, you will gain a large following in a short time.

Twitter is the best tool for sending quick updates to your venue's community. Some updates can include new menu items, coupons and happy hour reminders. Your Twitter network receives your announcement instantly, can reply to what you say and retweet it to their entire Twitter network to reach an even larger audience.

Justin North, Tony Percouco and Red Spice Road use this medium well, constantly updating when they have launched new menus, new restaurant openings and what they are trying (eating or preparing) at any given moment. i.e. " loving these White Truffles from Piemonte"

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