e-m@rketing 101

Build a Web Presence That Will Get Your Customers in the Door

by Bob McKay

With just a click of a mouse, consumers can check their e-mail, find local businesses and do virtually anything as long as they have an Internet connection. There is an unlimited amount of information at your customers' fingertips and your e-mail messages and restaurant's Web site are undoubtedly among the masses. What impression are yours making?

Your Restaurant's Face to the World
Before a new customer steps foot in your restaurant, many will search online for your phone number, address or more information about restaurant. Perhaps, they are looking to see if you offer online ordering or online reservations, yet another online feature that brings your business right to their fingertips. Using the Internet in this way has become so commonplace that if you don't have a Web site, you simply don't exist. Or, if you have a poorly designed Web site, your reputation is at risk. By focusing on these crucial Web design elements, you can avoid some major pitfalls.

Balanced Visual Appeal
Use colors and graphics on your Web site that mirror your restaurant's personality. Fine dining and modern, elegant restaurants should communicate that same feeling through their Web sites with classic design elements, rich color schemes and high-quality photos. If you are a casual, family restaurant or a QSR, illustrate your laidback, carefree brand with that same energy.

Awareness of the 60 Second Rule
Most Internet surfers will only give you 60 seconds of their attention unless you entice them to give you more. Put the most compelling message and visuals 'above the fold'— this is the portion of your site visible without scrolling. To capture potential customers' attention immediately, include a photo of your restaurant or some of your signature dishes, your phone number and address on your homepage. Most of the time, patrons who find themselves on your site are simply looking for your locations and menus.

Easy Navigation
Once you've got your guest's attention, ensure that your site is easy to use. Clearly outline headings on your main page that will direct customers to your menu, photos, pricing, contact information and perhaps even online ordering and reservation information. You could even include your restaurant's story and bios about management and employees to give your restaurant a more personal feel.

Quality Content
Clearly define what type of cuisine you serve and what kind of atmosphere and service your customers should expect. As consumers surf the Web in search of a restaurant, this is the information they are typically looking for. It is also what the major search engines will use when ranking your site in the search results. Content, as well as search engine optimization and promotion, determines how easy it is to find and access your site on the Web. Search engine optimization improves the volume and quality of traffic to your site from search engines via "natural" search results for targeted key words. Make common sense choices when categorizing your restaurant, playing up its best features and utilizing these key words. Use other promotions to complement search engine marketing and get the word out about your site. Include the link to your Web site in any press releases or articles about your restaurant, display your site in online ads, e-mail communications and all print materials, such as table tents, flyers, menus and business cards.

E-mail Marketing
In addition to having a well-designed site, an e-mail program can take your Web presence from average to outstanding. According to the Direct Marketing Association, e-mail marketing has a ROI of $45.65 and restaurateurs can't afford to miss out on this lucrative opportunity. With an e-mail program in place, you won't just depend on patrons to visit your site. You'll also have access to their inboxes and can drive them to your site and your restaurant from there. Remember to follow the same guidelines for your e-mail messages as you do for your Web site. Unimpressive design and irrelevant content can damage your reputation. In addition to good design, subject lines and message content should be brief, compelling and to the point. Capture your customers' attention with the subject line and entice them with a special offer, exciting new menus or other happenings around your restaurant. E-mail your customers once to twice per month with relevant, valuable messages and you will boost the number of visits they pay to your restaurant. If you reflect your restaurant's charming personality, an e-mail program can boost cus-

tomer loyalty and ultimately your bottom line.

An Online Signup Form
Include an online form on your Web site so your guests can sign up for your program to receive news, promotions, special members-only offers and upcoming events. In-store signup forms aren't enough. According to AIS Media Inc., 68 percent of restaurateurs are using online joins to grow their lists. If you add a join form to your site, you can capture new members and use e-mail to forge a relationship with them, potentially converting them into your most loyal customers.

Stay Up to Date
Once you have a well-designed Web site and e-mail program in place, sit back and relax, right? Not exactly. Like any other depreciable asset, Web properties deteriorate and lose value over time if not regularly refreshed and updated. Was your company's Web site built several years ago? If so, it's likely that online techniques were used that are obsolete today and it may be time to reconstruct your site. As for e-mail, the same rules apply. Make sure your communications are modern and relevant.

Overall, the Internet is an absolutely vital element to any business' marketing strategy and restaurants are no exception. Your Web site and your e-mails represent who you are and what your restaurant is about. Weak Web sites that leave visitors with bad impressions are often the result of amateurish creative design, inappropriate colors and graphics and cumbersome navigation schemes that make it difficult for users to move around the site. Don't make these same mistakes. Remember, strong brands take time and money to establish, but whether you have big chain or only independent restaurant, your Web presence should nurture your restaurant's personality. Don't let it hold your restaurant back; put it to work for you. It could mean driving more traffic to your stores and ultimately boosting sales.

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