



The Social Media Smarts

Q: While using Facebook and other social media networks, which is the best method and what works the most effectively?

—Tom Brown, Owner, *Harvey Milk's American Diner*

A: I bet social networking is both a source of excitement and of frustration for you, Tom, as it is for many others. Everyone's heard about how social media can drive traffic and improve brand image, but it's hard to know which networks are the best ones for your business and to navigate all the possible ways to use them. That's why it's critical to start with objectives. Social networks and social media are simply tools to use to accomplish a job, and you wouldn't build a house by looking at a hammer and saw and asking what should be done with them.

You need to also remember that social media's best use is often simply for listening and learning. Social conversations are an informal, inexpensive source of market research, and you can learn a lot about what your customers want, what they think of you, and how your competitors are doing. Social media isn't the answer for everything, either—local-store marketing, public relations, and “old-fashioned” advertising and promotions remain some of the most effective restaurant marketing tools.

When you're clear about what you're actually trying to do, you can evaluate the appropriateness of different social tools. Each is best used for different purposes—advertising, information, conversation, entertainment, or utility.

Facebook:

PROS: It's the most popular network with the largest user base.

CONS: Mobile capabilities lag, so it's not great for time-sensitive, in-the-moment usage.

Facebook's best use is as an enhanced website for masses to learn about you. Target is a good example of how you can use Facebook: It used the site to raise \$2.5 million for education by allowing fans to vote for recipients from a list of eligible schools.

Twitter:

PROS: It's low cost, done in real time, and is easy to target relevant conversations.

CONS: It has a short shelf life and limited message size.

Twitter is best used as a customer-service tool and for time-sensitive promotional messages. As an example, JetBlue uses its @JetBlue Twitter account to respond to individuals who need customer service right away, such as fliers stranded at airports. Its @JetBlueCheeps handle promotes real-time deals, including fare sales and last-minute promos.

YouTube:

PROS: It's the second-largest search engine, and online video continues to grow in popularity.

CONS: It has unclear conversion rates and pre-roll ads you can't control.

YouTube is best used as content marketing (for example, telling stories or conveying thought leadership) and additional exposure for TV advertising. Remember the Old Spice TV commercials featuring former NFL player Isaiah Mustafa? The company got millions of additional views via YouTube and then followed-up with a series of videos featuring Mustafa responding personally to comments about the original ad.

Pinterest/Instagram:

PROS: They are good for products with visual appeal (food!) and are the fastest-growing media.

CONS: They're less business focused and have lower user bases.

Instagram and Pinterest are best used as fun community-engagement tools. Lands' End, for example, created a Pinterest campaign in which users were encouraged to browse a website featuring the company's Canvas clothing line and create “Lands' End Canvas” pinboards of their favorite images.

No matter which social networks you tap into, a solid implementation plan will help you get the most out of your effort. Figure out the who, what, when, and how of your plan.

For “who,” you should identify two groups: the customers you're trying to reach, such as types of people or visit occasions, and the internal people who are charged with implementing the plan. Designate someone who is responsible for monitoring social networks for mentions of your brand and responding in real-time as much as possible. If your participation is unpredictable or wanes over time, people will not engage with you.

The “what” of your plan should indicate the types of content you will need to populate social media—a pipeline of offers/deals, different types of messages and information, videos, images, stories, and so on. Your content needs to be engaging, timely, and not just about you and your brand. Develop content about topics, events, and people relevant to your audience.

Content creation is often the most difficult and time-consuming aspect of social media marketing, so I recommend you develop a content calendar to establish a regular schedule when you will create, write, edit, and post content. That covers the “when” of your social media plan.

Finally, plan “how” you will interact with people through social media. You should use a consistent, distinctive voice and visual elements that convey your brand values and personality. ☑