



CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS:

Prepare, react, survive
—and maybe even thrive—
in the world of social media

by Mary Bergin

Horseshoes, football and baseball are each known as “a game of inches,” but sometimes the phrase applies to business too. Nobody knows this better than owners of Subway, the submarine sandwich operation with 21,000-plus franchises in at least 100 countries.

All it took was one online photo of a ruler next to a sandwich to spark a viral, global consumer conversation and subsequent class action lawsuit that took three years to settle.

All the fuss was about a Subway marketing campaign for “Footlong” sandwiches whose bread loaves didn’t always measure up precisely. The photo that began the chatter and led to legal action, posted by a teenager in Australia, showed an 11-inch Footlong.

Takeaway one: Be careful about what you promise. Manage customer expectations by being accurate in menus, marquees and marketing.

Takeaway two: Don’t underestimate the power of social media to complicate

business. How that happens may have everything or nothing to do with food or service quality.

Keep personal passions private

It’s a new landscape for business owners because of the incredible power that social media wields these days. “Think before you speak,” advises Brian Lee of Revelation PR, Advertising and Social Media, Madison. He says restaurant operators are wise to avoid commenting on political, cultural and other hot-button topics via social media because “the risks almost always outweigh the rewards.”

Backlash can be fast, furious and futile to fight. Lee mentions Cup It Up American Grill as a 2017 example. Owners permanently closed the restaurant in Tucson, Ariz., merely three days after posting their political beliefs on Facebook. “Within minutes, the post was met with a barrage of comments, most of them negative and including calls to boycott the restaurant,” the *Arizona Daily Star* reported.

A Wisconsin restaurant operator, who requested anonymity, says he remains affected by a colleague’s politically charged commentary—even though it was not posted on the business website. “What he said and did wasn’t illegal, but at the end of the day, there’s nothing to win by opining,” the owner says.

It didn’t matter that his colleague apologized online or that the verbal tirade was a personal opinion. Activists followed virtual footprints to the restaurant and bombarded the business with Facebook reactions, emails and letters. Five months later, repercussions continue: Scheduled banquet business was lost, day-to-day business has not fully recovered and a business partner is on his way out.

The owner thinks restaurateurs should ask employees to omit their place of employment from social media profiles, to lessen the possibility that the business will be linked to an individual’s antics online.

continued on page 18

SOCIAL MEDIA SHAMING



I’VE NEVER BEEN TO YOUR RESTAURANT, BUT I’M GIVING YOU A ONE STAR REVIEW BECAUSE I DON’T LIKE YOU!

A relatively new phenomenon in the social media world for restaurants and hotels is the threat of one star reviews. The public has latched onto one star reviews on Yelp, Facebook and other platforms as a way to punish a business that they may be unhappy with for reasons other than their actual experience with that restaurant or hotel.

While completely wrong and unfair, it is happening with greater frequency, instilling fear in the hearts of restaurateurs and hoteliers everywhere.

There are countless examples where members of the public post one star reviews because they were unhappy with a restaurant’s stance on a political or social issue or want to show their distaste for a specific incident or comment that was captured on social media.

For example, when a disgruntled employee exposed online a manager’s poor choice in a transaction of issuing a W-2 form, the negative response brought a social media shame campaign down on the restaurant. The restaurant suffered threats of one star reviews with comments stating that they hope the restaurant goes out of business as a result.

Another alarming example involves negative online reactions to a business decision. A hotel in Wisconsin was recently barraged with negative online comments, the threat of one star reviews and possible protests—and they even believe their website was hacked—all because a controversial group booked the venue for an event. As a result, the hotel cancelled the group’s contract. Hotels in different cities that were also booked for the group’s tour experienced similar negative reaction.

These serve as cautionary tales for business owners everywhere. The threat of “social shaming” or “cyberbullying” underscores the need for caution and restraint in business decisions and social media interaction.

Check out Yelp’s Support Center for guidance on reporting an inappropriate or questionable review.



“The restaurant business is hard enough, without all this,” the beleaguered owner emphasizes. “We should survive, but if I have to, I’ll reinvent and rebrand our place.”

Takeaway one: The world is politically charged and polarizing. Resist weighing in, especially on business profile pages online.

Takeaway two: Don’t assume the spotlight won’t find you. If it happens, acknowledge the issue, and then fight to move beyond it.

Whose story is it?

“Anytime a social media crisis is ignored, others are empowered to tell your side of the story on your behalf,” says Amy

Steger, social media and attendee development strategist for the Wisconsin Restaurant Association. “By briefly addressing commentary, there is an opportunity to engage in conversation, add a human element and educate others on your position.”

People who make a point of playing fair get swept into virtual hurricanes too. Kris Larson of Becketts in Oshkosh took heat from both sides of the political spectrum before Gov. Scott Walker’s recall election. His restaurant got onto do-not-patronize lists compiled by Walker supporters and Walker protestors.

Larson had done nothing to get there except host election-night parties for both Democrat and Republican

candidates. “We make food for a living—that’s that,” he said. “I had lots of long phone calls to explain” this during the heat of recall politics. “Every time you open your mouth, it’s public relations.”

He invests “a lot of time and some money” toward social media. He and his general manager treat the Becketts page on Facebook as “our own little newspaper,” maintaining and curating a consistent image through photography and video postings. The option of allowing Facebook reviews is disabled because of the many other places (including Yelp, TripAdvisor) for customers to leave online reviews.

Takeaway one: The more consistent your voice on Facebook, the more

By the Numbers

Research gathered by Kay-Tee Olds of Engaging Results Communications, Madison, shows how the power of online consumer reviews stacks up.

97 percent of consumers read online reviews for local businesses in 2017.

97%

87 percent won’t consider patronizing a local business with low ratings.

87%

84%

84 percent trust online reviews as much as a personal recommendation.

74%

74 percent say positive reviews make them trust a local business more.

58%

58 percent say the star rating of a business is most important.

helpful it becomes if or when something goes wrong. "There's not a lot of pretense involved in this," Larson says. "It's about integrity and finding your voice."

Takeaway two: Take charge of telling your story instead of letting others manipulate it.

Study the big picture

Who doesn't want more fans, "likes" and business exposure? Being found online is a good thing, unless plans and purpose backfire. "The benefit of going viral is reaching a large audience, and the drawback is that your messages can get altered or misinterpreted as they perpetuate through larger and larger audiences," Lee observes.

A Twitter push for #McDStories by McDonald's, to collect pleasant anecdotes that involved Happy Meals, instead became a magnet for sharing bad experiences at the fast-food chain. The social media project ended within hours after it began.

Watch where hashtags lead. One



casual tweet of "#whyistayed You had pizza," as a DiGiorno Pizza promotion, collided obtrusively with thousands of somber tweets about women in abusive relationships. Although the pizza maker's tweet was deleted within minutes, the damage was done. In addition to a public apology, DiGiorno reps responded individually to people who declared the comment offensive.

"What commonly happens when things blow up on social media is that the restaurant didn't have adequate monitoring/alerts in place and/or the restaurant didn't take the

continued on page 20



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continued from page 19

initial attention seriously,” Lee says. “In most cases, when you address an issue head-on immediately, the issue fades away. When you don’t, people invariably make (false) assumptions and take control of your narrative.”

Takeaway one: Use HootSuite.com, Google.com/trends or other trending tools online to stay on top of topics, phrases and hashtags that generate significant conversation. Set up alerts using Google.com/alerts to monitor what is said about your business online, so you can react quickly.

Takeaway two: The best plan of reaction is to have a strategy in place before it’s needed.

Crisis management pre-planning

Most restaurant operators don’t have a crisis management plan, says Kay-Tea Olds of Engaging Results Communications in Madison, so “when a crisis happens, there’s no time to think about what the next step should be.”

It is most important to protect people and property during a crisis, she told attendees during her “Managing Reviews” seminar at the 2018 Midwest Foodservice Expo. Then protect the business and the brand.

In the Olds game plan for how to handle a crisis: Identify a spokesperson. Be transparent. Inform staff and customers (“they shouldn’t have to rely on the local news”). Monitor social

“Offering a stellar customer service experience and an outstanding culture can help mitigate negative situations before they begin.”

—Amy Steger
Wisconsin Restaurant Association

media. And look at the situation as an opportunity to leverage internal and external communications, “to create more value behind your brand and build customer loyalty.”

Example one: A customer complains about not being able to order a delicate entrée as takeout food. You matter-of-factly share that the policy is in place to maintain a high level of quality. Point out that entrée taste and presentation wouldn’t meet your high standards if allowed as a carryout.

Example two: Customers complain about the poor quality of salmon. You trace the problem to the supplier and thank the customers for bringing it to your attention and share that the issue is being addressed with the distributor.

“The best defense against negative social media attention starts in your

business,” Steger says. “Offering a stellar customer service experience and an outstanding culture can help mitigate negative situations before they begin.”

From foe to fan

If criticism is handled sensitively, Olds says “you can create lifetime customers” during moments of weakness. A bad consumer experience that generates a great response might produce a grateful customer who turns loyal.

Be methodical, she advises. Listen to a customer’s complaint, gather additional information, make a judgment about what happened, respond to the criticism, and exceed expectations by following up with the customer.

“Take a deep breath, and don’t let your emotions cloud your judgment,” Lee says. “I’ve seen too many restaurant owners get into heated arguments on social media channels. Even if you’re right, the public will see how you lost your temper or used inappropriate language. Your main strategy should be to address the issue head-on, apologize if necessary (and make it a real apology!) and explain how you will avoid these types of situations from now on.”

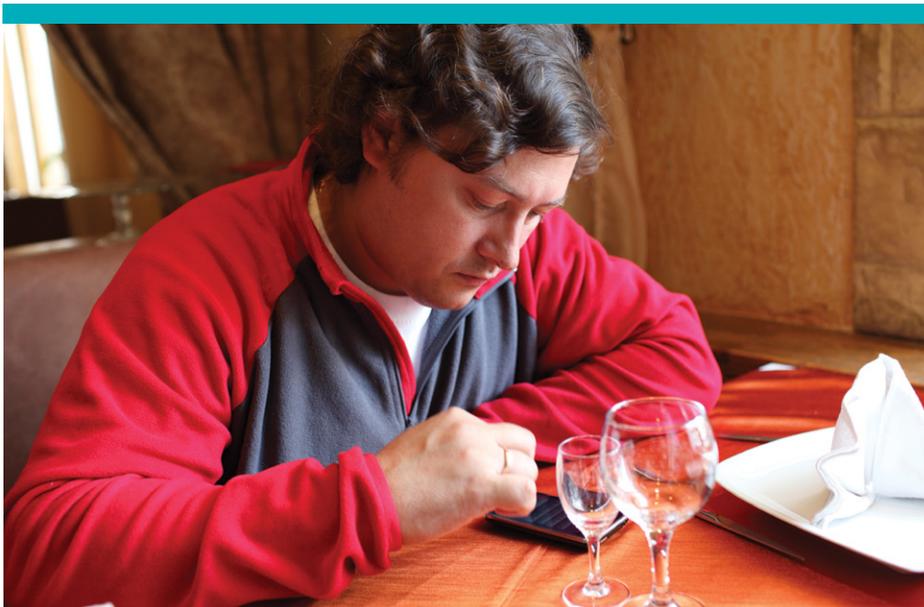
Takeaway one: To address online chatter, you need a place at the table. That means creating business profiles with Facebook, Yelp and TripAdvisor—at minimum. “It costs nothing but sweat equity,” Olds notes.

Takeaway two: Businesses traditionally spend money and energy on advertising and marketing. As Olds observes, “it costs less to build brand loyalty” but it’s hard to create brand ambassadors if you don’t have an online way for people to weigh in.

When criticism is unfair

The ease of leaving a bad review online is “out of control,” believes Kim Bowler of Alpine Resort, Presque Isle. “Your life’s work can be ruined because of unfair reviews,” sometimes posted by people who never visited or have an online reputation of criticizing any business they encounter.

“Everyone thinks they’re a restaurant critic,” Larson notes, especially because of



the proliferation of social media outlets for consumer commentary. A guidebook from the National Restaurant Association describes online reviews as “the new word of mouth,” but more powerful because of the speed, accessibility and available online critique outlets. “Whether a guest raves or rants about your service, it’s not just a passing comment to a friend or two,” says Larson.

They indeed can help make or break your business, the National Restaurant Association says, noting a Harvard researcher’s conclusion that a one-star increase in rating on Yelp prompts a revenue increase of 5 to 9 percent.

“The customer is not always right when a review comes in,” Olds says, but always respond to reviews, and stay professional. Take the discussion offline before offering a gift certificate or other incentive to make amends. To reward criticism publicly invites more negative reviews from people fishing for a freebie.

Issue a statement that corrects a false or defamatory statement, so that others don’t presume them to be true, Lee says. Online sites that make room for reviews also should have a way for undue criticism to be reviewed and, when warranted, deleted.

“People who love your place might think it’s too much work to go online” and post a positive review, Bowler observes, and Olds agrees that customers tend to react strongly when something is wrong, not right.

To counter that, Olds challenges restaurant operators to practice what they would like to see from others. That means taking the time to post a glowing review when experiencing a good meal elsewhere. **WR**

WRA Resources

Within the Members Only section of the Wisconsin Restaurant Association website (wirerestaurant.org) is advice about how prevent, prepare for and react to crisis situations.

Look for an expansion of relevant resources with advice about how to deal with news media and social media challenges. Step No. 1: Don’t panic—realize you have control about how to react.

Preparing for negative circumstances is vital. “In a PR crisis, the biggest mistake you can make is to think that this will never happen to you,” says Tracy Kosbau, WRA vice president of marketing and public relations. “Have a crisis communications plan in place.”

Her advice, below, applies to myriad predicaments. That includes lawsuits, food safety issues, devastating consumer reviews and organized protests onsite or online.

Do

- ✓ Tell the truth
- ✓ Show compassion
- ✓ Be available
- ✓ Be proactive
- ✓ Be positive
- ✓ Anticipate questions
- ✓ Rehearse your message
- ✓ Think before you speak
- ✓ Respect deadlines

Don’t

- ✗ Tell half-truths or speculate
- ✗ Place blame
- ✗ Lose your temper
- ✗ Be defensive
- ✗ Say “no comment”
- ✗ Speak “off the record”
- ✗ Try to wing it
- ✗ Talk too fast
- ✗ Ignore media calls

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