

Uploading a Digital Strategy for Your Restaurant

WEBSITES, VIDEOS, SOCIAL MEDIA AND MORE

by Mary Bergin

“What’s your mission, Agent?”

That’s the big and immediate question on the website for SafeHouse, a spy-themed restaurant and cocktail lounge that opened in 1966 in Milwaukee. Choose from two paths, “Mission: Daytime” or “Mission: After Dark.”

One click leads to info about the food menu and fun for families. The other taps into nightlife and the lineup of “spycialty cocktails.” Check out “infiltration opportunities,” which are upcoming events. Sign up for a spy briefing, “direct to shoe phones, smart phones or however you receive email.”

The playful mix of intrigue and dual personality online goes beyond fun and games. This all is an extension of the in-person SafeHouse experience, which begins with an obscure building entrance and a little clearance test if you don’t know the secret password. A Snapchat icon on the SafeHouse app makes it easy to post a quick photo or video of the unique experience.

Chris Remington is a digital strategy consultant who has worked with Marcus Restaurants, the operator of SafeHouse. He considers the website successful because it is engaging, has a tone that matches the business brand and content that gives consumers a reason to return.

“If you haven’t touched website content in a year, there’s no reason for people to come back to it,” Remington said during his “Restaurant Website SEO: Search Engine Strategy Done Right” seminar during the 2019 Midwest Foodservice Expo in Milwaukee produced by the Wisconsin Restaurant Association. That’s a big mistake in these ever-changing times.

Whether or not to have an online presence isn’t the question these days. It’s more about deciding what exactly your online presence will be.

The constant search

Consumers are becoming more curious, impatient and demanding, says Laura Sardegna, head of industry – food, beverage and restaurant for Google. Pre-purchase research goes far beyond big-ticket items such as automobiles.

She says online searches affect everything because prospective customers are very curious about everything they put in their hands and in their mouth. We search for the best olive oil, toothbrush, travel pillow and more.

“You started as a nondigital business,” Sardegna observes, but a restaurant without an effective website “is not a

complete business” because a growing number of consumers want to know your food and your history before stepping inside your door.”

In her Expo seminar, “Consumer Behavior in the Digital World,” Sardegna noted that we’ve gone from using computers to carrying mobile devices. We increasingly rely on Siri, Alexa and other virtual assistants.

In the four hours before her Milwaukee presentation, Sardegna says she checked email, charted a route from Chicago to Milwaukee, found a Starbucks en route, used the Starbucks app to pay for her purchase and used digital navigation to find her destination. “People want their devices to anticipate things, not just tell us things,” she adds. And that meant getting updates about traffic congestion in this example.

Health apps track the number of steps we take. Online aggregators track our virtual explorations and decisions made online. Sardegna calls it “a rapidly evolving landscape” that is extremely



Quick Takes

Limit administrator access to website and social media accounts. Link all to the business, not an individual who might leave you later, says digital strategy consultant Chris Remington.

Have a website that loads fast—within three seconds, says Laura Sardegna of Google. Use testmysite.thinkwithgoogle.com to see how your site matches up.

An email to 5,000 averages a 20 percent open rate and 5 percent engagement, says Matt Plapp of Driven Media Solutions, but a Facebook Messenger note to 5,000 averages an 80 percent open rate and 40 percent engagement.

challenging for business owners and disruptive to what historically was business as usual in foodservice.

Nearly 70 percent of young adults (Millennials and Generation Z) would rather leave their wallets at home than their phone, contends Chad Horn of TableUp, a Boston software company that helps restaurants retain guests.

One challenge is getting the prospective customer’s attention in the congested digital marketplace. Most restaurants have a menu on their website, Horn says, but do you show the food and make it easy to share something on social media?

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Getting social

An estimated \$14 billion in online food orders are projected by the end of this year, and 84 million diners seek a fast-food location each week. Ignore these facts at the risk of seeing competitors pop up at the top of online searches instead of you.

One way to build a fan base online is to engage prospective customers through social media. Kris Larson, owner of Becket's in Oshkosh, says this is especially important for independently owned restaurants and need not be overly time consuming.

"We tend to be much more actively engaged in our communities [than national restaurant chains] and do far more interesting things that have a unique, local perspective that is tailored to our cities," said Larson. "That increases the likelihood that our messaging will resonate."

A fast-speed video clip of a pretty sunset or Fox River shoreline gains more than 1,000 views on Becket's Facebook page. Word of menu specials and entertainment is posted via Twitter. Larson personally handles social media posts and web development, calling it "one of the most important things we do."

Expenses are cut by handling photography, video, copywriting and graphic design inhouse—"not as difficult as it sounds," he says. Larson led Quick Bite sessions at the Expo on social media photography and welcomes questions via email from WRA members.

Refine or say goodbye to the email blast, says Matt Plapp, president of Driven Media Solutions, a Kentucky-based marketing firm that works with restaurants. "Drive ROI with Social Media Advertising" was his Expo seminar topic.

"We aren't excited about getting an email anymore," says Plapp, who contends email blasts are overused or used incorrectly. "Know who you're talking to," he advises, which means not sending a "college night" special to senior citizens, or a "kids eat free" promotion to childless adults.



Keys to Online Success

Start small but be consistent in tone and timing on social media.

Define what your restaurant stands for. Let your goals, stories and values come through online.

Respond to online customer comments professionally.

Do something for guests that they'll only find online: a contest, secret special, event.

Nurture a sense of ownership. Example: Invite customer ideas before naming a new menu item.

—Source: Chad Horn, TableUp

"It's a crowded marketplace," Plapp says. "Most of us don't do posts that engage our audience," and an online strategy can stagnate quickly. Example: 1,000 Facebook fans of a business would likely see a post five years ago. Today, only five to 10 percent would see the post.

Start a conversation

Plapp gives this advice to restaurants wishing to gain exposure: grow an engaged database, strategize to put butts in your seats and track the results of these efforts. Consider social media

your online hostess, a way to break the ice and build relationships, because "conversations are what you're looking for."

Brian Weavel of Anna's Pizza and Pasta in Winnebago, Ill., shared his expertise during an Expo Quick Bite session on how to get small businesses noticed on social media. "Customers love interaction—it makes them feel like a part of your life," he says.

Get personal: Share an occasional triumph unrelated to business. "A big part of my social media campaign is to be as real as possible. I invite people into my life," and Weavel believes customers "appreciate sincerity."

If sharing a menu special, suggests Weavel, "explain exactly why it is special." When introducing a contest, tie giveaways to the sharing of your social media posts, because that "gives you an automatic wider audience for free, and potential new customers."

Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram are where he talks up business and life. One post mentions a former employee who paid a visit during a US Air Force Academy break and adds "We are so proud of him." Another retweets a GoFundMe page for a girl in need of brain surgery, with the plea to "help get the word out for my dear friend."

The power of video

At least 55 percent of us already watch videos online daily, says Bruce Irving of Boston, founder of Smart Pizza Marketing. He contends online videos will make up more than 80 percent of all consumer internet traffic by 2020.

A lack of video posts means missing out on the huge number of consumers who could spread word of your business by sharing your content. "What makes you different from the person across the street?" Irving asked during his Expo seminar on using video marketing. "That's what you should tell in your video."

Video clips have the potential to turn you into an ambassador for your community. The more people you know and the more people who know you, the better it is for business, Irving explains.

Seven Strategies to Watch

Among the restaurants whose online work earned a shout-out from Midwest Foodservice Expo speakers:

Apple Holler, Sturtevant, has its own YouTube channel with 50-plus videos of the family farm and restaurant that are linked to their website appleholler.com

The Bartolotta Restaurants, Milwaukee, uses Twitter to introduce key staff and menu specialties, match food with wine and interact with customers. twitter.com/bartolottas

Maxie's, Milwaukee, uses video clips to show staff at work, customers having fun and the vibe of setting and décor. maxies.com/milwaukee

Sobelman's, based in Milwaukee, posts photos, video, creative promotions and guest-created content, including testimonials. A Tweet announced word of free burgers when the Milwaukee Brewers won 10 games in a row in 2018. sobelmanspubandgrill.com

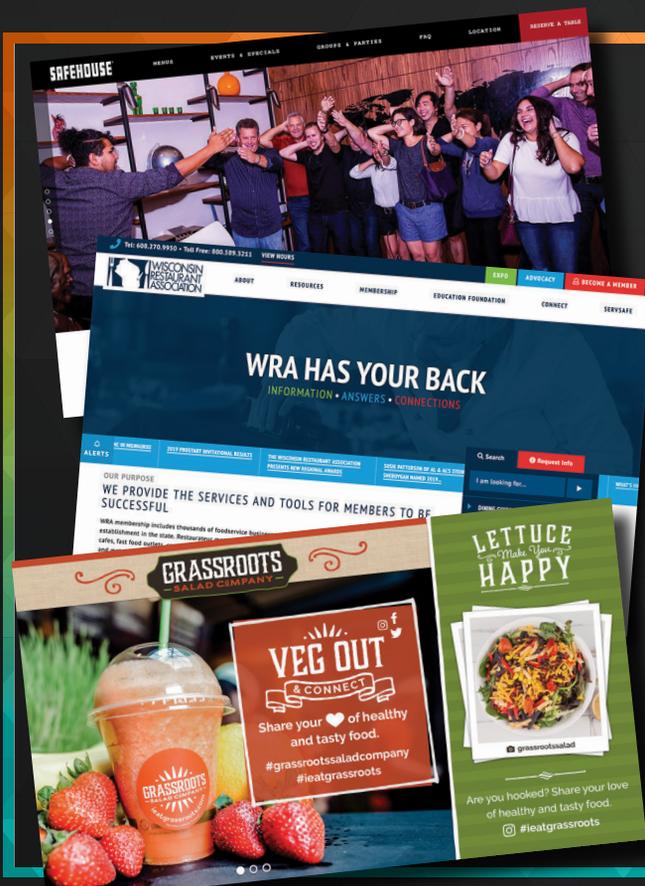
Twin Anchors, Chicago, uses its website to talk up TV and movie shoots on the property, celebrities who have visited and fond memories of customers. twinanchorsribs.com

Pizza Hut introduced an interactive “ordering table” online in 2014, so the customer could “swipe” toppings onto a virtual pizza crust. pizzahut.com

Domino's Pizza provides “deliver anywhere” hotspots, a way to bring pizza to customers in a park, a beach or other away-from-home settings. dominos.com



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Sound intimidating? “Don’t overthink the equipment part of video,” he says. “Your phone likely produces better video than what would have cost thousands of dollars in equipment 10 years ago.”

Sardegna of Google says TV watching declined 11 percent and digital video views increased 75 percent in the past four years. If investing in TV ads, realize that most are seen by an older audience. YouTube postings are more likely to reach ages 18-34.

Experts advise that you keep video clips short and compelling, no more than three minutes long. Shorter is better. Getting to the point quickly is crucial. “The first three to five seconds are the most important, to make sure they stick around [for the whole video],” Irving says.

Google and Facebook make it affordable and easy to target a specific demographic of customer, he adds. Consider using Rev.com to create video captions because many consumers watch videos with the sound turned off.

Stay alert, aware

Don’t ignore the power of restaurant and other review sites. Horn says Yelp has 170 million monthly users, TripAdvisor has 300 million monthly users and more than 1 billion people consult Google. At least one in three diners won’t eat at a restaurant that earns less than four stars



Perfect Timing

The best time for social media posts depends on where the posting occurs, says the social marketing team at HootSuite.com, where multiple social media platforms are managed at one location online.

On Facebook, post from noon to 1 pm on weekends and noon to 3 pm on Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday.

On Instagram, post from noon to 1 pm on weekdays for the best visibility.

On Twitter, the most clicks and retweets happen at 3 pm on weekdays.

LinkedIn primarily is for professionals to network about work. It is not for items of general consumer interest. That said, the peak times for postings are 7:45 am, 10:45 am, 12:45 pm and 5:45 pm Monday through Thursday.

when reviewed, he warns.

“[Prospective customers] will come to you online to see the menu and where you are located, but will then go to Yelp before making the decision on whether to come to your restaurant,” Horn says.

So whatever you do, don’t go on autopilot or let content get stale. “It doesn’t

matter what you create if nobody is coming to it,” Horn says. “It’s not just about checking a box that you’ve posted something on Facebook or Instagram.”

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A Free Assist

Wisconsin Restaurant Association members have access to a social media crisis toolkit to help navigate both offline and online incidents before they blow up on social media. The toolkit outlines some basic scenarios that restaurant businesses often face and provides specific advice and suggested language to respond to these situations. The guidebook was developed for the Wisconsin Restaurant Association by Brian Lee, president of Revelation PR, Advertising and Social Media in Madison.

Lee presented a seminar on how to build your own website at the Expo, which started out with advice on the importance of securing a good website domain name. Lee suggested using GoDaddy.com only to see if the name you want is available.

He asserts that all four-letter domain name combinations are taken, so don’t be discouraged if your most logical choices are unavailable.

