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CUSTOMERS

# Influencers, Bloggers, and Foodies: Why They Matter to Restaurants

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You may have heard whispers of the success brought to restaurants by influencers...but do they truly matter and are the results as good as they sound?



In today's restaurant game, influencers, foodies, and bloggers are "becoming the new word of mouth," says Gretchen TeBockhorst, president and founder of Prim Communications, "Nowadays, so many people are following other influencers on Instagram and Facebook...that becomes the new route [they] take to get information on places to dine."

If you're not taking advantage of what influencers can offer your restaurant in terms of sales, followers, media opportunities, and highlighting what you do best, you're missing out on one of the best marketing investments a restaurant owner can make.

## Why Influencers Matter to Restaurant Success

"They are very important to the world right now and they can definitely make or break, or drive business," says Andrew Freeman, founder of af&co. Influencers are keyed into your target demographic, enticing them with drool-worthy photos, encouraging them to stop by your restaurant with a single post, and helping you raise profits plus brand awareness. And according to Freeman, after influencer events, he definitely sees a pop in covers.

"It's just as powerful as word of mouth because you're following that person for a reason," says TeBockhorst, "You're following them because you want to know what they're doing just as you would ask somebody whose opinion you trust that you might work with." Because the interaction between influencer and follower is more like friend-to-friend, and followers trust the blogger's judgment, they're more likely to dine at that spot, she adds.

The content produced by top-notch foodies, influencers, and bloggers, is typically high quality as well, which can reflect a good light onto your brand, and the thumbs-up endorsement from an influencer can spur their followers to visit you and post, offering additional exposure.

## Finding the Right Influencers for Your Restaurant

It's not always about the number of followers. Finding the right influencer to engage with means tapping into who your target demographic is hanging out with, how much they're liking posts and engaging, and how much pull the influencer, blogger, or foodie has over their audience.

Influencers are easy to find because they're posting publicly so you can reach out organically,

through email, or through DMs, to follow and then hire ones you think are the right fit for you, says Freeman. Instagram, Facebook, and Google searches are the best places to look for influencers. Search for profiles that are posting food, restaurant, or blog content, or do a quick Google search for food influencers, restaurant bloggers, or a combination of words that fit your brand.

TeBockhorst also recommends using hashtag searches to find the best influencers. For example, if you're in the Denver market as a brewery, you can search the hashtag within Instagram, Facebook, or a Google search. "Denver beer," "Denver craft beer," or "Denver bar," would be good options for a Denver-based brewery.

### **Effectively Evaluating Influencers**

With the results, see who's posting under those hashtags, what their profiles look like, the number of likes and followers they have, the number of mentions of other establishments, and if their content and photos would fit your brand. Does it look like they're convincing their audience to go to other restaurants? Do they have a website that explains that they're a blogger or influencer? Do they present themselves as a professional who's creating quality content? Audit them to see if there's anything that comes up that wouldn't be on-brand for you, and if the search comes up clean, that influencer may be a great ambassador for you.

"If somebody has 40,000 followers and their posts are getting 50 likes and maybe three comments, then something's obviously off. People are not engaged. People are not interested in what they're saying," says TeBockhorst, "There are a lot of food influencers out there and you may end up finding one that has a lot of followers, but that's not always going to drive the most traffic to your restaurant."

Do a search through social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook for someone with exceptional photography and content who fits your brand's image, and has your exact target demographic at their fingertips. Someone with magazine-quality content without gritty grammar and punctuation errors, and who has a ton of engagement through comments and likes on their posts.

"You want to make sure you're finding the right person, the right influencer that has the right following that'll end up dining with you," explains TeBockhorst. For example, don't pick influencers with fine-dining photos if you're a fast casual concept. Pick the influencer with photos that look like your menu items where you can tell their audience is excited to chow down.

Once you've found a potential fit, spend time vetting them, says Freeman. If you're working with a marketing agency, they'll typically do this for you. However, if you're DIY, look into nano-influencers with smaller, but much more engaged followings, and make sure the influencer, blogger, or foodie's audience fits your ideal customer, Freeman recommends.

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### **Connecting With Influencers**

How should you engage influencers who are a slam-dunk? Send them a DM or email inviting them to your restaurant during a specific time to try your cuisine, or set up an influencer event. Be clear about what you're offering, the time and date, what you're hoping to get out of the relationship, and whether or not this is one-time or ongoing engagement. Give the message a personal touch as well to stand out from the crowd of their inbox.

### **Quick Tips For Working With Restaurant Influencers**

- **Double-check their followers.** Because followers, including fake ones, can be bought, evaluate their engagement and likes for the true value of the followers.

- **Have an agreement.** The agreement should explain complimentary meals or the trade agreement for posts, what the influencer is expected to provide, the number of permanent posts and/or stories, platforms for the posts, posting deadlines and schedule, analytics reports, and anything specific to your restaurant that needs to be mentioned. Be specific and set expectations, but do allow the influencer a bit of creativity to make the post authentic.
- **Be specific about what's included.** Tell the foodie, blogger, or influencer what the parameters are for their visit and how many guests they can bring to curtail any wild expenses. Place the influencer in an area where they can take great photos, send out specific dishes you want them to photograph or try, but control the experience without letting the influencer take over.
- **Ask for analytics reports.** Each post should come with an analytics report on the likes, comments, and click-through numbers to show total engagement.
- **Thank them publicly.** Give the influencer some props on your social channels for their hard work and also so you can see what's getting posted, and how those posts are interacted with.

### Cost and ROI of Engaging Influencers

Because restaurants operate on slim profit margins, Freeman's a fan of trade agreements and comped meals. If you do have someone who's extremely successful, he recommends sticking to a budget of around a few hundred dollars, unless it's a celebrity, which can be thousands of dollars.

TeBockhorst says she has an influencer who currently gets paid \$75 per month for a six month contract of one post per month, but that certain influencers can charge over \$1,000 per post because they treat the work like an advertisement.

"Are you going for somebody who's going to give you the equivalent of impressions that a local publication could give you? Or are you going for something closer to a micro-influencer, which I believe, is 5,000 to 10,000 followers," she says, "It may not be the equivalent of a major publication, but they have quality content and quality followers and have proven results for other restaurants."

When it comes to ROI, analytics reports that show social site trends and traffic from Google, Venga, Facebook, Instagram, and/or OpenTable plus topline sales are the way to go, says Freeman. You could also set up a discount code for the influencer to share online that can track how many sales were made from that code through your POS system.

### Terminating the Relationship

If the influencer is overextending the restaurant or not delivering, it's up to you to fire them. Freeman recommends short-term agreements where if the results are lackluster, you can say, "We've enjoyed working with you, but we've taken a shift in our marketing plan."

TeBockhorst says an honest conversation is best, and she recommends communicating, "These were our expectations and you didn't come through with our expectations, so we'd like to cancel the agreement."

Even though you may have worked hard on how to get foodies through your doors, sometimes the influencer relationship doesn't work out. If it's a rough ride, have a meeting to discuss which terms aren't being met or the personality conflict, and if necessary, end the influencer agreement.

#### Recap: Tips For Working With Restaurant Influencers

- ✓ Double-check their followers
- ✓ Have an agreement



- ✓ Be specific about what's included
- ✓ Ask for analytics reports
- ✓ Thank them publicly

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