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CUSTOMERS

Instagram is a Must-Have For Attracting Restaurant Customers

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From #foodstagram to #forkyeah, Instagram, with over a billion monthly active users, provides the perfect social media platform for restaurant owners to connect to potential customers. It drips with gorgeous food photos, opportunities for engagement, and it's one of the most effective marketing tools available. But attracting customers to your restaurant means knowing the ins and outs of using Instagram to its fullest potential.



"It's sometimes the place that [customers] land before they even decide to visit your website," says Talia Samuels, owner of Outshine Public Relations, "But today, it seems like younger diners, and a lot of people who are interested in the culinary world, often go to Instagram first when they're making a dining decision."

And if you post "engaging, exciting, well thought out, well-crafted content," it'll help you get people through the door, explains Ryan Pernice, owner/operator of Table and Main, Osteria Mattone, Coalition Food and Beverage, "A restaurant that puts half the amount of effort into it [where] others put none, it makes a huge difference."

Looking to take your restaurant's social media feed from poverty-stricken to profit center? Whether you're using Instagram for pizza restaurants or coffee shops or fine dining, start employing these tips and you should see customer attraction, increased engagement, and super-sized sales.

There are a number of Instagram strategies that you can implement today for your restaurant and when you do, you could easily see the change in ticket numbers and sales.

Outstanding Photos

Whether it's you, a trustworthy staff member, or a professional photographer, posting gorgeous, mouth-watering photos on Instagram is nonnegotiable. Everything should be documented in Instagram from menu changes, to events, to promotions, to people engaging with your food.

"I own three restaurants and a management company, and I still do social media for our three restaurant brands, our management company, and myself," says Pernice, "I'm amazed when I see how crafty some of the photos out there are when all it takes is to clean off your iPhone lens, think about how the food is going to look on a screen, and lighting and composition; that's all photography is."

Instagram Stories, Instagram Live, IGTV

"I manage about 12 different accounts, for my clients, on Instagram and I see how much more people react, and [they] are watching Stories [rather] than a regular post," says Samuels, and the

visibility is about quadruple a regular post.

With IGTV and Instagram Live, restaurants can provide in-depth looks at recipes, the customer experience, or practices for customers. It's something your audience can look forward to and continue to engage with. "Video content is always king and it always performs the best. Whether it's a story, video, or feed post," says Kelly Stoker, account director at Prim Communications, "There's a lot of different ways to go about that so don't feel defeated if you can't create quality video content up front. You could always do a GIF or create a slideshow."

Instagram Insights

With an Instagram business account, Stoker says you have an advanced reporting tool, Insights, which reveals the content followers are engaging with, audience demographic info, and click-through rates. You can then pay to boost high engagement posts in order to increase your audience.

Restaurant-Specific Hashtags

It may seem small, but hashtags can boost your restaurant's instant Instagram attention. Use hashtags that specifically speak to your cuisine and brand for campaigns or connect to local publications and news stations.

Large platforms, like OpenTable, also run a #DishPics campaign each week where they choose photos from accounts using that hashtag to feature on their page. Samuels recommends finding people and businesses you want to engage with and using those hashtags to create cross promotion and engagement with a new audience you don't own.

“ I think Instagram is actually a great way for businesses to advertise ”

A Variety of Posts

Pernice has a number of post types in the mix: timely, scheduled content on promotions; posts tied to a current trend like healthy eating; new cocktails; just-arrived ingredients from their suppliers; professional photos; and spontaneous photos. This variety helps maintain an audience's attention while growing the audience for the brand.

Experts say types of posts that do well on Instagram for restaurants include:

- Photogenic, crave-able dishes
- Behind-the-scenes with the chef, owner, or staff
- Close-up photos
- Aerial photos like tablescapes where diners are digging in
- People engaging with your food and restaurant space
- Instagram Stories of your restaurant
- Crazy, over-the-top dishes
- GIFs of people enjoying your food

Influencers, Food Bloggers, and Local Businesses

Influencers are one of the biggest audience growing tools, says Stoker, "As you're growing your audience, I always recommend following your local influencers, food influencers, even lifestyle influencers." She's seen an increase of at least 100 followers each time they've worked with an influencer to grow a restaurant's following. Partnering with local businesses, like the artisanal bakery who crafts your hamburger buns, can also help with cross-promotion and audience growth.

Paid Ads

Although Samuels typically isn't a big supporter of advertising, when it comes to Instagram, she advocates for it because it's effective and you can customize your posts specifically for your demographic.

“I think Instagram is actually a great way for businesses to advertise,” she says, “They always deliver to you a report of how many people clicked through to your website, how many people signed up for your newsletter, how many people engaged with your posts. It's a great way to see how your marketing dollars are working for you.”

Your “Why”

Samuels recommends building a theme around your “why” to attract customers. “Why did you open your restaurant? What is it that makes you special? What are your differentiators?” she says. Whether you’re passionate about grilled cheese, using your grandma’s recipes, or bringing immigrant dishes to the masses, putting out quality content consistently that explains your “why” creates a more personal bond to your brand with followers.

Contests

Samuels says contests are a fun way to give a little something away while engaging with your current followers, and gaining new ones. It could be a campaign for a dinner for two or a gift card to your restaurant, but set the requirements so that people have to tag friends or follow your page to help you with followers and engagement.

Tracking ROI on Instagram

As far as digital ads go, Stoker says social ads give some of the best return on investment (ROI). You can check Instagram Insights, Facebook Pixels, and Google Analytics to see progress. For Samuels, engagement levels are the best metric to check because it provides an overall scope of the health of your audience and shows just how captive they are.

You can also pull reports through Insights to compare “What did you do this last month as far as content that people were responding to? What were your top three types of content that people were into? And you'll start to see trends,” explains Stoker. Where the ROI shows, she says, is in tying your social reports to your sales reports, and if you’re full-service, tying them to reservations.

Instagram is the Future For Restaurants

With active daily users in the hundreds of millions, Samuels says Instagram is a platform no one should ignore. Adapting to the different platforms Instagram offers, like posts, Stories, Instagram Live, and IGTV, is essential, she says, “As long as you can do that and you can roll with the punches that Instagram throws at you, then it's an essential way to market yourself, especially nowadays.”

Stoker agrees that Instagram is where social media for restaurants is heading because it’s visual, people share what they’re doing, and now regular guests, not just influencers, are becoming critics and vocalizing their opinions.

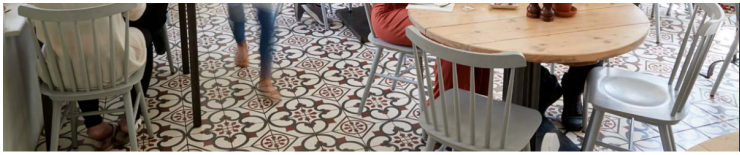
“It's the future because everything is now being driven on personalization and customization,” says Pernice, “If I can send a tailored, unfiltered message right to my guests’ pockets, that channel is one-to-one, and that's far more useful and beneficial and controllable for me than trying to pay some big brand marketing company a bunch of money to put a campaign together that may or may not reach my guests.”

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