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How Can Single-Unit Restaurants Strive for Powerful Online Presence?

By Leora Lanz and Jenna Berry

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With the age of technology in full swing and the use of social media at an all-time high, digital marketing is not only recommended, but also necessary. The following list of recommendations will ensure that an independent restaurant's online marketing presence will survive and thrive in the competitive nature of today's world.

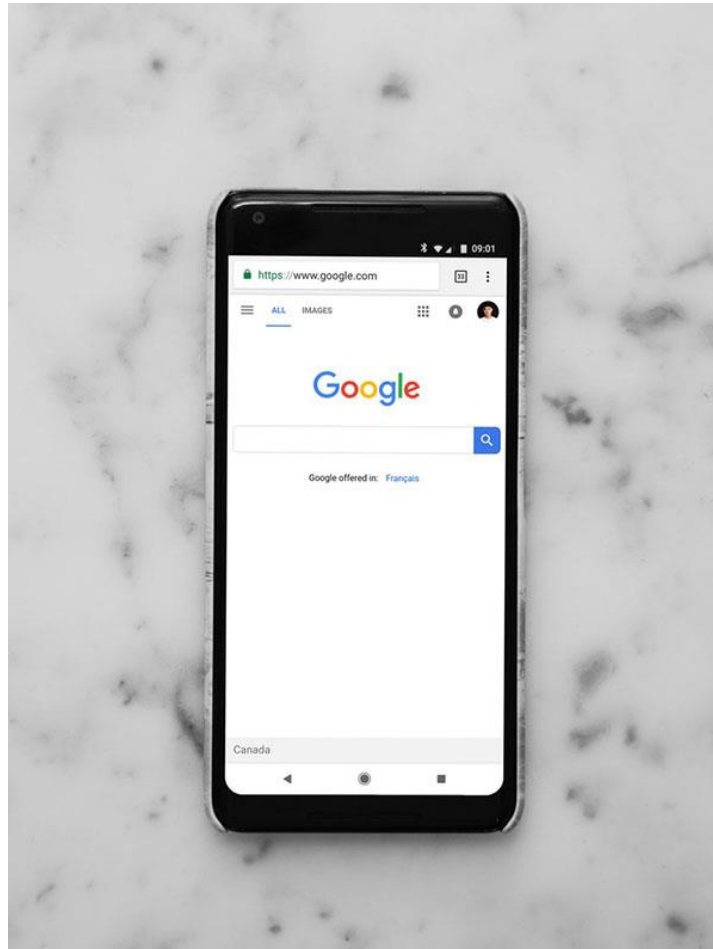
GOOGLE: According to Andrew Gazdecki, Founder of Bizness Apps and Member of the *Forbes* Technology Council, over half of "near me" searches result in a store visit. With mobile searches for restaurants rising, google presence is extremely important. Through organic content, paid advertising, and Google My Business, an independent restaurant can easily stay in line with its competitors.

- **Organic Strategies:** According to Digital Marketing Specialist at Net Affinity, Sophie Tremblay, Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is "the strategy...used to increase the authority, visibility and presence of a website organically in search engine results" (*HSMIAI*, 2017). She further explains that three aspects of a business must be in check to achieve successful SEO: the website's structure, content, and relative authority. In order to monitor and enhance SEO, there are several online tools that analyze a website's ranking, including Google Search Console, SEO Profiler, Moz Bar, and Screaming Frog. Utilizing these services will help drastically improve organic rankings for single-unit restaurants that do not have a strong corporate funding background.

Additionally, reviews are essential for organically improving rankings. Restaurants with better ratings and more reviews are naturally placed higher in Google results (*Next Restaurants*, 2016). Therefore, it is important to encourage guests to leave reviews after a positive dining experience.

Independents that utilize signage and messaging in the restaurant to generate reviews will encourage guests for more reviews, affirming that the restaurant takes pride in its business -- that it is confident most reviews will be positive. Volume and quality are both important here.

In a mobile search, organic listings will not usually be visible until the user scrolls at least once or twice. “The likelihood of a single-unit restaurant appearing in the top five or ten listings for anything other than brand terms (ie; the restaurant’s name) is negligible,” shares Principle of Boston-based C77 Consulting Seth Cargiuolo. “Unless the restaurant has significant buzz, perhaps gleaned through earned media or mentions in prominent local food scene outlets – or if the chef has gained fame or notoriety – relying on organic presence is not an effective strategy. Paid advertising, aggressive push for positive reviews, and maintaining a strong Google My Business listing are essential.”



- **Paid Strategies:** As soon as budget can be allocated, a paid advertising presence is essential; unless digital marketing talent exists within the business already, securing expert help from an agency geared toward smaller-budget, local small businesses is highly advised. Gazdecki emphasizes the importance of keeping tabs on competitors, and he explains that one of the most effective ways to do this is to study the competition’s keywords and know their target audience. Once the competition has been analyzed, a single-unit restaurant can purchase keywords on Google Ads. Knowing which words are relevant will help a restaurateur gain insight on which specific keywords are necessary to purchase.

- **Google My Business:** Claiming a “Google My Business” page is an essential step for enhancing a restaurant’s presence on Google. This feature allows a restaurant to create a small profile that will appear on the right side of Google after the restaurant is searched. The profile includes a map of the restaurant’s location, the address, hours, contact information, user reviews, and even directions to the restaurant. According to editors at *Essential Marketer*, Google My Business is vital as it allows users to search in their local area with ease, and lays out all of the information in a clean, readable way. Follow the link to <https://www.google.com/business/> for step by step support in creating a Google My Business profile. After the profile is complete, potential diners will be able to find an independent restaurant’s information in a pleasant, user-friendly manner.

WEBSITE: In research shared by editors at *Restaurant Engine*, approximately 80% of people have searched for a restaurant on a mobile device. This proves that the efficiency of mobile layout for a single-unit restaurant, as well as the security of this restaurant’s website, is crucial. As the Senior Marketing Consultant at Southcoast Marketing Group, Todd Philie stresses the importance of mobile website format. If a restaurant does not have quick mobile speed or attractive mobile layout, it will deter customers that could have been easily attained. Some tactics that will help improve mobile performance include:

- **Menu Revisions:** According to Brad Shorr at *Food NewsFeed*, designing a mobile-first menu is necessary. Most consumers searching for food on the go do not want to look at a PDF menu because it is small, difficult to read, and slows down mobile speed. For this reason, the creation of a list menu will be sure to attract more customers.
- **Attractiveness/User Friendliness:** Knowing that the majority of users will view a website on a mobile device, it is essential to structure content in an easy to read, easy to understand format. “Keep copy simple, clean and direct,” adds C77’s Cargiuolo. “Know your audience and consider the user experience before all other factors. Ensure that the most important information *for your desired customer* is prioritized and easy to find.” For example, if the restaurant has a superior cocktail menu, craft beer selection or wine list, and the desired customer truly appreciates that offering, make sure it is continually updated and featured prominently on the site. Or if the focus is locally sourced ingredients, find a way to highlight the mission and the farms or ranches involved. Or if the restaurant caters to vegan-friendly or gluten-free customers, ensure that information is highly visible, easily found. Investing in professional photography is key to increasing a restaurant’s visual appeal.



- **Format:** According to editors at *Bentobox*, two of the main categories that are most important to consumers when deciding where to eat are menus and location. As mentioned above, the menu should always be in list format and never PDF. In regards to location, there should not only be a section designated for contact information, but the address and phone number should also be anchored at the top or bottom of the website.
- **Action Steps:** Adding the ability for a customer to take the next step is imperative. A clear *call to action* for the desired action is recommended. Open Table is great for reservations and a variety of tools exist to enable online and SMS (text message) based ordering for take-out and delivery. A statement as simple as “reservations recommended” next to the phone number can serve as an action step.
- **Food Delivery and Additional Online Presence:** Particularly in urban areas, more and more customer want the restaurant to come to them. UberEats, DoorDash, GrubHub and Eat24 make it easy for restaurants at any price point and also enhance the digital visibility for the restaurant.
- **Generate New Revenue Channels:** “Online Ordering and To Go catering are tremendous areas of opportunity for independent restaurants, and the mobile site needs to make this seamless and easy to execute,” shares Roger Drake, Principal of Drake Public Relations and Marketing. “The infrastructure of Online Ordering and To Go business generates another 15-25% in revenue for many independents; having operational procedures in place to insure the order is correct at the point of purchase, as well as a follow up “thank you” goes a long way in building business and competing with chains who generally will not take the time to do this.”

In addition to mobile features, the security of a website is vital to a single-unit restaurant’s online marketing presence. Editors at *Restaurant Engine* define a Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) as having a padlock and introductory https:// before a website address. It has been proven that secure restaurant sites are better ranked on Google, because Google naturally pushes these sites higher. In addition, it is increasingly important to secure a website to prevent personal information from being stolen. This especially pertains to restaurants that take online orders, because names and credit card information can be easily stolen with no SSL. In conclusion, it is not only important, but also necessary to secure a restaurant website to ensure safety and security.



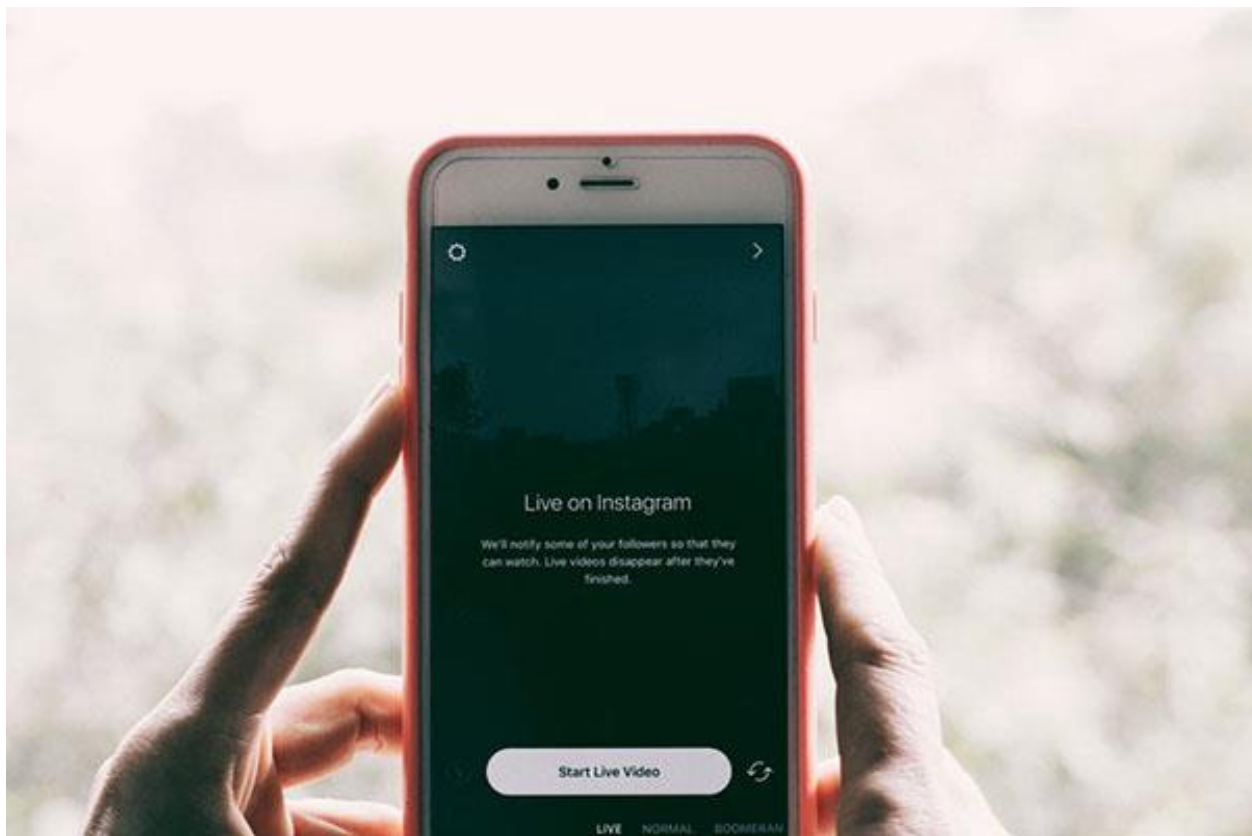
INSTAGRAM: Staying current and consistent across all social media platforms is important as social media is a dominant force in today’s society. According to the *Mediakix* team, Instagram began as a photo sharing platform but has evolved into a “bona fide recommendation engine.” Additionally, Lisa Flores, Director of Sales and Marketing for Boston’s Columbus Hospitality Group and founder of the Society for Event Planner Restaurant Venues (SERV) emphasizes the importance of Instagram as she states, “Food and restaurants are so visual and social media allows people to form a personal connection to the restaurant.”

“And finding the employee who can set up lighting and mood in executing photos on Instagram, especially with food, will increase their reviews and recommendations as well,” adds Drake. Implementing the following Instagram recommendations will increase overall awareness of a single-unit restaurant.



- **Hashtags:** Creating a unique hashtag allows a restaurant to tell a story through its Instagram posts. This will thus drive more traffic through the Instagram page and allow potential customers to envision their future experience at the restaurant.
- **Influencers:** Catarina Chang, co-owner of the premier Korean restaurant Koy, located at Boston’s Faneuil Hall Marketplace, explains, “Working with multiple food bloggers and influencers gives us a lot of exposure to their audiences and, in exchange, we have the opportunity to build our own audience.” Influencers are individuals who are able to control consumer’s buying habits through social media as they are perceived as an expert in their industry. It is important that single-unit restaurant owners reach out directly to local influencers to ask for a post on their page in return for a free meal at the restaurant. This is a low-cost tactic that will generate a significant return on investment.

- **Promoted Ads:** Instagram allows business accounts to pay money to promote their posts. These ads place an independent restaurant’s Instagram on the feed of individuals who do not already follow the account. The ads have the potential to reach hundreds of thousands of users depending on the budget and settings that are chosen. Follow the link to <https://business.instagram.com/advertising/> for a step by step explanation of creating promoted Instagram ads.
- **Stories:** The “Stories” feature on Instagram allows brands to post highly engaging picture and video content that disappears after 24 hours. “Users are accustomed to sharing and consuming less-staged and more authentic life moments in this format and thus the requirements for high-cost photography and videography from a brand are lessened,” shares Cargiuolo. “Brands, including many chefs and restaurateurs, use this feature to bring customers behind the scenes, sharing scenes from the kitchen and working with staff or suppliers. This allows viewers to experience the preparation of the food and beverage as well as the human side of the brand.” Stories are also an excellent way to tease or announce special food and drink offerings or events. Customers who like to be “in the know” can take advantage of limited-time offerings and will want to follow the brand.



- **User Generated Content (UGC):** Leveraging UGC is an excellent way to build awareness and recognition. A memorable Instagram handle can help when a guest posts a photo of their meal or experience; it assists with brand recognition and opens the door for a “share-ability” with customers’ friends and networks. Clearly display on menu boards, cocktail napkins and get the name out.

- **Contest:** One of the most effective ways to increase overall brand awareness for a single-unit restaurant is through the use of social media campaigns. According to SEO and Content Marketer Gordon Donnelly, running a contest on Instagram will increase follower counts and overall interest in the restaurant. Contests that encourage the use of user-generated content are a natural fit for the restaurant business. Setting a \$50 minimum as a benchmark for gift cards and giveaways will be sure to boost participation (*Wordstream*, 2018).

While these tactics are all important for maintaining a popular Instagram page, the use of a scheduling tool is equally as critical. According to Colby Hutchinson of Best Western Hotels and Resorts, determining a rollout strategy is necessary to achieve and maintain a successful social media presence (*Hotel Management*, 2018). It is important to determine who will respond to and manage replies to comments, and who will prioritize this in addition to their other daily work. Once this has been determined, the frequency of the posts will be set in stone and lead to a more efficiently-run social media page.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: Restaurant staffing is a challenge and an intern will help take the pressure off of other employees. Hiring an intern is beneficial when there is not another person who can take on the responsibility of online digital marketing. An intern could assist with social media posts, menu revisions, and keyword research, among other things. This would allow full-time restaurant employees to focus on their jobs and relieve stress for everyone involved. Or perhaps, hire an hourly employee part time (10-15 hours per month) just to focus on social strategy and execution. This will be money well spent.

Along with an intern, there are multiple outside professional services that can and should be utilized for independent restaurants. We are not here to advocate for these specific tools, but rather suggest them as helpful outside resources. Peter Venti, Director of Operations for Cambridge, Massachusetts-based Real Food Consulting, encourages small restaurant owners to “Invest in a sales and marketing tool that truly fits the strategy and capabilities of the restaurant, because focus and alignment can help overcome a small budget and level the digital playing field.”

Yext, for example, is one online platform with a mission to “give companies control over their brand experiences across the digital universe of maps, apps, search engines, voice assistants, and other intelligent services.” Used by major brands like Taco Bell and Rite Aid, Yext offers a variety of products and services that will boost a restaurant website’s ranking. In addition to Yext, Whitespark is a similar online platform that promises to “improve rankings, drive business, and fast-track your success in local search.” Among its services are a data aggregator, local search audit, and citation building tool. These services will help enhance a restaurant website and identify opportunities for optimization and increased visibility.

Whether an intern or an outside service, there are several options for creating a powerful online presence. Hospitality marketing constantly evolves and is dynamic, and therefore marketing for independent restaurants must always be maintained. It is key to understand consumer trends, competitor habits, and the needs and wants of a specific restaurant audience. Single-unit restaurants that prioritize online marketing will be successful and prosperous in the long run.



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