

Instagram Promotional Best Practices

By Lindsey Danis

As the fourth most active social media platform in the world Instagram boasts more than 1.6 billion users in 2023. Nearly one third of them are between that ages of 18-24. No surprise that independent operators have found this platform to be especially effective in grabbing the attention and patronage of younger diners. In this article, we explore best practices of using Instagram in your arsenal of social media promotional tools.

A Storied Future

To build engagement and a sense of community with your Instagram, tap into interactive features like "Stories". According to Instagram, Stories is a feature of the platform that lets users "share all the moments of your day, not just the ones you want to keep on your profile. As you share multiple photos, they appear together in a slideshow format: your story."

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

By the time you've finished reading this article, you should be able to:

- Describe Instagram "Stories" and how it is best deployed in your promotions.
- Explain the pros and cons of working with Instagram influencers
- List 12 Instagram marketing best practices.

“ Instagram trends come and go, but one thing remains constant: Restaurant operators who are not making the social media platform part of their marketing are missing out on attracting young diners. In this article, marketing and publicity professionals share the best ways to make Instagram work for an independent restaurant. ”

Stories is effective in building engagement with followers. You can find out what your audience likes or wants to see in your restaurant, and gain a better understanding of how to serve your customers through polls, quizzes, and other features available in Stories.

Stories also works well when there are limited-time promotions, such as a daily special, says Tracy Green of Estes Public Relations in Louisville, Kentucky. posts disappear after 24 hours, although they can be saved to a story highlight that appears at the top of your profile.

By using Stories to promote drink or menu item specials, you can promote the item immediately, without the worry of people seeing that content later and disappointed when they cannot order a special.

Instagram shows Stories to the people who tend to interact with them. While Stories are not necessarily a way to broaden your audience, they strengthen engagement with loyal customers.

User Generated Content

User-generated content (UGC) encourages customers to use a branded hashtag to share their dining experience. By reposting high-quality customer photos tagging them for credit, you can foster a sense of community.

UGC also takes the pressure off you to constantly create new content. Green explains the benefits of UGC for busy restaurant operators. "A lot of restaurants have the time or manpower to produce a lot of content. If you are trying to run an updated Instagram account, you need a lot of photos. You do not want to use the same few photos over and over and you do not want to use stock [photos]," Green says. "UGC can be a great way to get different photos in your feed. You can thank those people and say thanks for visiting and encourage them to come back. It builds a nice relationship with your customers."

The key to success is high-quality images. Green recommends making sure that any UGC photo aligns with your brand aesthetic and does not have anything distracting, such as a dirty napkin, also visible in the image. If the menu item is not presented correctly – for example, if the plating is messy or there was a substitution for the usual drink garnish, it is probably best not to post the image.

Popular concepts with high levels of Instagram engagement may receive more UGC tagged with the branded hashtag than they can post. "The Instagram space has been such a boon," Green says. "When I started doing restaurant social in 2017, that didn't exist, so we would screenshot the photos, save them to a folder in the name of the person in the file name." Now, she can click the bookmark button and save tagged posts to a UGC folder.

"Save it and go ahead and review it later," she recommends. If Green decides not to use a post, she will often move it to a folder of rejected UGC content, so she does not post it by accident.

UGC makes sense for established restaurants that already have a loyal brand following. But startup restaurants can also generate UGC, then use customer content to promote their new concept. Green mentions House of Marigold, a newly opened lunch and brunch restaurant in Louisville. The space was designed to be "Instagrammable," so they built influencer UGC into their pre-opening plan.

As Green recalls, they invited around 15 influencers to visit the week before opening. Anyone who could not take part in the pre-launch visit was invited to visit the restaurant when it was operational. "We invited them in and encouraged them to post that content, reshare and reuse. People would think 'that looks cute, I want to try it'."



That built them a lot of buzz."

Influencer UGC made sense for House of Marigold because the restaurant caters to a demographic that prioritizes Instagrammability and influencer content when choosing where to eat. "If you cater to that demographic, it makes sense to emphasize the influencer component. If you are catering to an older audience, maybe not," says Green.

Influencing Your Market

Busy operators and influencers can build mutually beneficial partnerships that promote the restaurant and drive traffic. While it takes time to identify local influencers who are a good match to your audience, the main benefit is exposure to their audience, who is primed to think positively of brands that come with a recommendation from someone they trust.

"Independently owned restaurants have small marketing budgets and there's not a lot of room to pay individual influencers," says Green. The good news is, you do not have to. Estes Public Relations rarely works with paid influencers, Green says, adding that she is seeing an increase in the number of influencers who request payment in exchange for posts.

So, Green usually works out a comped situation with the influencer prior to their visit. "The bigger the following, the more we are going to accommodate them. It might be them and a guest for a full meal and drinks, whereas it might be apps for somebody smaller." She will also clarify in the advance what they are asking of the influencer, such as one permanent post on their timeline. With established restaurants, she likes to spread out visits by reaching out to a handful of influencers every month and inviting them in for a meal. "It keeps the talk about your restaurant going, just by spreading them out," she says.



With startups, Green will incorporate influencers into pre-opening events. "We try to keep the groups small, and we like to make sure the chef/owner comes out and talks to everybody. We do not advise having them in with oversight to make sure they are having a good experience that will be reflected in their content," she advises. If there are some pre-opening kinks, whether on the service side or in the kitchen, Green says it is a wise idea to hold off on inviting influencers.

Traditional media personalities, such as food critics, are likely to be more sympathetic to a restaurant in the opening stages. An influencer is just going to tell you they waited a long time for their food or that menu items were inconsistent, and is less likely to be forgiving.

Green recommends startup operators ask themselves if they are ready to have influencers in, and if they have an owner or manager who can answer any questions and tend to the influencers during their visit. "You do not want someone with 20,000 followers to post about how service was slow. Then it is not worth it," she says.

For operators who are considering paying influencers, Green recommends projecting your return in advance. Will the money the influencer requests get you reach as what you would spend on traditional advertising, like a magazine ad? If you cannot answer that question in the affirmative, then paid influencers are not a good match, at least for the time being.

The largest benefit of working with influencers is their reach can complement your existing social media efforts, raising awareness among a new demographic. "If you can layer your social media outreach and traditional media outreach, you get to a nice broad swath of your demographic, especially if you cater to an audience under 40," says Green, mentioning that a younger audience is more likely to see Instagram content than a news segment or newspaper article. "You're shooting yourself in the foot with the younger demographic if you don't make some attempt to capture an Instagram audience on your own and through influencers."

But as Green hinted, there is a loss of control that comes when working with influencers. Influencers have different standards than a paid journalist writing a review for the local newspaper. They will not hold back if they do not like their meal, even if it was comped. Unless you are paying them for the content, you probably will not see the post until it goes live. If the loss of control is unacceptable, Green recommends paying the influencer and making a review of their post a mandatory part of the contract.

Nazrin Bagirova is a marketing specialist for Sweet Paris Crêperie & Café, with multiple locations in Texas, Miami, and the Twin Cities. Bagirova credits a Brand Ambassador Program using influencers with growing the crêperie's Instagram followers by 12,000 over a 6-month period. The previous six-month period saw follower growth of 3,000, in contrast. In addition to growing follower count, brand ambassadors helped to increase user engagement by 11.6 %, says Bagirova.

"Sweet Paris has been a favorite spot for social media influencers who frequent our locations to enjoy the beautiful interiors and artful food and drinks," says Bagirova. The restaurant's aesthetic is warm and inviting with outdoor bistro seating reminiscent of Paris.

Sweet Paris Crêperie & Café runs applications for their Brand Ambassador Program every 6 months. This brings in a steady stream of Instagram users who have an affinity for the crepe restaurant and want to promote them on Instagram. Bagirova says they approach it like a collaboration, thinking about the influencers' interests and priorities, not just what is good for the restaurant.

Because Sweet Paris is opening units in new markets, new influencers are constantly being exposed to the brand. Many of those who show interest in the ambassador program are foodie influencers. But Bagirova says, "we also work with influencers and ambassadors who represent the Sweet Paris customer demographic."

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and really show what it means to indulge in The Art of Eating Crêpes!" which is the restaurant's mission. Sometimes, influencers who really resonate with the brand's style seek them out. Instagram users will tag Sweet Paris in a story or post or reach out via direct messaging, initiating a relationship.

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They give priority to Instagram users who take beautiful photos and videos, demonstrate love and enthusiasm for the Sweet Paris brand, and create content that receives lots of likes and comments from followers. High engagement rates signal that followers know, like, and trust the creator. When that creator raves about your concept in a post, some of that affinity will transfer from the trusted influencer over to your brand.



Bagirova recommends independent restaurant operators identify what goals they are trying to achieve by working with influencers, then tailor their influencer strategy toward those goals. She encourages operators to give influencers creative freedom over the type of post and to be flexible.

Bagirova learned the hard way not to delay on setting expectations and tracking results when working with influencers. Instagram analytics show the number of likes, views, and comments an Instagram post received, which can help operators evaluate content performance. If someone is not delivering in the way they hoped, is there a shared contact in place to hold them accountable?

Bagirova mentions a graphic she saw on social media that suggested keeping people informed, interested, involved, and inspired was a type of key performance indicator. "Our special community of influencers and ambassadors make content that truly resonates with that concept. They do such an amazing job sharing their Sweet Paris experience with their followers and helping to grow our online community of crêpe enthusiasts!" she said.

While it takes time to work with brand ambassadors, the benefits of doing so outweigh the extra effort. Bagirova admits that influencers take extra work and a dedicated community manager can be helpful for operators who have the bandwidth to hire someone for the role.

These strategies take some initial setup, monitoring, and refinement. Leave yourself extra time to get started. Once the processes of posting high-quality content, incorporating UGC, and working with influencers are refined, your concept can get more mileage out of Instagram while cultivating an engaged and loyal audience.

Instagram Best Practices

According to young Instagram marketing enthusiasts, the following are several best practices for posting to Instagram:

Start with strong photos. Strong photos do not just show off menu items in their best light, they tell the story of the dish. Certified pastry chef, food stylist, and professional food photographer Kimberly Houston recommends staging photos with props that suggest how the item is served. Rather than a plain background, add props like utensils, a napkin, oil and vinegar bottles, and components of the salad, like a ripe avocado half if the salad contains avocado.

Post consistently. Consistency is the key to having your content seen on Instagram. Whether you post daily or three to four times a week, develop a schedule to it. Many restaurant operators use a content calendar to plan out posts in advance.

Use content buckets. Combined with a content calendar, content buckets are essential for creating a steady stream of engaging, on-brand content. Content buckets are themes or topics for posts, such as menu items, behind-the-scenes, or meet-the-employees. Content buckets simplify the content creation and posting process because you are only ever talking about a handful of topics. They also reinforce a coherent brand image, which helps to define your restaurant for your audience.

Post when your audience is active. The best time to post to Instagram is when your audience is using the app and thus more likely to see your post. Sprout Social reviewed the best time to post to Instagram for bars and restaurants. Their research found that engagement rates are higher Monday through Wednesday, with the highest engagement during Monday late afternoon (2 pm and the 4 to 6 pm window) and Monday to Wednesday late night (10 pm to 1 am). Of course, it only makes sense during these times if your concept is open. So, if your restaurant is shuttered on Mondays, do not post on that day.

Use geo-specific hashtags. Tagging a post with a hashtag means that it will show up whenever anyone searches for that hashtag. You can use as many as you want with every Instagram post, though Instagram's corporate account recommends 3 to 5 hashtags. For maximum visibility, aim for hashtags with a fair amount of use, such as 10,000 to 20,000. Avoid those with millions of uses, since it is harder to stand out in a crowded pond. Incorporate location-specific hashtags to get discovered by users in your community or who are hungry and looking for a good place to eat.

Mix in trending hashtags and themed days. Experiment with trending hashtags and themed days (like those National Burger Days, et cetera) to expose your restaurant to a wider audience. Mixing in a little bit of this content is a fun way to get fresh eyes on your Instagram feed, by tapping into hashtags you normally use.

Create your own hashtag. Branded hashtags unique to your establishment offer the chance to tap into user-generated content (UGC), described in detail below. Branded hashtags also foster a sense of community, reinforcing that all-important sense of customer loyalty.

Write keyword-rich captions. Captions are a good opportunity to tell the story of your restaurant or a particular menu item. But if you are not incorporating keywords in those captions, you are missing out. Since caption text is searchable, you want to incorporate a few keywords that define your concept, for example 'Meat & Cheese' or 'plant-based.'

Use carousels. Carousel posts contain multiple images. Rather than post five separate times about new menu items, consider creating a carousel post with multiple images of the dishes and an engaging caption that encourages followers to swipe to see more. Since Instagram will highlight different images from the carousel post to the feed, your audience may see this style of post more frequently than a single-image post. Repetition reinforces recognition and familiarity, leaving your restaurant top of mind.

Start reels strong. Reels are short videos that create a sense of engagement. Many operators enjoy posting behind-the-scenes Reels or "get to know the chef" Reels. Some operators have found Reels helpful in the hiring process. The best reels have a strong and captivating start that stops the scroll. For example,

with a question often works because it evokes curiosity.

Keep up with trends. Instagram is always changing. What works well today won't necessarily be as successful next month. Make a commitment to stay up trends and user behavior on Instagram by following influential creators in the restaurant and hospitality industry who tend to be early adopters of new features. Since Instagram often promotes content that uses new trends and features this can help you stay one step ahead of the algorithm.

Automate the workflow. With so many things on your plate, it can be easy to forget to post and lose the benefits of consistency. Whether it is scheduling content reminders for yourself or using an Instagram scheduler such as Buffer or Later, there are free and low-cost ways to automate posting so you gain all the benefits of Instagram without having to keep it top of mind.

Do Not Let Perfection Be the Enemy of Success

You do not need to wait until you have the perfect photos of every single menu item to promote something on Instagram. Green says that sometimes the perfection can cause a client to miss out on the ideal window of time to promote something in advance. "People want less perfection on Instagram," she says. "They want things that feel authentic. You do not need to do a photo shoot for everything or wait to get a professional photographer in. Just get it up. Do not pursue perfection," she says.