

Social Media Guest Engagement

By Lindsey Danis

The value of social media marketing goes well beyond its reach and low cost. Sure the first step of promoting your business via social is creating messages to attract interest in your concept. That said, the real upside of your Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok posts is follower engagement. A post does not have to go "viral" to be a win for the business. Several reposts here and there can pay off.

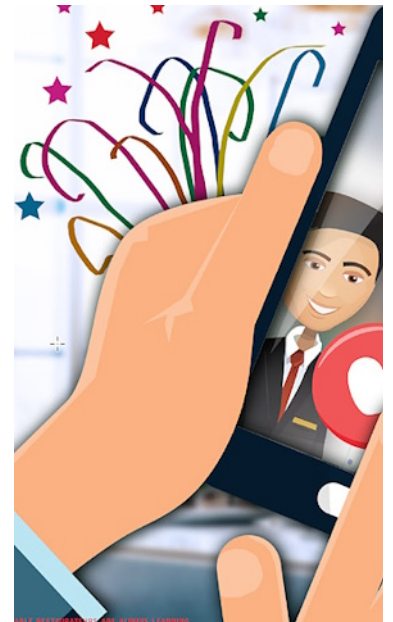
Hospitality consultant Chris Tripoli believes that the operators who are getting the most value out of their social media marketing efforts are encouraging their audience to reply and repost. "The more you engage your guests, the more the customer feels they are part of your concept. Loyal guests not only tend to dine at the restaurant more often, they become an extension of its marketing by introducing new customers to the concept." Time spent on customer engagement leads to increased revenue in three ways, Tripoli says, adding, "Guests visit more often, they spend more money during visits, and they bring third parties with them, which leads to a bigger bill."

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

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

- Describe ways to foster guest affinity to your concept.
- Identify two generative AI applications that can help time-strapped operators create social media content.
- Explain how community involvement can leverage social media engagement.

“ You tell your story on social media. Good for you. Are your guests telling your story to their followers? ”



Dmitri Fetokakis, owner-operator of Niko Nikos, a Houston, Texas, Greek fast-casual concept is one of Tripoli's longtime clients. Fetokakis says that people believe fast casual food is pre-prepared. His story is that "everything we make in-house is from scratch. We bring the best ingredients from Greece and we best stuff." That is the story.

His engagement is treating followers of his social media as insiders, worthy to visit the back of the house. He offers ample behind-the-scenes video, via Instagram Reels and TikTok, making the fresh menu items.

Tools of the Trade

"I've been doing social media a long time, so I understand the marketing side of it," says Kristen Corral, co-owner of plant-based taco concept Tacotarian, in Las Vegas and San Diego. Corral handles the business's social media marketing using techniques and tricks she learned as a pet care business owner.

You cannot hope for engagement without a steady stream of content, which is time consuming and challenging if you are not naturally creative. Corral understands that "a lot of small independent restaurants don't have somebody who can market for them. For those restaurants, I think AI (artificial intelligence) is somewhat super underrated, especially ChatGPT. It can help people who do not know what they are doing learn a few prompts to get them started," Corral adds.

Corral uses several AI tools, including the generative language tool ChatGPT, to get new ideas and streamline content creation. She finds ChatGPT particularly helpful to spark ideas when she is writing Facebook copy. "You cannot say 'write me Facebook ad copy for a taco shop,' you have to give it a prompt to help it be useful," she says, adding that she will describe the imagery found in the photos accompanying the ad.

She will also tell ChatGPT to write as if it is a high-level ad copywriter that excels at Facebook ads, a prompt that helps the language generator understand the desired tone. These extra steps tell ChatGPT what kind of voice to imitate and what type of image will accompany the copy, cues that enable the AI tool to create more relevant and on-brand copy. Corral will usually take what ChatGPT comes up with and modify it to fit the brand, but overall says she has had "pretty good results" with first-draft copy when using prompts like these.

Corral uses the social media scheduling app Later to schedule image-based content. Later has an AI tool that she will sometimes use to help create captions. While Later's AI can sometimes give "ridiculous suggestions," Corral will prompt the AI tool with specific language like "\$1.99 taco Tuesday special." As with ChatGPT, she will often take part of the suggested copy and use it to create posts in the brand's voice.

While AI reduces the time it takes to create and schedule content, Corral also uses it to engage with customers who mention Tacotarian on social media using the messaging chatbot ManyChat. ManyChat allows her to build out interactions based on keywords and key phrases. Corral set up the chatbot to

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reply to story mentions of Tacotarian with an automated message that gives the customer a 10% off coupon.

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The coupon connects directly to their Toast POS, which allows her to track how many people are using the "superfan coupon," as she calls it. Corral estimates that they are usually getting anywhere between 5 and 10 redemptions per location per month. "It's not a whole lot, but people enjoy it," she says.

Given their locations in two popular vacation destinations, Tacotarian attracts tourists who are not likely to be repeat guests to enjoy the coupon. That says town guests indicate they appreciate the offer and share the information with their followers.

Manychat has a learning curve that might discourage operators who are not inclined to master yet one more tech tool; however, Corral believes the time to master the platform is rewarded. "It is great for restaurants that are super busy and get a lot of story tags."

Once "workflows" are set up, Manychat runs automatically. This saves time – one less variable for operators to track when engaging with comments – and customers who mention the brand in their social media. Getting recognized for posting about a favorite brand makes a user feel good, which in turn strengthens the bond that they feel for the restaurant.

At Tacotarian, customers are encouraged in multiple ways to interact with the brand via social media. For example, there are signs in the bathroom asking to connect on social media. Guests can scan a QR code and go directly to the taco shop's social media page.

"We have signs in the restaurant that say tag us," says Corral. "We have a sombrero on the wall. People can put it on and take photos and it has our hashtag. People engaged in the restaurant is going to help them stay engaged with you on social media."

Corral believes operators can sometimes focus too much on storytelling and cultivating brand awareness through social media posts at the expense of guest engagement. While telling your story is important and helps create a bond, operators should reflect on ways they can invite the customer to reply to social media content. This can be as simple as asking customers what they would like to see, and using suggestions to drive new menu items. This makes customer feel like they are part of the brand, which Corral says is "instrumental for growth."

Survey Says

Lauren Coulter, who co-founded Kentucky-based craft-casual brunch restaurant Biscuit Belly with her husband Chad, recalls turning to social media for a tool that helps them better understand their core customer.

In the early days, Coulter says they were "randomly picking sites" to open new units. Realizing that they needed to better understand the core customer in order to focus on them, and pick the best locations for the concept, they created a survey focused around guest preferences. She asked herself several questions. "If our average loyalty customer comes once every 60 days, what can we do to increase that to every 30 days? What is keeping them from coming in more often?"

Participants received a gift card for their efforts. They promoted the survey on social media and to their loyalty program members. Of the 930 people who participated in the survey, 100 came from Facebook, Coulter says. The survey gave them great insight into "what people are looking for and what would make them come back more often."

The team also used guest feedback to come up with new menu items. She found that guests were interested in lunch and healthy options. "We are rolling out three traditional lunch options, inside-out omelets, and a bowl because we kept hearing it'd be nice to have a breakfast bowl," Coulter says.

Biscuit Belly customers take a lot of photos of the concept's biscuits. "The food is so Instagram-able by design," adds Coulter. As part of the restaurant's strategy, we have an Instagram ready class on plating food attractively, from a social media point of view. "What does it take to make this go from being something to where people are pulling out their phones to take a photo?"

The restaurant doubly benefits. Customers who pull out their phones to snap and post a brunch picture to Instagram inevitably tag Biscuit Belly, which exposes the brand to a new audience. Biscuit Belly then asks to use the customer's photos and gives them credit when resharing the content on their social media feeds.

User-generated content rewards customers who feel seen and validated when their photo is re-shared on the restaurant's feeds. It is an easy way to get feedback without the time and money to hire a photographer, take it yourself, or turn to stock images.

Whereas some restaurant operators might be annoyed that staff are distracted by their phones, Coulter has found a way to tap into employee interest in TikTok by allowing them to create content on the clock, so long as it is relevant to the brand of course. The brunch restaurant has also partnered with local influencers to create engaging content that helps define the brand's values.

Leveraging Influence

Coulter recalls one of their early experiences working with local influencers. It came about almost by accident when a comedian social influencer posted a TikTok about Biscuit Belly. With over one million followers, his post attracted a great deal of attention to the concept. Coulter invited him to produce and host another video for Biscuit Belly.

When a new unit opens, Coulter says they look at local influencer channels for "somebody with that mischievous, silly brand" who creates other food-related content. She doesn't think it makes sense to pick somebody in an unrelated niche, like style, just because that person happens to have a big following.

"We don't have these big budgets to give out, but people are always looking for experiences with their families and friends," she says. "Influencers have different levels of what they will do for various [incentives]," she adds, mentioning another local influencer that has posted about Biscuit Belly in their stories. They tend to work with influencers who have been happy to get free food during their stay, or gift cards, which they use to bring loved ones to the restaurant.

When asked about the impact of TikTok views on revenue, Coulter admits that "it's hard to quantify who is coming back and the true value they bring." She is currently exploring options like a VIP card that would give them more data on the impact in the future. Right now, she is happy with getting new experiences



people who have the same values as the brand.

That's the Spirit

Operators agree that it is important to demonstrate community spirit wherever they have locations, whether the concept is a single- or multi-unit concept. Niko Nikos supports his local community by donating to school Spirit Night fundraisers. Niko Nikos also sponsors blood drives and promotes them on the restaurant website as well as rewards donors with gift cards. Guests who applaud these efforts are likely to share the events on their media to like-minded followers.



Fetokakis had just completed name, image, and likeness (NIL) licensing with local college football players when we spoke. This allows Niko Nikos to bring out local college football players to promote the brand, generating buzz for the restaurant and enthusiasm from sports fans who are passionate about college football. "The athletes come out and endorse the brand, we'll do something where they come out in their jerseys, and we'll use social media to promote it," he explains. The operator hopes local football fans will want to come out for a gyro if it might be served to them by a favorite player as part of a fun event. Fetokakis expects that the football licensing agreements will create natural opportunities for social media followers to engage with posts and visit the restaurant more often.

At Tacotarian, 20 percent of revenue from monthly specials is given to community charities that align with the concept's values of animal welfare, civil rights, and environment. "That has really helped our brand awareness in the communities where we operate," Corral says. "The charities want the donation, so the more you sell the more money you are going to get from us," she explains, adding, "They're getting people to try the food and post about it on social media." Prater introduces a new and bigger audience to the concept, while helping to reinforce the brand values and storytelling, such as the connection between a plant shop and caring about animal welfare.

The Ripple Effect

Large waves often begin as ripples. It is difficult to measure the relationship between guest engagement and increased sales, except for the viral post that creates a tsunami of attention and business. "I can't say that social has ever changed just one thing, but probably a million little things over time," says Coulter.

On the plus side for independent operators, Coulter believes, "we're in an age where people want to support small businesses. They don't want to go to [big chains]." Independent restaurateurs who can make guests feel like they are not just the audience but members of the band can tap into that mindset. That is getting a larger share of a guest's dine-out budget.

WESTSIDE STORY

Westside Fish and Chips Huntsville, Ontario, Canada

For Westside Fish and Chips owners Debbie and Chris Knobelsdorf, their social media challenge was doing a better job of telling their story. Debbie says she fought what she calls "a constant battle to attain our share of the customers out there searching for a place to eat, whether they be our long-time, regulars – getting them to choose us an extra time or two per month – or a tourist just traveling through town."

Interestingly, she refers to the challenge as "not really a problem, just a constant battle with more and more choices out there for the customer to eat at. A year ago, coffee shops sold coffee and donuts. Now you can get breakfast, lunch, and dinner practically anywhere. Everyone is trying to get their own piece of the pie."

After 38 years "things can kind of get stagnant," Debbie laments. She and her colleagues "have made a conscientious effort to be more visible on social media, Facebook, and to utilize – if I remember correctly – 'geofencing' (the use of GPS or RFID technology to create a virtual geographic boundary, enabling soft triggers to trigger a response when a mobile device enters or leaves a particular area). When a customer goes to your website, your banner ad follows them when they are searching elsewhere if they are in our targeted area."

For her own part, Knobelsdorf adds, "We are working hard to post more pictures on social media, and all of the staff have been instructed to share. That's how the story goes further, by people sharing."

Knobelsdorf encourages her customers to review her restaurant on the most popular websites in her area – Yelp, Trip Advisor and Google. "We explain that the best way for little guys like us to compete with the chain restaurants. They're usually more than willing to oblige."

Additional steps have also helped. "For decades, our company vehicle has just had your basic name and number on it," she points out. "This past year I convinced my mother and partner to go all out. We've had so many comments about the graphics job; it's very noticeable. Long story short: we're trying to be more visible to our customers face as much as possible." Knobelsdorf credits RestaurantOwner.com for helping her become more involved in improving their restaurant's online presence. "They have pushed me to either implement certain things – like pushing social media – or to re-enforce certain (other) things."

As a result of these efforts, Knobelsdorf says her restaurant is, in fact, busier. "Sales the past several months have been up 10% to 16%, which makes us handle the lean winter months much easier. We just recently tightened our belt a bit and lowered many prices, and sales are still up 16% now. We always cared about making it easier for our customers, that they deserved a break – and they came."

The owners have succeeded in increasing awareness "and our bank account," she adds. "Winter months are very stressful financially. You can't be in business and not weather some storms. The increase in sales has improved our off-season financial picture. Now we can go into spring and summer with a good foot already, and do it all over again."