Digital marketing has always been important, but now, because people cannot leave their homes, it’s become a key element to a restaurant’s success. From social media campaigns, to online reviews, your restaurant’s digital presence matters. Now is not the time to reduce the focus and energy around advertising and marketing, but rather, the time to step it up.

What matters right now is ensuring your restaurant has a channel and strategy in place in order to communicate to your customers where and how they can find you, and what experience they can expect from you.

COVID-19 will impact the story you tell about your restaurant, and how you tell it. The goal of this guide is to help you think about the right digital strategy, including tips, best practices, and inspiring examples to help your restaurant increase your presence in the marketplace and grow your followers during and after COVID-19.
Keep your customers informed about how COVID-19 has impacted your restaurant.

First and foremost, help your customers stay informed during COVID-19 by letting them know the basics: if you’re still open, if your hours have changed, and how they can order food from you or best support your restaurant.

1. Tell your customers if you are open/closed and if your hours have changed because of COVID. Check out this example from All Together Now in Chicago. They created a very simple landing page for COVID-19 with their hours and information.

2. If you’re still selling food, let your customers know how they can order it (GrubHub, Uber Eats, Door Dash?), and receive it (pick-up, and/or delivery). Blake’s Hard Cider updates their customers on changing pick-up rules via Instagram.

Stay top of mind by continuing to promote your goods and services.

Melissa Schrieber, Founder of Insight Forty-Two, recommends a three-pronged communication strategy: “Your message should rotate between something normal, something interesting, and acknowledgment of the world we live in. You have to talk about COVID-19, but it’s how you do it that will matter the most.”

The Normal

1. If your menu has changed to be more friendly for takeout and delivery, promote the new dishes. Alinea, a fine-dining restaurant in Chicago, is offering a reasonably priced menu to-go.

2. Share any products or services that you’ve added to your menu that might be seen as unexpected. Many operators are adding new offerings like commodity items, DIY kits, or frozen meals. Check out these examples of restaurants offering a roll of toilet paper with every order.

3. Stand out from a crowded landscape by sharing promotions. With online ordering, customers can pick from a variety of options quickly and easily, and are easily swayed by coupons or discounts. Earl’s Kitchen and Bar has great examples of this. The bright side: customers with coupons are more likely to spend more money.
Interesting & Inspiring

1. Share ways that your customers can support your staff with fundraisers or virtual tip jars.

2. Appeal to families and figure out interesting ways to avoid waste. Check out this example from Baker Miller, who is throwing in play dough to every order.

3. Share with your customers if you are doing any special virtual events during COVID-19. See more examples at Virtual Dining in Chicago.

COVID-19

1. Share your COVID-19 Policies like what you are doing to keep your restaurant clean, how you are keeping your staff safe, and how you are keeping customers safe.

2. Let your customer know how they can support your restaurant with gift card or merchandise purchases. Instagram founder, Mike Krieger launched a site called ‘Save Our Faves’ for Bay Area residents to purchase gift cards to support their favorite local restaurants.

3. Are you giving back to your community at all? Share that! Agave & Rye started a campaign called ‘Gloves on Hand’ to donate gloves to healthcare workers.

Wild idea!
Now is the time to experiment? Casa Las Palmas, developed a drive-thru program to safely deliver food to their customers.
Keeping your social media up to date is more important than ever.

With social distancing and temporary shelter in place orders implemented across the country, remaining active and engaged with your customers through social media and digital content is an extremely important way for restaurants to stay in touch with their customers and communities.

Whether it’s menu updates, hour changes, or new cleaning practices, it’s important to let your customers know how your restaurant is responding to the crisis. Social media platforms during COVID-19 provide your customers with a landing spot to see what’s happening and how your business is pivoting to accommodate the fluctuating landscape.

Social media also continues to serve as advertising for your restaurant. Keep your restaurant top of mind by showcasing new products, such as takeaway meal kits, or new services, such as curbside pickup, in a fun and meaningful way.

Your digital content could come in the form of photos, articles, videos, information sharing, polls (example: tell us something you’d like to see on our takeaway menu), special mentions/shouts to community members or other partner restaurants, promotions, and/or calls to action (example: like and share this post and tag 2 of your friends to receive a 10% discount on your next order).

If possible, don’t reduce your social media budget and spending. Now is not the time to reduce the focus and energy around advertising and marketing, but rather, the time to step it up.

If time and energy is limited, focus on one platform.

We realize that you may not have time right now to focus all of your efforts on building out social media content across multiple platforms, so make it easy by prioritizing the platforms where you have the most engaged followers and that best reach your audience.

We’ve created a brief overview of the big three, to help you identify which platform is best for your restaurant.

The Big Three

The most widely used social platforms for restaurants are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter. Each platform behaves differently, with different core functionality, different audience demographics, and reasons for growing an audience.

Facebook
Use Facebook to share curated content, video sharing, live webinars or digital event invitations, and special promotions.

Instagram
Use Instagram to share high-res photos, short videos (60 seconds), special promotions, & fun how-to videos. You can also repost and share photos posted by your customers.

Twitter
Use Twitter to post new information about your restaurant or industry, or re-share relevant information. Twitter relies less on images, and more on latest, up to date information and trends.

Quick Tip!
During this crisis, we are seeing an increase in the number of daily posts that restaurants are providing to their followers. If you normally post a few times per week, considering upping this to once daily.
Instagram

Instagram is best for sharing high-res photos, short videos, a special promotion, or a special menu offering. It’s a great place to showcase new or existing menu offerings and products, fun photos, and short videos (such as 60 second how-to guides for meal-kits).

Pros

Easy to use and great easy editing features for filters and photo enhancing.

Great spot to showcase your brand, personality, and products in a fun way.

Free insights into your analytics on the backend when using Instagram for Business.

Cons

Built to be used on your smartphone.

This isn’t for every age group. Millennials and Gen Z are the dominating users of Instagram. If your customers tend to be a little older, go for Facebook.

More content heavy and works best if you to post once per day.

Best Practices

Post 1-2x’s per day, either on your grid or via your stories.

Post engaging, high-quality images.

Use hashtags to reach more followers. Take a look at other local restaurants in your communities to see what hashtags they are using in their posts. Some examples: #food #foodie #restaurants #goodfood #takeaway.

Make sure your account is a business account. You can use the analytics to help you decide which posts are reaching the most followers and getting the most engagement. Learn more about analytics here.

Quick Tip!

Use the story feature to show your space in real-time, share a promotion, post your weekly menu, or show a “behind the scenes” video. Stories only last 24 hours, so you can be more flexible with what you show here.
Facebook

Use Facebook to share curated content, video sharing, live webinars or digital event invitations, and special promotions.

Tell your guests about any special dishes your restaurant is offering, or how you’ve pivoted your best selling items into takeaway options. For example, Prime Provision’s best selling meatloaf can now be purchased for the whole family as a heat-at-home takeaway meal kit, including all the sides. Share a personal story about your restaurant, your workers, what you’re doing right now to stay up and running and involved in the community. Run a Facebook Live video that shows your chefs in action.

Pros

Allows your followers to share their favorite posts of yours easily.

If someone likes your page, then Facebook uses this to encourage their friends to also visit your page.

Facebook gives preference to graphic heavy content (like videos and photos). So for restaurants with food photos, meal-kits, fun takeaway items, grocery products, etc. to show, this is a real win.

Cons

This isn’t for every age group. The average age of Facebook’s users is 41. If your audience is younger, turn your attention towards Instagram.

Your followers need to interact with you on Facebook, or they will be less likely to see your future posts, so you’ll need to keep your engagement regular.

Monitoring Facebook in order to respond to customers means this platform requires more regular engagement.

Best Practices

Post 1 - 2x’s per day.

Take advantage of Facebook videos or Facebook Live (note: Facebook Live videos are viewed 3x’s more than pre-recorded videos).

Facebook allows you to write very long posts, but research shows the shorter the post (less than 100 characters), the higher engagement.

Once you get more familiar with Facebook, use their business analytics tools to see what posts are reaching the most followers. Learn more about analytics here.
Twitter

Use Twitter to post new information about your restaurant or industry, or re-share relevant information. Twitter relies less on images, and more on latest, up to date information and trends.

**Pros**

You can pin your most important content, like the seasonal menu, at the top of your profile so it’s the first thing your visitors see.

Easy way to keep up with industry trends and conversation.

Showcase your brand’s personality. If you want to see a bold personality from a famous food chain, check out Wendy’s Twitter.

You can speak directly to their customers and address customer concerns quickly. See how Starbucks addresses their customer’s issues.

**Cons**

You cannot edit your posts once they’re live, so be careful what you post and/or be prepared to start over again if there are errors.

It tends to take a longer time to gain followers for lesser known brands on Twitter.

Negative tweets and trolls. Connecting with your customers can be a pro and a con. Be prepared to respond to customers quickly, try to ignore the trolls, but remember to always remain professional.

**Best Practices**

Be consistent; re-share and/or post 5x’s per day.

Keep your Tweets short and to the point (you only have 140 characters).

Use hashtags to engage a wider audience.

Engage more frequently with trending topics.
The do’s & don’ts of communicating with your customers

What to communicate is important. It’s also just as important to manage how you communicate during a crisis and during the recovery. What and how you communicate will develop the voice and tone of your brand. Below are general guidelines on “how” to deliver your “what” for the next 3-9 months while the world settles in.

1 Don’t ask. Give.
Melissa Schriebert describes how some companies are asking for consumers to take part in activities and generate content, such as submitting videos. The intention is good, but when people are working from home, taking care of their families, and trying to stay healthy, asking them to go above and beyond may feel like a big lift. Now is the time to give something back, and ask for less.

2 Be transparent and authentic.
In today’s climate, and even before the pandemic, consumers expect transparency and desire authenticity. They want a brand to feel personal, authentic, and honest. Communicate in a way that is in line with your brand and values, and share what’s happening with the business and people.

3 Be empathetic and relevant.
Try to understand where your customers are coming from today. Think of the asks you’re making of them, what’s happening in their lives, and be cautious of oversharin. Asking consumers to spend stimulus checks or tax returns on discretionary spending when unemployment is high feels out of touch.

4 Be the good you want to see in the world. And be true.
In between messages aiming to communicate and drive traffic, be sure to share stories of how you’re contributing to your community. These are great things to share and celebrate in the community—and the message should be one of gratitude and honor, not one aimed to drive traffic and increase sales.

5 Differentiate your advertising.
There are other ways to get the word out about your operation beyond your typical channels. Think about cross-promotion with other local businesses. What could you do with the local brewery, distilleries, bakeries, etc.? You could also partner with local influencers with followings to help promote your operation - this can even be enhanced by offering discounts to those that use a special code offered by that influencer only.

6 Not business as usual.
In times of crises, there are certain things that should be avoided. This is not the time to be exploitive. Guinness didn’t promote large celebrations and gatherings for St. Patrick’s day - their message was one of wellbeing, instead. For upcoming holidays, take the moment into consideration, and handle it with care.
Pay attention to your hashtags
Lastly, let’s talk about hashtags. Simply put, hashtags are great. People following these will help you gain views and new followers. Consider the following:

#thegreatamericantakeout #dineinathome #eatathome #newschoollunch #takeoutfood #comfortfoodnow #takeouttuesday

But there are also hashtags that shouldn’t be used during a crisis, such as #covid, #corona or #coronavirus. These are reserved for important information and updates.

There is always a story to tell, even if you temporarily closed.

Some operators made the difficult decision to close their doors during COVID-19. For those that are looking forward to the day that they get to re-emerge, there are stories to be told between now and then to remain present and relevant.

What you can be doing now

Share employee spotlights; what are staff doing during this time

How are you helping staff (if applicable)

Menu development and experimentation

How you’re helping the community

Share photos from before COVID

Learn about what your audience wants so you can develop more/better products and experiences for when you’re open through Instagram polls, or sharing a typeform with your facebook followers.

What you can do before re-opening

Staff reunion pictures!

Opening day prep and communication

Post photos of your menu, emphasizing any new special dishes.

Promote a reopening party and sell tickets

Brewella’s

Nisei Lounge

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