

Restaurants' social-media strategies in 2012

Executives from the 800-unit Checkers Drive In to the three-unit tre'za outline tactics for connecting with customers and franchisees

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For growing franchise brands, 2011 was an educational year in terms of adopting social media into the marketing and recruiting mix. As brands of all sizes — from the nearly 800-unit Checkers Drive In to the three-unit upstart tre'za — look back on best practices learned last year, officials are making bigger plans for social-media strategies in 2012.

Nation's Restaurant News spoke with several chains to discuss which social-media platforms can complement Facebook's dominance for restaurant marketing, and which new applications, mobile or otherwise, are open to growing brands.



Creating a one-stop shop on Facebook

Gary Occhiogrosso, chief development officer, Trufoods LLC

We launched a social-media contest for our Ritter's Frozen Custard chain, and the analytics were through the roof. So one goal for next year is to get our remaining brands — Pudgie's Famous Chicken, Wall St. Deli and Arthur Treacher's Fish & Chips — up to speed. We already use social media to engage in conversation with guests and address their questions, but the piece we want to move into is a data capture effort.

It appears that more people are engaged on our Facebook page than our website. We're going to give people the ability to purchase gift cards from a tab on our Facebook page, and we've loaded up our tabs with all the information people expected to find at the Trufoods website. We see 2012

as an opportunity to take what we've started and expand upon it, making it more user-friendly and letting people get more information right from the Facebook page.

We can cross-promote our brands through one mechanism with social media. Rather than paying for a message to be repeated four times, we can expose our brands to more people on Facebook, which is useful because we're primarily a franchise organization. People can learn about our brands from one area. We did a radio flight in the Midwest for Ritter's, and the choice of stations we chose was based in large part on who was using the Ritter's Facebook page, and we bought based on those demographics.

From a franchising point of view, I love it. When a potential partner calls me, I tell them go to the Facebook page and listen to what guests are saying about us.

What could have more credibility?



Continuing the conversation

Peter Riggs, vice president of brand development, Pita Pit

We took a non-traditional growth model for a franchise brand, starting in Syracuse, N.Y., and then opening in Moscow, Idaho, so having brand cohesion across large distances is something we've been working on for a long time. Social media's made that a lot easier for us.

We've had great success with our "Name That Pita" contest on Facebook, but the real big effort has been just to talk to our customers. We weren't trying to push anything or sell anything, but were trying to take the conversations we were having in our locations and taking them global. If you go to our brand page, the brand isn't talking about the Chicken Caesar Pita or whatever. It's saying, "You have to see this hilarious video I found last night." Social media's about continuing our interaction from the stores, where we're trying to be friendly above all.

The more your customers realize they can just talk to you without getting your agenda, then when you do have something brand-related on your Facebook page, they don't automatically tune it out. So we'll do a little more talking that is brand-related in 2012. We'll talk to customers about

our different promotions, and you can only do that after your customers know you're genuinely interested in what they have to say.

We'll try to do a little more with Foursquare, because we want to get people competing for mayor titles and stuff, and we'll pursue more interaction with Twitter. But really Facebook is the best way to stay connected and communicate.



Focusing on the fans

Bridget Keeler, marketing manager, Toppers Pizza

The launch of our Topperstix tab on the Facebook page went really well this year, where we offered a free order of Topperstix and in return accepted guests' information like names, addresses and email addresses. We want to continue with Toppers Tuesdays, which is an exclusive buy-one-get-one offer for our Facebook fans who get rewarded for being loyal followers.

For new store openings — we have 20 planned for 2012 — we want to create more tabs for those events on our Facebook page and give out rewards to the first 50 people “checking in” in line. As we grow, we want to create these events so they can see themselves on Toppers' national Facebook page. We'll also put a new video series on our social pages, “A Day in the Life of a Delivery Driver.” Customers can see the driver's interactions with them.

We'll do a lot of search engine and Facebook advertising with all that, and next year we'll start testing mobile apps and then some mobile ads in the Milwaukee market.



Building the business

Daniel Rothfeld, chief executive, tre'za

We're an upstart brand, so we've used social media for the past year as an opportunity to engage prospective customers, generate awareness and build some brand equity into a concept that heretofore wasn't known. Moving forward, we plan on using it to create more trial within that business unit and use it for marketing.

Everybody's still trying to understand which platforms work the best and provide the most value for them. For us, we want to get an online application for ordering that will integrate back into our point-of-sale system. Our third location is a prototype in Atlanta where carryout is 35 percent of sales, versus less than 10 percent of mix at our first two locations in Little Rock, so an online-ordering app becomes more important.

We're finding there hasn't been a lot of creativity with the legacy POS providers out there, but as newer systems leverage social media and tablet technology, you'll start to see some interesting integration with social and online loyalty programs.



Finding the right franchisees

Terri Snyder, chief marketing officer, and Jennifer Durham, chief development officer, Checkers Drive In

2011 was a breakthrough year for us using social media to connect with potential franchisees. We added two new tabs to our Facebook page: "Own a Checkers" and "New Openings." The "Own" tab connects people to our website's franchising portion, and the other page lets potential operators see all the commentary from customers who are eager for restaurants to open near them. In 2012, we'll continue to leverage Facebook and be more direct on LinkedIn, where we have more opportunities to connect potential operators with our existing franchisees.

Twitter will be the next area for us, as our guests are really picking it up. Social media is a really critical part of the new-unit opening marketing mix. We went very aggressive with openings, offering free fries for a year to the first 100 guests, and we used Facebook and Foursquare to promote that. We had more than 400 RSVPs for every opening. Late-night was key for us, and we drove that with Facebook, Foursquare and texting in a test in St. Louis.

As we begin to understand more about social media, we'll become bigger everyday players in banner advertising. We're primarily TV and print buyers, but we're seeing more money spent on social media, largely through Facebook.

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