With the rise of technology and social adoption, the resturant industry is finding its place in an online world.

ARE YOU ALIVE IN THE DIGITAL SPACE?

By Megan O'Neill

In every way possible, food is influenced by social and cultural engagement. Technology, at the very least, has the power to increase one's involvement in food culture while expanding the palate. As we transition into a more participatory society with digital abilities quite literally in our back pocket, technology gives customers the needed platform to engage with each other, with brands, and with food. But technology and the idea of engagement in the digital sphere must be harnessed and embraced by restaurants to enhance relationships with loyal and potential customers.

"With the exception of a few relationships in our lives that last forever, every other is dependent upon the frequency of interaction," says Travis Smith, founder of Content All Stars, a content marketing agency providing online strategies for industry leaders and authorities across the board—think Microsoft, Perry Marshall, Living Social, etc. "So it stands to reason that the more often you hear from or get value from a particular person or entity, the tighter that relationship is."

Being on social platforms is not just an extension of marketing—it's interaction. It's engagement. It's to persist in tightening that relationship.

Digital Food Life, a nationally syndicated report conducted by The Hartman Group, encourages those adapting to technology to remember that digital culture is more than social media, apps, banners and Google; it's how technologies are integrated into consumers' food life.

The first challenge is to answer that question—understand your target audience and find out how technology is integrated into their lives. Which spaces are they in? There's so much power in reconnaissance done with your customers—ask questions. Are they on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or Pinterest, and what kind of information are they looking for there? Would they like to see a Tweet about your daily specials or an Instagram image of a dish you're working on?

Today's consumers are no longer simply buyers of goods or services—they want to be a part of the experience and actively participate in your restaurant's decisions. Consumers want to know which purveyor supplied your truffles, and which farm you visit for fresh produce. To remain relevant in the purchasing decisions and lives of your customers, restaurants must provide this information, and what better platform than online services with incredible scalability?

1. Review-based platforms

With every new advance comes a challenge. Review sites have the power to democratize a dining landscape—the everyday patron can voice his or her opinion just as the New York Times food critic can. Reviews are a function of sites such as Yelp, TripAdvisor, or Urban Spoon, and potential customers, often those from out-of-town, can differentiate great service from poor, and fantastic drinks from inadequate bartenders with the click of a button. At

OpenTable, an online reservation service and subsidiary of Priceline, their customers write more than 400,000 reviews a month.

"There's so much power in reviews," says Smith. "This all comes down to social proof, which is a proven element in how we make decisions. We try and shortcut the decision process by seeking out what someone else like us has already done or would do."

Be proactive—the digital review space shouldn't be looked at as the enemy; Yelp also allows restaurants to include menus and discounts. In the end, engagement is key here, and monitoring review sites for the good and the bad gives managers and chefs the opportunity to respond, ask questions and find a solution to front or back of house issues.

2. Web order and reservation services

OpenTable finds restaurants for more than 15 million diners each month, and beyond that, their network connects those diners with more than 30,000 restaurants worldwide. The company introduced its first mobile app in 2008, and with incredibly user-friendly platforms for Android and iOS, they're transforming the on-the-go reservation system—in North America, 41 percent of their reservations are made on mobile devices. OpenTable also offers reward programs and top restaurant lists for its location-based customers—again, the more platforms on which customers are reminded of your name, your brand, and your restaurant, the more the idea to dine there stays top-of-mind.

Yelp's online reservation service, SeatMe, is a new front of house management system that takes reservations 24/7 from users. Within a few minutes of the reservation being made, restaurants can accept them on their own website or Yelp page. The system automatically confirms and reminds guests, so you don't have to. At full capacity? Guests can also elect to be messaged if a popular reservation slot opens up. Neither reservation systems are free for restaurants, but their perks exist in scalability and the far reaching capabilities of the world wide web.

Similar to OpenTable or Seat-Me, GrubHub and Seamless, delivery websites who merged in 2013, offer restaurants the opportunity to be seen in the digital sphere at a bit of a price. But if you're a customer looking for a streamlined, convenient delivery option, they're both a modern marvel. GrubHub opens businesses up to a world of customers they would have never reached by slipping paper menus on a door knob—restaurants are now an option for every Internet surfer working up an appetite.

3. Social media platforms

From company sweepstakes and contests offered on Twitter to check-ins and menu updates on Facebook, restaurants should use social platforms to really frequent customer relationships. No longer is dining a 2-hour experience, it's a constant check-in. "There is just a ton of leverage in putting your message out online," says Smith. "One because of the scalability and two because it's darn near free."
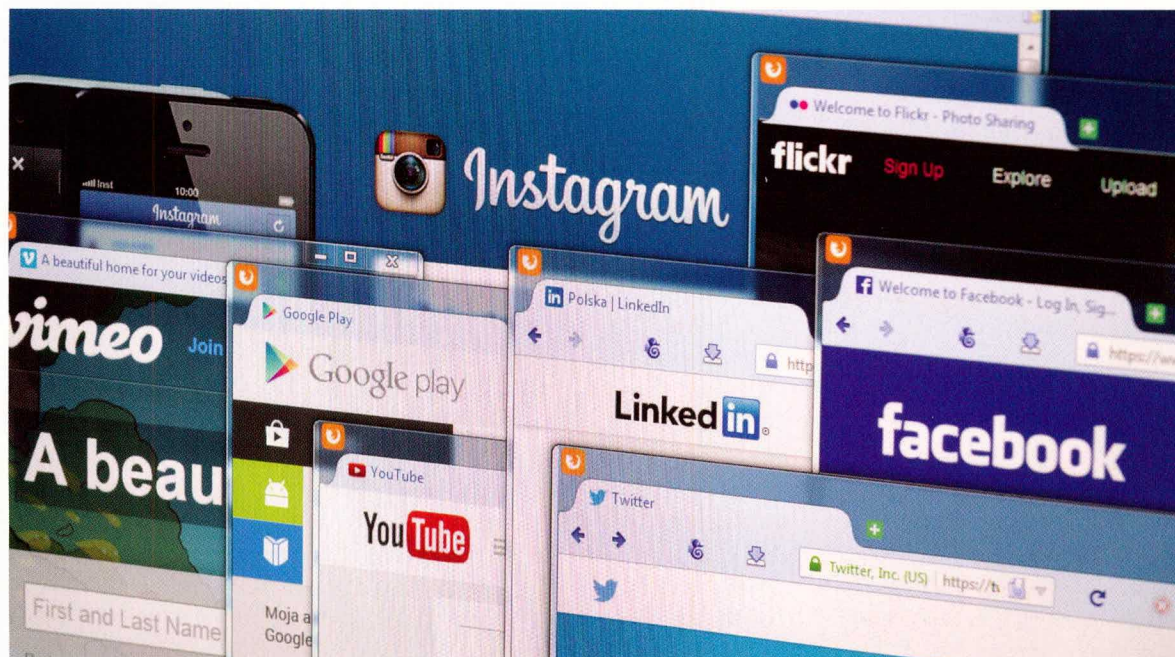
Smith suggests that if you can find a way to make images part of your marketing platform, you absolutely should. We're becoming an image-dependent society.

We're visually driven, and restaurants are encouraged to cater to that. Photograph new menu ideas, post them on Instagram, and ask for feedback. Be visual, and promote your images across all social platforms to spark interaction. Make a Pinterest account and interact with other restaurants and chefs, sharing your recipes, images and blog posts for all to see. A strong presence on these photo sharing sites can go miles. At-home consumers are costantly using the digital space to search for recipes, discover new food trends, and find their place in a global food culture; sharing your piece of the pie is a thought-provoking way of keeping a relationship tight.

Social networking sites certainly shape a customer's opinion of a restaurant. How many people have visited the restaurant recently? Through FourSquare, Instagram and Facebook, all of which allow you to check in to a restaurant, a patron's time is immediately documented—be sure to establish your restaurant on all of these sites as a location to encourage check-ins.

Connect with your local community through Facebook and Twitter, offering loyalty programs if they share or retweet your posts. Share your process of preparing dishes, share promotions, or share background information on your chefs or staff members. These are all relatively low maintenance and free marketing efforts to tempt your customers through beautiful artwork and images, menu preparation or promotions.

These small steps into the social sphere are an example of embracing technology without incorporating, say, an iPad menu into the recipe. In the end, diners want a human experience, and a waiter cannot be replaced, so be sure to share that online.