

# Ace in the Hole or Wild Card?

## What to (Reasonably) Expect from Social Media Marketing, and How to Leverage It to Your Best Advantage

If you don't feel that you have a handle on this, you are not alone in this industry. A recent study by the Cornell Center for Hospitality Research found that while most restaurants are using social media, not many restaurant owners have a clear vision for it or a goal in mind and even fewer can measure a tangible return on investment.

By Allison Wollam

**S**eth Siegel-Gardner, owner of Pass and Provisions restaurant in Houston, is often updating his restaurant's Twitter, Facebook and Instagram social media sites with news, pictures, information and events at the restaurant.

He's used social media sites to do everything from selling tickets to an event at the restaurant, to adding a new dish to the menu or even launching an entirely new menu, but he admits that tracking social media success can be a challenge.

"Success is always so difficult to measure," he says. Ah, yes — and there's the rub.

For independent businesses particularly, social media is seductive in that it seems to be an inexpensive form of promotion. Hire a tech-savvy kid to set up a few accounts, and the world is your oyster. Creating a Facebook page or Twitter account is simple and free, if you don't opt for marketing add-ons. When marketing doyens wax poetic on the power of social media, the big question hanging over the conversation is "How much business, measurable on the P&L, is being generated?"

If you don't feel that you have a handle on this, you are not alone in this industry. A recent study by the Cornell Center for Hospitality Research (Needles & Thompson, 2013) found that while most restaurants use social media, not many restaurant owners have a clear vision for it or a goal in mind and even fewer can measure a tangible return on investment. They just

feel it's something that they need to do but don't really know how to do it successfully.

To be effective, social media needs to be managed by you and your key staff, not left to your teenage nephew. And your time and the time of your managers are valuable. While popular social media sites, such as Twitter and Facebook, allow restaurant owners to engage with patrons, it sometimes is a challenge to make sure customers are paying attention and know whether investing time and energy in social media is worth the time and effort.

### Engagement — Your Top Priority and Metric

Paul Barron, CEO of DigitalCoCo, a digital agency that builds restaurant brands through social media, mobile "apps" and other digital initiatives, says the first step restaurant owners should take is to just get moving and posting on social media sites.

"With so much competition now in the social space in regard to a restaurant rising above the fray, it is difficult to stand out, but without a voice you are not even in the game," he says. "As for the measurement of success, in the first six months, if you can simply have engagement from your guests or community you have a big win."

He points out that if you are getting engagement, then you are getting word of mouth, and just like in your community this is really difficult to measure.



“But, if you use social media correctly, you can actually see how your guest and community interact with you,” he says. “As you get more sophisticated there are some pro tools that you use to actually track visits or location-based actions, which results in butts in seats.”

Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are the top performers when it comes to a restaurant’s social media reach. But they also cover their bases on other platforms — think Pinterest, LinkedIn, Foursquare and Vine — depending on where their targeted audience tends to gather online and which platforms bring in the most feedback and visits from guests. (For a review of popular social media sites, see “A Quick and Basic Guide to Popular Social Network Apps and Platforms” on Page 20.)

As with every aspect of your business, you need to be clear and consistent

with your concept and the guests you want to attract. Independent restaurant owners should carefully consider the content they’re displaying across social media platforms before jumping into a social media campaign. Social media can not only engage a loyal customer following but can also help a new or developing restaurant develop their brand’s personality and build a voice for the business.

While you would like to be able to show how social media efforts increase sales, your most critical metric is “engagement,” the number of interactions. If people are following your restaurant and talking about it positively, it means they likely are patronizing your business and encouraging their friends to do so as well.

How this translates to your income statement might not be entirely clear; however, again, most advertising and marketing operates to brand your business rather than generate direct and/or immediate response.

### Give Them Something to Talk About

And here is where proper management is critical.

You need to drive engagement by giving users a reason to engage, and you need to keep engagement interesting and positive by controlling the message. This is not something to leave to a 19-year-old server who “likes computers.”

**Ideally, you can monitor all of the restaurant’s accounts all day long during business hours, and possibly even get alerts on social media activity after-hours. If it’s an especially pressing issue on the weekend, like to find out why a restaurant’s phone number isn’t working, it’s important to respond to customers’ concerns as soon as possible.**

To ensure maximum engagement, you need regular posts that tell the ongoing story of your restaurant and why your guests would want to return and bring their friends. Don’t leave this up to whim or the spirit of the moment. Like everything else in your restaurant, you should have a schedule and checklist.

For example, create a monthly social media calendar highlighting various holidays and restaurant specials, suggests Aimee Woodall, president and founder of Black Sheep, a Houston-based marketing and publicity firm. By planning, restaurant owners are less likely to slip up and forget something important. The establishment of a social media calendar provides crucial extra time for cultivating a relationship with the restaurant’s online audience, she says.





## A Quick and Basic Guide to Popular Social Network Apps and Platforms

**Facebook.** It is the most popular social network with more than 700 million users. People usually build profiles to keep in touch with family and friends, and they are used by businesses as a marketing tool. On Facebook people can send and receive messages, chat online, post pictures and share links and videos. They can also “like” a page.

There are six types of pages: local businesses, companies, products, artists, entertainment and community. Facebook offers many options to interact, such as the Wall, photo albums, comments space and the “like” button, where people click if they like the comment or post. If users don’t like something or someone, they have the option of blocking the person’s updates or deleting the person from their profile.

**Foursquare.** The first location-based platform for mobile devices (smartphones, iPods, iPads). It is not as popular as Facebook and Twitter but it has been growing fast. People use it to “check in” at places and to show their friends where they are. They can also leave comments and reviews about the place they are at.

**Instagram.** Allows users to share photos and videos online to a number of social networking services. Users can apply filters to the photos to modify them for artistic effects. The name is derived from “Instamatic,” the old Kodak camera that produced the square images that are characteristic of this service.

**LinkedIn.** A social networking site for professionals, which is more valuable for developing contacts in the industry and accessing content from industry leaders than promoting your business to the general dining public. Nevertheless, as long as your presence is collegial and professional, it can provide a presence for your restaurant among high earners and influencers in your community and beyond.

**Pinterest.** Allows users to create and manage collections of images with common themes. In the case of your restaurant, you could post images of signature items, servers, décor, etc., that capture an event or theme. Users can “like” photos and pin images to their own “pinboards.”

**Twitter.** A platform that shows real-time updates. On Twitter you can choose which updates you want to see and you can also use the search engine to look up other people’s updates on a specific subject. Businesses can use Twitter to inform about their products and services and to see what people are saying about them. Twitter was created in 2006 as a texting program and grew to be the only real-time information platform in the world.

**Vine.** A mobile application for Android that lets users create and share six-second videos by pressing and holding their finger down on the screen. Videos are limited to six seconds, however, you can start and stop recording as many times as you’d like during that time to include several different scenes.

“It’s imperative to actively engage your audience each and every day,” she says. “Respond to and, most importantly, be inviting and friendly and gracious in every way. Social media is the most immediate extension of your brand. You’ll want it to be representative of the customer service they receive in your restaurant.”

### Free Analytics Tools

You will need to climb the learning curve to use them, and we don’t have space in this article to teach you how to use them; however, there are some valuable analytics tools to measure engagement.

Facebook and Twitter offer free analytics to gauge the engagement success of posted content. These tools quickly help to determine which posts are successful and which are flops. Woodall says it’s very important to pay close attention to how the audience is reacting and engaging. For example, if photographs are the most popular posts, maybe it’s time to invest in some new food photography. Is your audience enjoying “Fill in the Blank” posts? Work a few into your monthly social calendar. “These metrics are a simple, effective and free opportunity to take a close look at the needs and experiences of your customers,” she says.

Other free tools, such as Google Analytics and Klout, are extremely useful tools for social media monitoring. Google Analytics is a particularly strong tool for tracking site statistics, such as how and why your customers stumble across your website. The tool is also useful for measuring return on investment of social media. Google Analytics’ social reports can show marketers the effect of social actions, which social networks are yielding the best results, which content is most popular and how social media can result in money for your restaurant.

If you’re running a social media campaign that directs users to your website, Google Analytics is an effective tool for monitoring which platforms are directing the majority of your traffic, Woodall says. Google Analytics offers a “Network Referrals” section that shows specifically how users get to your site from different social networks and how many visitors that social media platforms bring in. You can also compare social referrals with the total number of site visits.

Meanwhile, free social media measuring service Klout (Klout.com) can tell you

how many people you influence, how much you influence them and the influence of your network across your social media platforms. Once you sign up for the free service, Klout allows you to see a map of your social media activity over the past 90 days, allowing restaurant owners to cross-reference the exact moments the score increased with the content you posted or ways you engaged at that time.

"You'll definitely want to see your account as influential in anything food/food industry related," Woodall says. Woodall says that if you're looking to start conversations with Klout influencers, keep in mind that their score can only tell you so much. They may be extremely influential in the food community but have a relatively low Klout score. She says that Klout should not be the final consideration in gauging influence.

"It's completely possible to conduct social media successfully on a shoestring budget," she says. "My firm does it all the time and, in fact, that's part of the beauty of social media." Indeed, another free service, My Top Tweet by TwitSprout (Twitsprout.com) ranks your top 10 most-shared tweets and the number of times they were "retweeted." This is helpful to track the progress of your own brand, but also allows you to inform yourself on what works well for other independent restaurant owners, including your competitors.

Twitter's free "advanced search" is very useful too, especially for local businesses. Restaurant owners can use it to search terms related to your restaurant that people near your location are talking about. The tool can help owners analyze how many people are coming to your restaurant after reading your social media posts, if that number is growing, the issues and concerns local customers have with your restaurant and what needs improvement at your restaurant.

At the end of your set measurement period, it's important to prioritize the problems you have identified and use that information to put in place fixes and improvements within your restaurant. You can measure the direct effect on your business by looking at the additional revenue or cost savings that these new improvements and upgrades give you.

Barron says while engagement is the best measure of social media success, Klout scores can help to determine how you influence others, but the best barometer of all is if you are getting fans and followers. The best tactic for that is to post relevant and fun content that guests want to see. Here are just a few things that Barron suggests will help gain followers and engagement from customers and potential customers:

1. Post your nightly specials on Twitter and Instagram.
2. Post Vine video shorts of a specialty plating or a chef preparation.
3. Post a "frequently asked questions" feature on Facebook

## Hands-Free Social Media

Would you rather be having face time with real friends, rather than Facebook friends? Are the only tweets you care about from the birds outside your window, and the only vines that matter the one that grow grapes for your wine?

Moving Targets is a social media marketing resource for restaurateurs, suited for operators who don't have the time or inclination to design and manage their social media strategy. Moving Targets creates and sets up accounts for clients and works to establish their clients on all of the top online social networks, including the most powerful reputation-monitoring services.

Moving Targets is a turnkey service; restaurant owners don't have to know anything about computers, the Internet or social networks. The company can post daily, weekly or monthly promotions on your behalf and is designed help you grow your network from hundreds to thousands of followers. Plus Moving Targets will let you know when people are talking about you, good or bad, so you can manage your restaurant's business image.

The company measures business social media success by building your network and promoting a positive image for client restaurants, with the goal of driving patrons to the business. Moving Targets offers five "Targeted Neighborhood Promotions" to help restaurants connect with guests. Its Social Media Marketing Service builds long-lasting relationships and protects your online reputation. For more information, visit [www.MovingTargets.com](http://www.MovingTargets.com).

with pictures and ingredients.

4. Email a monthly newsletter with the latest happenings, new menu items, entertainment news and a popular recipe of the month.
5. Post blogs that bring customers "into the kitchen." Customers want more than just a meal. They want an experience.

Barron says that Google Analytics is a great tool for Web traffic and tracking where clicks are coming from off Twitter and other networks, while Klout is good for your own ego but the real measurement is when guests actually speak to you via social media platforms.

## How Your Social Media Presence Stacks Up

Measuring your social media success can be as simple as tracking your menu items and your restaurant name inside simple search tools on Twitter or community hashtags, Barron says.

Indeed, Barron's DigitalCoCo's Restaurant Social Media Index has become a popular go-to source for

## Additional Sources

### RestaurantOwner.com Social Media Resources for Members and Nonmembers

RestaurantOwner.com members can get up to speed with social media marketing with the following webcasts:

- **SOCIAL MEDIA BASICS**

[www.restaurantowner.com/members/WEBCAST-Social-Media-Basics.cfm](http://www.restaurantowner.com/members/WEBCAST-Social-Media-Basics.cfm)

You know your restaurant should have more of a presence on social media but you've been too busy running your restaurant and now you don't know where to start or you've started but know you could be doing it better. If so, then this webinar is for you.

- **SOCIAL MEDIA: ANSWERS TO YOUR BURNING QUESTIONS ON FACEBOOK, YELP, TWITTER & MORE**

[www.restaurantowner.com/members/WEBCAST-Social-Media-Answers-to-Your-Burning-Questions-on-Facebook-Yelp-Twitter-More.cfm](http://www.restaurantowner.com/members/WEBCAST-Social-Media-Answers-to-Your-Burning-Questions-on-Facebook-Yelp-Twitter-More.cfm)

This program focuses on the most common questions we get on all aspects of social media.

- **HOW TO GET STARTED IN SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING**

[www.restaurantowner.com/members/1181.cfm](http://www.restaurantowner.com/members/1181.cfm)

Bear Silber is the young, energetic co-owner of Pizza Party, a single-unit independent restaurant in Santa Clara, California, that has been in business since 1962. In this webcast Bear tells us why he's so passionate about the new social media channels for marketing his restaurant and how he's using them to build a following of highly loyal local customers and attract new ones.

- **HOW TO USE SOCIAL MEDIA SITES TO COMMUNICATE TO YOUR CUSTOMERS & ATTRACT NEW ONES**

[www.restaurantowner.com/members/1134.cfm](http://www.restaurantowner.com/members/1134.cfm)

In this webcast you first will be taken through a brief history of the online trends to bolster your understanding and knowledge. Then you will receive information regarding online marketing through actual social research of how companies execute social media campaigns today. It concludes with practical tools and resources so you will leave with a social profile and the ability to send messages to your customers on demand.

If you are not a RestaurantOwner.com member (yet), you still can download the following ebooks to develop a plan to market your restaurant in the digital age:

- **#TwitterWorks Restaurant 2.0 Edition**

[www.restaurantowner.com/public/1383.cfm](http://www.restaurantowner.com/public/1383.cfm)

- **#Foursquare Restaurant 2.0 Edition**

[www.restaurantowner.com/public/DOWNLOAD-Foursquare-Restaurant-20-Edition.cfm](http://www.restaurantowner.com/public/DOWNLOAD-Foursquare-Restaurant-20-Edition.cfm)

consumer and brand intelligence in the restaurant and hospitality industry.

The index measures influence, engagement and sentiment and looks at food, service and brand experience. Barron says the software was designed to provide crucial social media measurement information such as how your social media presence stacks up against other restaurant and hospitality brands.

Powered by third-party tracking systems such as Klout, along with proprietary systems like DigitalCoCo's Social Insights (<http://digitalcoco.com>), the Restaurant Social Media Index measures your social influence each quarter, including a location-based action component, which allows the measurement of your brand's social return on investment.

Of course, if restaurant owners are willing to invest, there are premium analytics tools that provide an in-depth glimpse at social media performance.

Some of the paid tools, like Sprout Social, provide a more holistic view of social media programs through measurements and analytics. Woodall says that if you don't want to spend your time measuring social media success yourself, then invest in a well-rounded measurement tool.

"If you're serious about providing stellar digital conversation, this may be something to work into your budget," she says.

A paid premium service such as Sprout Social provides services from \$39 a month for a standard package to \$99 a month for a premium package for social media monitoring and measuring.

The software does everything from measuring engagement, helpdesk integration, a deluxe social media reporting package, Google Analytics integration, complimentary training and support and can manage up to 20 social media profiles while you're busy running your restaurant. Engagement is a measure of interactions. The number of comments and volume of people participating in contests or using online coupons posted on social media sites are important figures that should command your attention.

A categorization of engagement to pay particular attention to is simply whether more people are "liking" the fan page on the res-

restaurant's Facebook and Twitter accounts. The goal shouldn't be to simply reach a certain figure, but just further evidence more people are consistently being exposed to the brand.

Once the social media pages are set up, it's important to monitor them on a regular basis. If you set up a page and fail to monitor it on a regular basis, it could definitely hurt your business.

Ideally, you can monitor all of the restaurant's accounts all day long during business hours, and possibly even get alerts on social media activity after-hours. If it's an especially pressing issue on the weekend, like to find out why a restaurant's phone number isn't working, it's important to respond to customers' concerns as soon as possible. Of course, this is often an impossible task for owners and managers of busy independent restaurants, who can't afford a dedicated social media position on staff. Fortunately, there are businesses such as Moving Targets that provide these services. (See "Hands-Free Social Media" on Page 21.)

## Tracking Growth

Start out knowing that you plan to track your progress on social media, and don't try to do it after the fact. "It's very difficult to map your social success and failures in retrospect," Woodall says. One way to do this is to set out knowing that you will map audience feedback and set up a time frame when launching a new calendar, campaign or style of posts. When you have completed the campaign, you'll be able to see the growth.

When you start out with a plan, it's easy to look back and see patterns such as these:

- Did you gain more followers when posting drink specials, or when you held an event at your restaurant?
- Did your clientele start to expand when you began an Instagram account?

"To know what works, you must begin with a plan so that you can see the changes and identify the catalysts," Woodall says. For example, if your restaurant is introducing a new healthy menu, set a goal to get 400 customers into your restaurant to try the new menu over an upcoming weekend. Develop a Facebook page or Instagram strategy, and post pictures of your new healthy menu items.

Then, create content around the importance of healthy eating and provide information on your Facebook page about farmers markets in your area. Finally, offer a coupon on your Facebook page to engage customers to actually come in to the restaurant. The number of customers who claim and redeem the coupon is a result you can immediately quantify.

Experts agree that it's important to ask yourself why you are considering including social media in your overall marketing campaign in the first place and how your efforts will affect your revenue and grow your business before investing time and resources into a social media campaign.

Put a measurable outcome in place along with a time frame in which to achieve the goal before kicking off any social media campaign. With new social media platforms, such as Vine, popping up every day, study current social media networks to determine which ones perform well, look at audience trends on new networks and then measure performance in tests on new networks before putting a chunk of time and money against the new platform.

Another way to measure the success is to simply keep your ears open. If a customer mentions that she read about a new special or a new menu item on social media, then your social media marketing effort was a success. Add those instances to your notes too.

For independent restaurant owners, it doesn't have to be an exhaustive process. It can be as simple as setting up a Google Alert to find any mentions of your restaurant, and search sites like Twitter, Facebook and Yelp daily or weekly. Simply keep an eye on what your customers are saying about your restaurant, and what they want to see on your menu.

And it doesn't have to be an exhaustive process. Keep it simple. Buffalo Wild Wings' top post of all time was two words: "Mmmmm. Beer." posted with a photograph of a cold glass of beer.

## Complement Your Traditional Promotional Efforts and Skills

Indeed, social media campaigns can complement, or even replace, traditional comment cards or guest satisfaction surveys. And by using free social media analytical tools, you can monitor not only the feedback to your restaurant, but also the ones down the street to see what works.

Maybe a Twitter post today doesn't drive diners to your restaurant, but a user may see that post and become more familiar with your brand just by seeing the post. That familiarity later on might mean choosing your restaurant over an unknown competitor.

Trying to keep up with current apps and platforms is a chore if social media isn't your thing. If it is any small consolation, what's hot today may just as likely be gone — or at least out of favor — tomorrow, leaving restaurant owners and managers with the daunting task of figuring out which platforms will reap the biggest rewards and, more importantly, where and how they should deploy their time and effort.

That said, climbing the learning curve is not difficult. Really smart engineers did the hard work, and made their products and services accessible and usable by anyone of average intelligence. Favoring your success is the fact that leveraging these tools to gain exposure for your business is simply a matter of age-old cleverness and marketing savvy.

**RS&G**