

Don't Fear



the BLOG- osphere

By Andrew Abernathy

Blog management may be the next essential skill you need for in-house marketing.

In January, Nick-N-Willy's Pizza (nicknwillys.com), the Centennial, Colorado-based, take-and-bake/fast-casual chain, faced catering one of the most prestigious media events of the year: the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. In addition to serving pies, sandwiches and salads, this chain, with more than 40 stores nationwide, made a point to promote its efforts with an onslaught of cross-promoting social media platforms. Although Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and Flickr can work effectively on their own, the smorgasbord of viral marketing tools would not have been complete

without the company's Slice of Life blog, a tool that proved to be the nucleus of the pizzeria's marketing plan.

The festival kicked off, the ovens fired up, and as the film began to roll, the Nick-N-Willy's group decided to have a little fun blogging its side of the Sundance story: The crew built a man out of pizza boxes and took him out on deliveries. Bill Murray was spotted at a screening. A marketing coordinator interviewed vendors and moviegoers who enjoyed pizza between flicks. Every post reverberated on Twitter, Facebook, Flickr and/or YouTube—and it seemed that the more posts

they published and promoted, the more people started logging on to the company's website. All in all, the blogging led to massive exposure for the company. But, nine months later, this group is still finding topics to blog about. And while they're self-admittedly still figuring out the "how to" when it comes to blogging for business purposes, company president Richard Weil says they're pressing on and happy with the current results. "Blogging is something that you must continually manage," he notes. "You've got to be sure you're allowing consumers the opportunity to comment with free will and be prepared for whatever is said. However, the comments are almost always positive."

Today, with online ordering, smartphone applications and an increased emphasis on viral marketing industrywide, the importance of your company's Web presence is at an all-time high. Blogging is just one more way to get your brand into customers' minds—and your pizza in their stomachs. To a busy operator, blogging may seem like just another item that never gets checked off the to-do list. But when used correctly, blogs are a great way to tap into a younger demographic, gauge customer satisfaction and help frame your business in a positive light for consumers. To help you get started, we collected operator stories, interesting statistics and professional blogger advice.

Why Blog Now?

Pizza is a comfort food, a party food and a family food—it's even been called the gourmet food of the recession! But any seasoned operator will tell you that a huge portion of your sales come from a young demographic, and these consumers are probably online downloading something right now. Al Newman, director of training for Madison Heights, Michigan-based Hungry Howie's Pizza (hungryhowies.com) cites research that shows 18-to-34-year-olds, the "Net Generation" (or Generation Y) form a group that prefers to avoid person-to-person contact when doing everyday tasks, such as ordering a pizza. Furthermore, this trend shows signs of gaining momentum. In a recent survey conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 67% of technology experts said that in the next decade, Web and social media will continue to be of great importance even as this

demographic matures. So why not encourage a little pizza envy in your customers when they're online?

Anthony Caruso, the owner of Pizza Man (rosemountpizzaman.com) in Rosemount, Minnesota, found that using a blog on his website helped market his pizzeria to local high school students—and, in the past year, his revenue has increased more than 300%. "My first month at the shop, an advertising rep walked in the door, and I gave his product a shot," he recalls. "It was a very expensive lesson in throwing it all at the wall and seeing what stuck. The social media aspect of the business costs me only my time, doesn't interfere with cash flow,

and has been more productive than 90% of any other advertising that I have tried. I told one high school kid about it, and he told three people, and two of them told another three people, and so on."

Maintain for Success

Take advice from the busiest bloggers: Post regularly. Your entries don't need to be lengthy, but they should be frequent. Before you go public, you're going to want to have a few pages of posts to show that you're serious. Soon, you'll develop an eye for potential blog topics. All of this wisdom comes from Jason Feirman, the creator and operator of idreamofpizza.com.

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com, a site dedicated to reviewing pizzerias nationwide. While Feirman is not a pizzeria operator, he manages one of the most interesting pizza blogs on the Web today—a site that has grown from a side project to a full-time gig with paying sponsorships. “You must develop a voice,” he advises. “Many pizza blogs are started and then left to sit idle. So many pizza guys are characters, and people interested in your blog will want to see that.”

Try offering exclusive specials on your blog to gauge how many of your customers are logging on. If you host special events and/or collaborate with community organizations and charities, this is also

a great way to get the word out and show your clientele that you stand for more than pepperoni and mozzarella. However, Feirman points out that everyday events often make the most memorable topics. Often you can share a picture—maybe a pie comes out of the oven in a funny shape or a customer writes a poem on the back of his receipt. By appreciating the small things, you’ll probably find more than enough possible topics for your blog.

Keep Your Cool

In the Internet age, you can’t control what other people publish. While many online comments tend to be positive, there

is always going to be a bad review or two around the corner—it happens. As Weil notes, this is an opportunity to reach out and turn an unsatisfied customer into someone impressed with your attention to detail. Don’t forget that criticism can also be valuable, as it points out something your customers would like to see changed. Sometimes Nick-N-Willy’s is forced to remove comments from the blog when they become obscene or do not further the conversation, but they try to let the customers have free will in the comment section. Of course, you have to set your own policies when monitoring your blog.

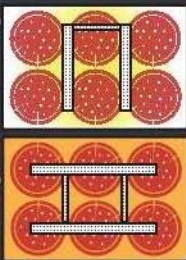
However, the worst thing an operator can do in response to a negative review is criticize the customer; venting your frustrations might end up scaring away other customers, along with their pizza money. Amy and Samy Bouzaglo, the owners of Amy’s Baking Company (amysbakingco.com) in Scottsdale, Arizona, received a negative review from a local food blogger who felt “unwelcome” when he ordered a Margherita pie last August. When he wrote a bad review on yelp.com, Amy responded back to the customer online, calling him a “moron” who needed to keep to himself and was probably working for a competitor. The response launched an outcry from other customers and ended up getting written up in the *Phoenix New Times*. Many of the commenting parties vowed to never eat at the restaurant again. Had these owners reached out more kindly to the disgruntled customer, the whole situation may have turned out differently.

Obviously, the rules of blogging are still being written. But the most important thing to do is to find an angle that works for your operation—whether that’s an operator’s weekly thoughts on life or a daily funny photo from the store. Blogging generally highlights satisfied customers and shows that your business has a little depth. Ultimately, it’s also just another free way to alert your customers about specials, events and menu items, but it requires creativity and nurturing. With consumer review websites such as yelp.com and urbanspoon.com, every customer has become a potential critic these days; and they’re sure to have both positive and negative opinions. While everyone else is writing about your pizzeria, the only real question is: What are you going to say about yourself? 🍕

Andrew Abernathy is PMQ’s associate editor.

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