

Social Media Strategy

For Casual Dining



Casual dining is the toughest group to market

While doing research for this guide, we noticed on Google Business pages that fine dining, fast casual and fast food do not have a lot of customers posting pics to their Google reviews, but casual dining business pages had a slew of customers posting photos and we wondered why.

Why would there be more interaction in Casual Dining than there would be in the other three categories?

In fine dining it would be a faux pas to pull out your phone to take a pic of your meal. In fast casual and fast food, it's more utilitarian and it's cheap food, why would you post a picture?

Casual dining has a higher price point than fast casual or fast food, and with it comes higher expectations for value. A more casual atmosphere, and it seems that this trifecta attracts a lot of complaints. Dissatisfied guests flock to Google in hopes to "warn" people of their worst meal, to show evidence of their terrible experience, or maybe finesse a free meal.

Casual dining is also the type of business that has lower barriers for entry than fine dining or fast food. It takes a bigger investment to build out fine dining, and fast food establishments require a lot of expensive equipment to make food fast.

Casual dining is getting hammered on all fronts when it comes to guests' behaviour and expectations. The rise of meal modifications and food sensitivities has played a huge part in casual dining. Fine dining doesn't allow for many modifications, and fast food doesn't have the bandwidth for modifications at such a large scale. Customers with food sensitivities will avoid fast food and would not visit regularly at fine dining establishments.

So they darken the door of casual dining and ask for gluten free fryers, dairy free dressings, vegan and vegetarian dishes and let the whole world know when they feel dissatisfied.

Casual dining has a lot of competitors because of the lower barrier to entry, and restaurateurs in this category need to run a very strategic marketing and operating plan in order to be sustainable.

YOU ARE A COMPANY OF SALES & GOOD IMPRESSIONS

You sell an experience

A CURRENT GUIDE ON THE SOFT SELL OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Our marketing work in casual dining while monitoring data has given us valuable insights to help your casual dining restaurant prosper. We want you to succeed, as restaurants are one of the best ways to keep people in jobs and bolster the economy.

Social Media is all about inspiration and excitement, and to harness that your casual dining restaurant requires these things:

- Good lighting, good interiors and good plating
- Compelling and trendy products
- Waitstaff that are willing to be brand ambassadors
- Leadership and bandwidth for viral moments
- Buy-in from your staff, guests, and your suppliers

We will go into each point in-depth, on why these are important. The main reasons are to evoke inspiration and FOMO. The fear of missing out, and one of the easiest way to do that is through seasonal products.

We have gotten enormous push back on the operational logistics of ever changing products, but as long as they are seasonal, guests will stay loyal. Yes, your operations team will have to update POS systems and marketing teams will have to update online ordering. Yes, staff will have to taste the new products and get excited about them. Yes, your kitchen managers will have to train on new recipes. Seasonal dishes can be rotating, you don't have to invent the wheel each time.

The entire success of diner expectations hinges seemingly on the unexpected, but in truth, the menus and products are all planned out a year in advance in order to give the marketing team time to develop each campaign and roll out.

Casual dining patrons are also heavily online, we won't get into the psychology of that today, but high expectations and social media seem to go hand-in-hand. Smart owners know how to cater to that behaviour and can make a huge profit when done correctly.

Every marketing campaign should feel like an announcement, written in a tone that seems to cater to their VIP and regular guests that are on the inside track. Leverage the guest's buyer persona is crucial for higher profits..

Free UCG

The rise of phone photos is the number one reason to have amazing lighting in your establishment, and in the bathrooms for mirror selfies. You want free advertising? Create delectable plates and cocktails with as much natural lighting as possible. Get rid of dimly light restaurants and layer lighting with the correct colour temperatures for bulbs.

Use correct shades and blinds and do not add film to the windows, it casts a blue hue that is not only depressing, but skews the look of your dishes to the natural eye and the camera lens.

Hire an interior designer that specializes in the techniques of lighting and you will enjoy a lot of free advertising from your snap happy guests.

Your Google Business page, Apple Maps and Yelp will be full of aspiring foodies and amateur photographers raving about the experience. Your Instagram feed will be full of tagged stories and post mentions, hopefully showing beautiful photos.

From a basic psychology perspective, utilizing as much natural and ambient lighting is good for guest's overall mental health and it builds trust for your products. We've heard it time and time again that people don't trust dark restaurants because they can't see their food and they instinctively wonder if it's fresh.

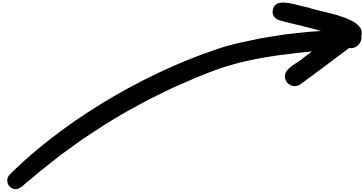
Good plating is food styling, look through the lens of your own phone when developing new dishes. From our experience as food stylists and food photographers,, simple is best. Any kind of drizzle on top of dishes is not appetizing on camera, anything black like cooked mushrooms, beets or balsamic glaze doesn't translate online. Nobody can make glop look good and you can't fake freshness.

Menu development must have the food styling factor, the size and colour of plates, the balance of colours and spacing of each item. Create each dish with proportion on interesting dishware is a winning combination.

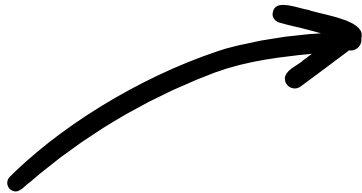
Good lighting and good plating offers inspiration for your guests to show off. Social Media in this category is all about "look at me, look at what I have discovered, let me teach you about a new restaurant, I am the first to try this new cocktail or this new dish. I am special".

This buyer persona type typically like to show off to their own communities online, make it as easy and compelling as possible for them to do that.

**GOOD
LIGHTING**



**BAD
LIGHTING**



Trending Eats

There's nothing worse than a stale old menu from a marketing perspective. Social media demands constant pizzazz to stay relevant with your viewers, keeping loyal fans interested and attracting new followers.

Seasonal menus and special features have never been easier to develop with the popularity of TikTok, full recipes are available with a video to produce trendy cocktails and dishes quickly and easily.

Having the agility to jump on trends in a timely manner and being able to feature the limited time feature on social media with trending hashtags will gain an entirely new type of follower.

If your restaurant caters to what social media demands, new clientele will discover you. If your social media manager is building connections with inquiries and commenters, that will give your restaurant a definite edge over the competition.

We have seen it so many times that restauranteurs try to force what they think is popular to happen and they bomb miserably on social media.

Social Media is the biggest instant focus group you can have.

Why in the world would you not want to leverage all that data for your success? It's like shooting fish in a barrel, it is ridiculously easy once you get the hang of it.

Keep your main menus small, with products that you know are the most popular based on your own data and keep room for those lightning fast trends that will excite and delight viewers on social media.

Create FOMO with trending dishes that are only available for a limited time, tell a story about the dish or cocktail for social media, once the feature is over make a poll on for followers to vote on bringing it back.

Leverage social media to your advantage, create processes that allow for quick turnarounds for features. We promise, it will be worth it when done consistently and your restaurant becomes known for interesting limited time offers.

PRODUCT FLOWCHART

1

Create menu or cocktail with detailed ingredient list and suggested pricing, including ounces on steaks, ounces on liquor, is gluten free or vegetarian available, dates available and if available for delivery and takeout.

2

Make edits to menu with key people before sending to design.

3

Once approved, submit to marketing in a timely manner for menu design with all details and organize with marketing for promotions. Ensure that the menu is written exactly as it will appear on menu. Ensure all ingredients are available for day of promotional videos, pics etc.

4

Menu, posters, website and social are created for review, and once approved printed for launch
Once printed and available at location, staff training will be initiated

5

Day of Launch
Track sales and keep notes of what sold best
Ask servers for feedback from guests if things could be improved on etc.

In House Ambassadors

As fans of storytelling, we would love to take over hiring, but we know that's not in our job scope. We would 100% hire servers with an innate on-camera persona. We believe that a restaurant is like a stage, the servers are actors, and everything must work smoothly like a production. Every shift is showtime and everyone from kitchen staff to front of house have to be "on".

When hiring staff, an ingenious idea is to treat it like an audition. Do their eyes light up when smiling? Do they have personality and a zest for life that is contagious? If yes, ask them if they wouldn't mind testing for an ambassador role, with an offer for extra perks when assisting the marketing team with videos.

There are a lot of benefits that staff do not realize when being in front of the camera, customers will recognize them from social media and ask for them specifically, larger tips for having such a fun personality and better shifts, as the marketing team will sing their praises to the owners.

Hire for personality and train for skills. Having in-house ambassadors for skits, behind the scenes and narration videos works great for authenticity. *You can also recruit customers to be in your skits, we've done that and it works great.*

We've added an Employee Media Release Form for all employees, just in case they are in the background of videos. You may want to alter the agreement for different employees, depending on what is agreed upon for their participation as ambassadors for your business.

Some median industry rates for 2024 are:
Models \$50 an hour
UCG content \$250 for story and \$500 on grid
UCG content is if they share your reel to their account and prices depend on their follower and engagement numbers.
You will also want to evaluate if their followers are your ideal customer demographic.

If you have a large staff, run monthly prizes for employees that like, comment and share your posts. They can have a burner account that does that, if they don't want to mess up their personal algorithms.



EMPLOYEE MEDIA RELEASE FORM

I, _____, a valued employee of _____,
I grant permission for photographic and video documentation of my being, to be utilized for social media purposes. I understand that this voluntary participation does not entitle me to any compensation, unless previously agreed upon, and that the employer reserves the right to make final edits before publication.

I understand that in the event of any distortion, blurring, or alteration of the media, whether intentional or otherwise, I release my employer, its officers, employees, and agents from any claims of injury or liability that may arise from the use or distribution of the media.

I have read and understood this release and consent form before affixing my signature. I acknowledge that I have signed this under no duress or coercion, and that it is not a condition of employment.

Signed and dated by: _____

Witnessed and dated by: _____

In case you'd like to be tagged on our social media platforms, please provide your Instagram and TikTok handles below:

Facebook: _____

Instagram: _____

TikTok: _____

Going Viral

Have a plan if your videos ever go viral, you may need to call in favours to meet the needs of the customers and the sudden influx of sales in a short period.

One scenario that happened recently was a manager calling us in the evening and when we answered, all we heard was a panicked, "What did you guys do?!"

We had no idea what we had done, the place was packed, there was only one server on, the manager and a bartender. It was supposed to be a normal Tuesday night. We quickly checked Instagram, and the reel that morning was fine, around 11K, but when we checked Facebook the reel was over 500K and climbing quickly.

It was our mistake for not checking Facebook earlier in the day to see the numbers, and maybe one of us could have warned the manager that maybe to have a few more staff on hand.

We texted the manager back with screenshots of the numbers and apologized for not keeping track, they called later and said they spoke to each table and explained what happened online, almost all of them had come in because of the Facebook reel.

It worked out, luckily with the quick thinking of the manager and his ability to speak to each table and apologize for the wait. People laughed it off and were understanding, but it would be a good idea to have a plan for viral content.

This leads us to our next topic:

BUY-IN FROM YOUR STAFF, GUESTS, AND YOUR SUPPLIERS

The Buy-In

When planning for the unexpected, your business will need co-operation from staff, guests and suppliers. You could be selling out of certain items, or need staff to come in to help and you will need suppliers to step up to bring in extra supplies.

This takes leadership, good processes and healthy relationships, you might be saying well it's easier not to go viral. Well, yes it is. If you are wanting to go from good to great and you want to grow on social media, you will need bandwidth.

When you go viral, you might be calling in favours, even organized criminals know those aren't free, so if you pray for rain, make sure there are umbrellas available.

CONCLUSION

Positive Reinforcement

If you're running a mid price range business, it can attract a certain type of value demanding clientele and take comfort in knowing that it happens in all mid range industries. We've seen it in hotels, spas, and retail stores.

If you know this is standard for this type of demographic, to be forewarned is to be forearmed. Offering perceived value through your restaurant design, approachable brand building and intense community involvement will help build trust and rapport locally.

We believe that a mixture of local and national content will help your social media pages flourish. If you can combine them for relevant memes, even better.

It takes a village to build successful media accounts, and the more platforms you can be on ,the better.

Some tried and true methods we use for a comprehensive marketing strategy for casual dining are:

Facebook – this is great for people who have not embraced Instagram or TikTok, it still is relevant to all ages. Welcoming posts and lots of community engagement here. Posts are more popular than stories and quality reels are a hit.

Instagram – is still about aesthetics, really beautiful photo carousels with entertaining captions or inspirational quotes. Stories and highlights are great for products, grid is all about inspiration and entertainment. High quality reels work very well, and unexpected edits with a trick of an eye.

TikTok – very authentic with maybe some product placement but absolutely no selling. Skits, audio lip synchs, bloopers and a great reach for advertising.

Pinterest – really pretty food, wine and cocktail photos work here, excellent platform for advertising events, flowers, menus, candles. High quality 1080 by 1920 photos are a great choice.

LinkedIn – for B2B business event advertising and executive hiring

Casual Dining Marketing is challenging, if you would like to get serious about your restaurant's growth, give us a call. We have brought in hundreds of millions of views for clients and can help your local brand go national.