THE MARKETEER
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IS YOUR MEDIA
unsociable?

The Marketeer asks whether your website and social media accounts attract or put off customers

"This is the online equivalent to not taking your Christmas decorations down"

Over the last few months I have been working with an independent licensed coffee shop not far from where I live. Having spent a little bit of time helping them re-merchandise their outlet and review their menus, I turned my attention to looking at their online presence, including how they were using social media.

As part of this work I showed them what a number of competing businesses were doing as well as looking at a cross section of other venues operating in the casual dining and hospitality industry. The aim was to look at best practice and search out clues from which the coffee shop could evolve its own online strategy.

It would be wrong of me not to acknowledge that we came across some really great and very creative websites, as well as some very engaging Twitter and Facebook accounts. However, it also became very clear that the amount of time and effort some operators were putting into this important part of their communication mix was varied to say the least.

A WEBSITE IS NOT JUST FOR CHRISTMAS
According to BT, over 80% of the UK is now online in some way or another. Research presented at the 2016 Pub Goers Conference by Cardinal Research also highlighted how customers are increasingly using venue websites as part of their decision-making process to determine whether or not they visit a particular pub, bar or restaurant.

Faced with such compelling insight it never ceases to amaze me how some operators seem to think that changing their website is something which only needs to be done once or twice a year. A common mistake that many outlets are guilty of is not removing events that have come and gone. While it may seem nice to demonstrate what you have done in the past, keeping last year's Christmas menu and other date specific events on your site simply takes up valuable space. Keeping them on your website is as likely to put customers off as it is in encouraging them to browse what's planned for the future. For me, this is the online equivalent to not taking your Christmas decorations down.

The opposite of this is how far ahead you post new events on your website. Unfortunately there are no hard or fast rules

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when it comes to this. In most cases it will be a matter of common sense. What I often recommend to clients is that they add a couple of weeks onto whatever they would do if they were advertising in local media or in-outlet. If you're still not sure on how early to put events on your website, another approach is to advertise things but at quite a high level. Using just the event name and perhaps the date followed by 'for more information contact...' can often work.

At an even more basic level I have come across a few sites which don't have up-to-date opening hours. Talking with an ex-colleague a couple of years ago, he was extremely annoyed to discover that a quite famous country restaurant was closed for refurbishment the day he visited it. There was no mention of this on their website. Needless to say he hasn't been back and takes every opportunity to voice his frustration any time the restaurant comes up in conversation.

THINK BEFORE YOU POST
Looking at the world of social media, both Facebook and Twitter have come a long way since their respective launches in

2004 and 2006. They have now evolved from being just a way in which you or I could talk to our friends and families to a major commercial platform by which many businesses now communicate and engage with their customers. It also seems to be the preferred method for President Trump (correct at the time of writing!) to express his views on world events.

A major challenge for many operators is how to get the best out of these platforms. When looking at how some clients use Facebook, Twitter and similar platforms, one of the things I often come across is the way they seem to view what they do online and their overall marketing strategy as two separate things. For me, a restaurant's online presence should be just one part of its overall marketing communication strategy and not a strategy in its own right.

Only when you have decided what your overall marketing aims and objectives are should you begin to look at how the various online platforms can help you achieve this. If you don't do this, there is always a danger that the tail will wag the dog.

ENGAGE, DON'T JUST PUSH
For some operators and individual venues their main use of social media is to advertise who they are, where they are and what they offer. While there is nothing wrong with this, especially if accompanied by really nice pictures of your outlet or individual menu items, it does miss a tremendous opportunity.

Pushing things out to your Facebook friends and Twitter followers is the online equivalent to putting up a poster or running an advertising campaign but with even lower levels of permanency. The real power that social media offers is the opportunity to engage and communicate with both existing and potential customers. This is all about having an on-going dialogue, asking for views and opinions as you would if you were having a face-to-face conversation.

Doing this takes time and no shortage of aptitude. For those wishing to take this next step, make sure you are clear what your objectives are, how you want to be seen and the tone of voice you need to adopt in order to maximise the positive impact that doing this will have on your business. ●