

INSTAGRAM INFLUENCERS

Look at photo-sharing sites as marketing potential. / BY MAGGIE HENNESSY

Go out to eat on any given night, and you may notice that more restaurant dining rooms are starting to resemble unofficial photography sets. Diners factor light sources and backdrops into table choices. Plates are dropped off and remain untouched for several minutes amid a frenzy of shooting and reshooting as diners adjust plates an inch this way or that, adding a manicured hand reaching for a truffle fry to create interest.

In most cases, these “photographers” are smartphone-wielding customers. Their “cameras” are phone hardware augmented by apps that filter and edit images for instant sharing on social media.

For an industry that relies heavily on the visual appeal of food, it’s hard to ignore the marketing potential of photo-sharing sites such as Instagram, which counted 500 million active monthly users as of June 2016. But as interest in food and drink continues to rise alongside a media landscape that’s skewing increasingly digital, once-hobbyist foodie Instagrammers who’ve built legions of foodie followers numbering in the tens of thousands are leveraging their wide reach into viable media brands.

These “social influencers” can fetch anywhere from \$300 for a blog or Instagram post showcasing a hot dish or dining destination to \$1,500 or more for influencer “events”—often, themed meals involving a dozen of their best influencer friends and pre- and post-event posts across various online platforms. And they’re becoming harder to ignore in a shifting media landscape, says Nicole Aylward, who, as of this writing, was public relations/marketing consultant for B. Hospitality Co., Chicago, with restaurants that include The Bristol, Formento’s and Nonna’s. She has since been named director of marketing at Rockit Ranch, Chicago (The Duck Inn, Bottlefork, Rockit Bar & Grill).

“PR is no longer just as easy as reaching out to a magazine, talking to a writer and giving them a story to write about,” Aylward says. “All of a sudden, all these other less-traditional outlets like blogs or purely social-based outlets started popping up as potential places for PR and marketing professionals to get information out about their brands.”

The upside, even for independently owned restaurants or small restaurant groups, is that anyone with a smartphone can get on Instagram. Plus, Aylward notes, the barriers to interacting

OPPOSITE: Imperial Lamian's black pepper beef with mixed peppers, red wine reduction and cracked black peppercorns.

PHOTO CREDIT Jeff Schear



with most influencers are still low enough to not require the weight of a large ad agency.

Rising above the clutter

Ten-year-old Indonesia-based Imperial Lamian, a high-end Chinese restaurant chain, launched a social media campaign months before it even secured a space for its first U.S. location, which opened in Chicago in spring 2016. CEO/partner Vincent Lawrence would share daily updates and photos on the Chicago location's Instagram and Facebook profiles to educate future customers on what to expect.

"We understand that we're a newcomer in the West," Lawrence says. "And people are clouded with so much information these days on social media. So how do I position myself so that when I open people understand immediately what I'm about? It's a little like brainwashing. 'This is Imperial Lamian. This is our food.'—every day. The message had to be consistent and cohesive."

Once the doors opened in March, Lawrence began inviting social influencers in for comped meal experiences to share with their followers. In the days and weeks following, the Chicago account's Instagram and Facebook pages added hundreds of likes

and follows, and the restaurant saw more traffic. When asked how they'd heard about the restaurant, many would mention reading about it in traditional news media, but "a fair number of them said, 'I saw a post on Instagram,'" Lawrence says.

How to measure success?

Determining the quantifiable impact of influencer posts or events on revenues or foot traffic is elusive, at best. "That's the \$64,000 question," says Lisa Kislak, vice president of marketing at Southlake, Texas-based Del Frisco's Restaurant Group (Double Eagle Steakhouse, Sullivan's and Del Frisco's Grill).

One of the first influencers Del Frisco's connected with was travel and food influencer @cheatdayeats (236,000 followers) when the brand was opening a new DF Grill location about 18 months ago. "They came in for a dining experience, posted about it and we had 1,500 likes in no time," Kislak says. "You start to see the power of people that have a good following that fits the profile of existing or future guests—and the immediacy of getting that engagement."

The 22-unit group has grown its Instagram following 200% in the past year, up from a few hundred to almost 9,000



followers on DF Grill alone. It's also ramping up its efforts with influencers, hosting such events as a Tequila & Bacon brunch with New York food/lifestyle influencer @brunchboys (248,000 followers), and a group of influencers at DF Grill in New York to try out its new lunch menu. The Tequila & Bacon brunch drew 850,000 total views on social media, while lunchtime traffic at the New York DF Grill is up 14%.

"Can I say that's all because of Instagram? Absolutely not," Kislak says. "But do I think it had an impact? Absolutely. This is new territory, and as marketers, we're all learning."

The new advertising?

A lot of "learning" relates to navigating the increasingly blurry line separating PR and marketing in the new digital media landscape, as more influencers expect compensation beyond the occasional comped dinner.

ABOVE: A shaved prime steak sandwich, left, and heirloom tomato and Burrata salad at Del Frisco's Grille.

OPPOSITE: The Bristol's cinnamon roll.

Del Frisco's doesn't pay-to-play, so its only influencer costs are the labor, ingredients and service that go into comped meals and events. Kislak likens paying influencers to paying for advertorial, which the company doesn't do. "We haven't felt the need to go that route, but never say never," she says.

B. Hospitality earmarks about 50% of its marketing budget for social media-based marketing, which includes influencer packages/mailings and comped dining experiences, as well as Facebook ads. Aylward says she had to convince her team to embrace paid influencer opportunities, not just because more influencers make a living off their sites, but also because paying for content yields better, more targeted results.

"I think of paid influencer opportunities as essentially 100% pure marketing," she says. "Like any advertisement, you should get the final say on how it looks, what the messaging is and when it goes up. If you're not paying, you lose that control. An influencer may come in for a free meal and not post at all, or post something at 3 a.m., 17 weeks later, when that item is no longer on the menu."

Fee-based and comped influencer events fall under the 7%-10% of Imperial Lamian's overall budget reserved for



marketing and PR, which means they compete with everything from traditional media outreach to boosted posts on Facebook. As such, Lawrence has learned to better manage his influencer budget through trial and error.

“In the past, we’ve hosted influencers for a meal, and they got so excited ordering, because they wanted to shoot everything, that they ordered way too much,” he says. “So for the last few dinners or lunches, we’ve come up with set menus with three or four courses at lunch and five to six at dinner. We’ll print out menus with the date and their names on them. Plus, it helps us control our costs.”

Targeting the right crowd

It’s tempting to say that when it comes to social media reach, more is always better. But there’s such a thing as too popular, even in Instagram influencer land.

A survey of 2 million social media influencers by Austin, Texas-based influencer marketing platform Markerly found that, for unpaid posts, Instagram influencers with fewer than 1,000 followers have a like rate of 8%, while those with 1,000-10,000 followers have a like rate of 4%. As the follower

base increases, the like rate drops. Instagram influencers with 10,000-100,000 followers see a 2.4% like rate compared to 1.7% for those with 1 million-10 million followers and more. (Comment rate follows a similar pattern.)

Some of this could be due to the influx of influencers who’ve grown their following using spambots, or fake users created in online black markets. Kislak will check influencers’ feeds to ensure the number of followers matches up with those actually engaging with the content.

But operators with doubts shouldn’t be afraid to ask influencers how they’ve grown their fan bases, Aylward says. “I will flat-out ask, ‘Did you gain those 40,000 followers using traditional methods? Have you used bots in the past or do you use them?’ Serious influencers are usually adamant that they’ve grown their followers organically. And while I’d much prefer to have a strong following, I don’t want 5,000 of those people to be living in Malaysia, and who will never come to my restaurant.”

She instead prefers to tap influencers who match up with a client’s tone and style, even if they don’t have as big a reach. The counter-service Italian sandwich spot Nonna’s works wonderfully with @sherriesavorsthecity (27,000 followers), a Chicago pastry chef/foodie who does “bright, poppy” posts and often highlights more-casual cafes and bakeries. On the other hand, chic fashion/food photographer @mushroomstew (41,600 followers) is a better fit for the more elevated, full-service Southern Italian Formento’s.

Kislak similarly tries to find influencers who are compatible with Del Frisco’s brands both nationally and locally. “Nationally, we look for people with a larger following—say 50,000—who are focused on food, wine, beer and even travel,” she says. “On a local basis, we might expand a bit further into lifestyle, fitness or home cooking, or somebody who covers a certain suburb, like uptown Dallas.”

As Imperial Lamian approaches 10 months in business, Lawrence is shifting his attention toward building ongoing relationships with one or two Chicago influencer partners as an extension of the brand’s efforts on social media to draw attention to the restaurant.

“For me, the posts have to be fun, but also with some elegance and professionalism,” he says. “At the end of the day, my brand is on the line, so it’s important to have the right partner.” ■

MAGGIE HENNESSY IS A CHICAGO-BASED FOOD/DRINK WRITER AND CHEF WITH A BACKGROUND IN BUSINESS WRITING AND MORE THAN EIGHT YEARS’ EXPERIENCE AS A JOURNALIST AND EDITOR COVERING THE FOOD/RESTAURANT INDUSTRIES. VISIT HER WEBSITE AT WWW.MAGGIEHENNESSY.COM.