

The logo features the letters 'ESR' in a large, white, serif font. To the right of the letters is a small, glowing lightbulb icon. The background of the entire page is a photograph of an outdoor restaurant patio at dusk, with people seated at tables under umbrellas and string lights. The image is divided into geometric sections by diagonal lines in shades of teal and yellow.

ESR®

THE
RESTAURANT'S
GUIDE TO
MARKETING IN 2024

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I Saw the Sign

From sandwich boards to aerial advertising, signage is a foundational aspect of a restaurant's foot traffic strategy.

Signage might be the first point of contact potential guests have with a restaurant, and it is a unique opportunity to communicate with them. From static to digital, the following types of signage can inform, educate, and even entertain guests.

Billboards

Billboards have been around since the 1830s, and their staying power is easy to understand. Not only does their sheer size demand attention, they have a long-lasting impact since they can be displayed for weeks or months, reminding potential customers of the restaurant's existence over time and reinforcing a consistent community presence.

When people see a billboard regularly, it helps to build familiarity with the restaurant's name, logo, and cuisine, and keeps them top of mind when it's time to dine out. Much like digital marketing segmentation, billboards can be strategically placed to target specific demographics. For example, a restaurant might place billboards near office complexes, schools, or busy retail areas to attract hungry office workers, students, or shoppers.

In many cases, billboards serve as directional assistance, guiding drivers (and walk-in traffic) to a restaurant's physical location. For instance, if the restaurant is located off a highway or in an area with a complex road system, a strategically placed billboard can help drivers find their way, which can be invaluable when navigating unfamiliar areas.

In-store window signage

The importance of window signage in relation to increasing foot traffic cannot be overstated. Eye-catching signage can quickly grab pedestrians' attention, prompting potential guests to step inside and see what the restaurant has to offer.

Well-designed window signage can communicate a myriad of information to potential diners. An upscale restaurant might use more understated signage to hint at its sophisticated ambiance, while a casual eatery might opt for a more fun and colorful approach. This helps potential customers quickly gauge if a restaurant aligns with their preferences.

Digital window signage is also used to display LTOs, special promotions, and even social media feeds and online reviews. Relevant messaging such as “Now Open,” “Try Our New Menu,” “Open for Breakfast,” or “Happy Hour Specials” encourage potential guests to step inside and engage with the brand. If a restaurant is known for its specialty dishes or unique cuisine, featuring images of these offerings on window signage can entice passers-by to try something new.

Sandwich boards

Sandwich boards, also known as A-frame signs, are typically placed on sidewalks or near the entrance of a restaurant so that they are highly visible to passersby. Restaurants can use sandwich boards to display real-time information such as daily specials, happy hour offers, LTOs, and more. In busy areas with multiple restaurants and shops, a well-placed sandwich board can also serve as a wayfinding tool, directing pedestrians to the restaurant’s location.

We’ve all seen creative, witty messages on sandwich boards. This kind of content, while simple, can leave a lasting impression on potential customers. It might even prompt passersby to share photos of the board on social media, spreading the word about the restaurant to a broader audience.

One of the most attractive features of sandwich boards is their low cost and versatility. To make the most of this simple yet effective marketing tool, maintain them well, ensure they comply with local regulations, and change messaging frequently to keep content fresh and engaging.

Vehicle wraps

Another cost-effective marketing tool, vehicle wraps transform restaurant delivery vehicles, company cars, or even personal vehicles into moving billboards.

Once a vehicle wrap is installed, it continues to advertise the restaurant for years. As the vehicle travels through busy streets and neighborhoods, it consistently exposes the restaurant’s branding to a hyper-local audience—such as a delivery area within a certain radius—reaching potential dine-in guests who may not have known about the restaurant otherwise. An effective wrap might include vibrant images of the restaurant’s signature dishes or unique, eye-catching artwork.

Incorporating vehicle wraps into a restaurant’s marketing strategy can enhance brand visibility, create interest, and ultimately drive more foot traffic to the establishment. However, it’s essential to ensure the wrap’s design aligns with the restaurant’s brand identity and appeals to its target audience.



Payment Methods Signage



Signage that informs customers about the payment methods a restaurant accepts is an often-overlooked aspect of signage that can provide several significant benefits.

First, clear signage saves customers time and effort by letting them know upfront which payment methods are accepted. This eliminates confusion and frustration at the point of payment, prevents potential delays and enhances the overall dining experience.

Displaying accepted credit or debit card brands can also increase sales. Customers tend to spend more

when using credit cards compared to cash transactions. In a competitive market, offering a wide range of payment options can set a restaurant apart from others that accept only a limited selection of cards, and can even spur potential customers to choose one restaurant over others. Transparently displaying the accepted card brands also instills trust in customers about the restaurant's legitimacy and professionalism.

Some card brands offer contactless or mobile payment options, and signage can inform customers that these modern payment methods are accepted, providing added convenience and safety during the payment process. This is especially important for restaurants in tourist-heavy areas, where accepting international card brands is essential. Many tourists rely on their credit cards while traveling, and clear signage can attract potential customers navigating an area on foot.

Non-traditional signs

For the more adventurous brand, options such as aerial advertising and human directionals (better known as "sign spinners") can be a fun, engaging way to attract dine-in customers. Particularly in tourist areas such as busy beachfronts, these methods can be highly effective.

Remember, the effectiveness of any signage depends on its design, content, and relevance to the restaurant's target audience, and it's essential to keep signage updated and aligned with the overall restaurant branding and marketing strategy. Regularly refreshing signage and incorporating new promotions or seasonal elements will help attract a steady stream of foot traffic.





Take it Outside

To attract more foot traffic, make the most of outdoor spaces.

Whether a lively patio, a private igloo, a spot by the fire pit, or a rooftop with a view, outdoor dining provides opportunities for operators to offer unique, memorable dining experiences.

It also allows restaurants to expand their capacity—especially during peak times or when indoor seating is limited—which can lead to shorter wait times, and potentially, higher revenues. With proper planning and execution, operators can leverage outdoor seating to attract guests and boost sales. Use these strategies to make the most of outdoor areas.

Make it inviting

Outdoor dining areas shouldn't look and feel like an afterthought. Instead, intentionally design the space to be attractive, welcoming, and accessible. Use comfortable, stylish furniture, incorporate greenery or other natural elements, and add outdoor lighting for dinner service. A well-designed outdoor area can entice passersby to stop and dine.

Weatherproof it

Make sure outdoor seating areas are equipped to handle a range of weather conditions. This way, it can be used throughout the year, regardless of the weather, making it a year-round profit center. Retractable awnings, patio heaters, and umbrellas can protect customers from the elements and excessive temperatures.



Use sidewalk space

If the restaurant is located on a busy street, consider obtaining permits to use the sidewalk for outdoor seating. This can help attract potential customers who are walking by and increase visibility for the establishment.

Make it a local hangout spot

Ensure outdoor seating areas can accommodate various group sizes. A mix of tables for individuals, couples, and larger groups invite everyone to enjoy the outdoor space. Restaurants can also host events such as live music, themed nights, trivia, or happy hours that are exclusive to the outdoor seating area. A lively atmosphere piques pedestrians' interest and creates buzz around the restaurant.

Specialize the menu

Consider offering a separate menu or specific dishes for the outdoor seating area. Lighter fare such as salads, sandwiches, signature drinks, and tapas are perfect for outdoor dining, especially during warmer months. Restaurants can also partner with other local businesses to cross-promote each other's offerings. A coffee shop might partner with a local bakery, for instance, to offer dessert service on the patio.

Advertise it

Once the outdoor seating area is optimized, highlight its availability in marketing efforts. Use social media, the website, and signage to inform potential guests about the unique experience they can have while dining outside at this establishment.

Don't skimp on service

We've all been there: the lone outdoor table who needs refills and silverware, wondering if our server forgot us. It's critical to offer the same level of attentive and quality service outdoors as is provided indoors.

Get social

Encourage guests to share their outdoor dining experiences on social media. In addition to specialized menus, make the outdoor area "Instagram-worthy" with plants, pergolas, artwork, or murals. User-generated content is a powerful—and free—way to attract new guests and showcase the unique ambiance of an outdoor space.



To drive traffic to a physical location, go virtual.

As evidenced by the increase in Frankensons Pizzeria's business after Lee's review, social media is a powerful tool for restaurants to reach and engage with target audiences. However, it's critical for time-pressed restaurant operators and managers to have a social strategy—and measurable goals—in place.

Start with knowing which platforms resonate with target guests. Video-centric TikTok is most popular with Gen Z, while Instagram is great for visual content such as photos. Threads and X can be used for quick updates and engaging with customers, and contrary to popular belief, 25-34 year old millennials—not Gen X—comprise Facebook’s largest user block. Think about where the brand’s target customers spend time online and focus social efforts there.

Ultimately, the best social platform is the one that employees will use. Here, we share tips that are sure to bring guests through the door. Read on to learn how restaurants can leverage social media to increase foot traffic and create buzz.

Create Eye-Catching Content: Post high-quality photos and videos of the restaurant's dishes, seating areas, and happy customers. Visual content is more likely to capture attention and entice people to visit.

Don't neglect the captions: That being said, words do matter. Write compelling captions that complement visuals and encourage engagement, such as asking questions or inviting comments.

Engage with the community: Engaging with the restaurant's audience helps build a loyal restaurant community. Respond promptly to comments, messages, and reviews and mix it up with interactive posts such as fun polls, quizzes, or challenges related to the restaurant or menu. This encourages participation and increases algorithm reach.

Take advantage of user-generated content (UGC): Guests love it when brands repost their content—and it benefits the brand, too, since UGC acts as free advertising. Encourage customers to share their experiences, then amplify those posts.

Promote exclusive offers: Use social media to announce limited-time promotions, contests, or special deals available only to social followers. This creates a sense of urgency and gives people a reason to visit. For example, marketers could post, "Hit follow and tag your bestie for a chance to win a free dinner for two!" Even those who don't win the contest will now be connected to the restaurant.

Partner with influencers: Invite food bloggers and influencers to try menu items and share their experience on their platforms. Influencer recommendations can have a significant impact on their followers, driving more foot traffic to the restaurant. Be sure to use a branded hashtag in all campaigns.

Leverage Geo-Targeting: Location-based marketing targets potential customers in the vicinity of the restaurant. Many social platforms such as Facebook and Instagram allow users to run ads specifically targeting guests in a certain geographic area.

Showcase events: Use social media to announce upcoming events such as music nights, holiday specials, or themed parties. This creates excitement and encourages people to visit during those specific times.

Encourage online reservations: Make it easy for people to book a table through social media. Integrate reservation widgets or direct links to the restaurant's reservation page in posts and profiles.

Spotlight staff: Highlight team members, their stories, and their favorite menu items. This approach creates a sense of community and shows appreciation for staff.

Share customer reviews and testimonials: Sharing positive reviews and testimonials from satisfied customers build social proof—and buzz—about the restaurant.



Post food tutorials and recipes: Share short cooking tutorials, chef tips, or recipes that people can try at home. This positions the restaurant as an authority in the culinary space.

Give a glimpse into the brand: If the restaurant follows eco-friendly practices or sponsors a local sports team, share it on social media. Social endeavors resonate with customers, so highlight any partnerships with local businesses or organizations or collaborations that can help the restaurant expand its audience.

Get good at videos: Leverage the “Stories” and “Reels” features to give real-time glimpses into daily operations. Live videos can also be used for cooking demonstrations, customer Q&A sessions, or behind-the-scenes kitchen tours. Live videos create a sense of authenticity and allow viewers to interact with the restaurant in real-time.



Be consistent: It’s important to maintain an active social media presence by posting regularly. Create a content calendar to ensure marketers share a mix of engaging posts, updates, and promotions consistently and use scheduling tools such as Sprout Social or Hootsuite to post consistently.

Monitor performance: Use social media analytics tools to track the performance of posts, ads, and campaigns. This helps operators understand which kinds of content best resonate with audiences.

Restaurants can harness the power of social media to increase foot traffic, attract new customers, and build a strong online presence. Consistency and genuine engagement with audiences are the keys to building a loyal following and driving more guests through the door.

Remember, building a strong social media presence takes time and effort. Engage with regularly, genuinely and provide valuable content. By staying authentic and responsive, brands can create a loyal following that translates into increased foot traffic.



Give Your Restaurant a Tune Up

Transform foot traffic into loyal patrons with these strategies.

Working in the same place day in and day out, it's easy to miss small details that can make a big impression. From time to time, it's imperative to step back and view the restaurant with a critical eye.

Curb appeal creates a positive first impression and invites people to explore what a restaurant has to offer. Once inside, it's imperative that their expectations are met—and preferably, exceeded. From revitalizing the menu to implementing creative marketing initiatives, these tips can help turn a dead restaurant into a bustling neighborhood hub.

Invest in eye-catching signage

It might sound obvious, but it's important to make sure people can find the correct location. Invest in a well-designed, attractive, and easy-to-read sign with the restaurant's name and logo. Primary signage should be visible from a distance and complement the overall branding and ambiance of the establishment.

Put it on display

Creative window displays can intrigue passersby and communicate a wide variety of messages. For instance, if the restaurant has received positive accolades or awards, consider displaying them in the window. This kind of social proof can build trust and attract more customers. Restaurants can also display daily specials or promotions, enticing potential guests to enjoy something new or different. Window space can also be used to communicate information about the restaurants, such as contact details, social media handles, or delivery options.

Alternatively, use window space for something visually pleasing like plants, additional seating, or even an open kitchen area. Pedestrians love seeing chefs toss pizza dough, chop veggies, or make biscuits and this also creates a sense of transparency and interest in the food preparation process.

Spruce up the entrance

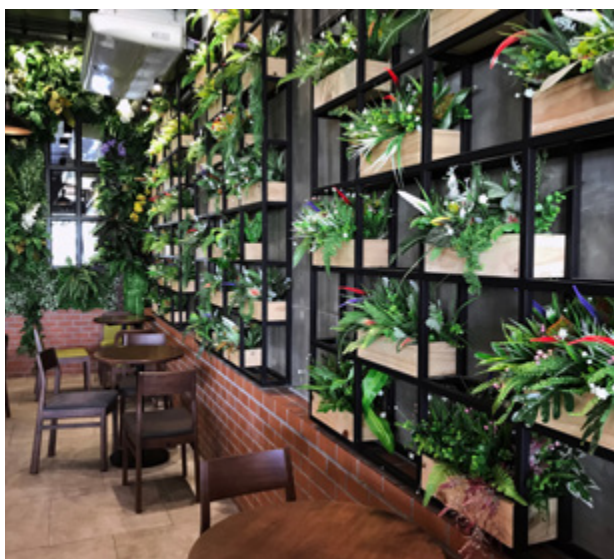
Take a look at the restaurant entrance with fresh eyes. Does the physical condition of the building and entrance look clean and inviting? Make sure all entrances to the restaurant are free of clutter, dirt, and debris. Doors and door handles should be well-maintained and employees should regularly sweep sidewalks, remove trash, and keep the windows and facade spotless.

Light It Up

Proper outdoor lighting is essential for both safety and aesthetics. Use warm and welcoming lighting fixtures to illuminate the restaurant's entrance and outdoor seating areas.

Go green(ery)

Well-maintained landscaping creates a positive first impression, and a little goes a long way. Try using seasonal plants and decorations in containers to create a dynamic outdoor space that attracts customers throughout the year. For example, tulips and spring decor might grace the entrance and outdoor spaces in spring, colorful annuals during summer, chrysanthemums in fall, and holiday decor throughout winter. Living walls and rooftop gardens are always a hit.



Choose music wisely

Just as every dish has a unique flavor, every restaurant should have a distinct auditory ambiance. Music choices have the potential to influence diners' moods, cravings, and overall dining experience. For instance, studies show that loud music attracts younger customers and drives guests to choose more indulgent options, while quiet music promotes relaxation and more mindful choices. Slow tempoed music typically influences guests to be more patient and increases sales, but it also makes them want to stay longer, which slows table turn time. By aligning musical selections with the restaurant's identity, operators can subtly guide patrons' choices and enhance their overall experience, which hopefully leads to repeat visits.

Refresh decor

According to the National Restaurant Association, restaurants renovate on average, every five to seven years. As trends evolve and tastes shift, a refresh of the restaurant's interior can breathe new life into the space. Additionally, a makeover signals to guests that the restaurant is keeping up with the times and is committed to providing quality experiences. This can positively impact the perception of the brand and increase foot traffic.

Unique and updated decor can also set a restaurant apart from its competitors; it might even become a spot that patrons want to share on social media. Above all, make sure seating is comfortable and accessible.

Make the patio pop

If space permits, add outdoor seating so that guests can dine al fresco. Remember, patios aren't just for summer: they can be used year-round with the addition of insulating curtains, heaters, fire pits, and other cold weather solutions. Colorful awnings or canopies can reinforce the restaurant's branding or add a pop of color while protecting customers from the elements.



Revitalize the menu

Even the most tantalizing menus need a refresh from time to time. When a restaurant introduces a revamped menu, it creates a sense of excitement and novelty. People are curious to try new dishes and flavors, and this curiosity can drive them to visit the restaurant. A menu revamp also allows for the incorporation of current food trends, dietary preferences, and culinary innovations. For example, including plant-based options, gluten-free choices, or fusion dishes can attract guests who are looking for these specific options.

Many guests appreciate restaurants that prioritize local and seasonal ingredients—and will pay extra for it. Showcasing ingredients from local farms and food producers appeals to environmentally-conscious consumers and those who seek freshness and quality.

In some cases, such as being under new ownership or management, a revamped menu might coincide with a broader rebranding or reinvention of a brand's image, which can help the restaurant signify a fresh start.

Post upgrades on social media

People love knowing that their favorite dining spots care about their comfort, so as upgrades are made to the restaurant, make sure potential guests know about it. Invest in professional photography to showcase new spaces and menu items, or create interactive content like polls or challenges related to the changes. This keeps audiences engaged and helps gather feedback for additional features or improvements.



Tech Tools

Good things happen when culinary artistry meets digital resources.

It took awhile for restaurants to board the tech train, but now that the benefits of digital are more accessible and measurable, brands are keen to embrace a wide variety of technological solutions. Some of the most popular web-based tools can not only make restaurants more efficient, they can contribute to higher profits and ROI. Here, we'll explore some of the tools operators can employ to attract diners, specifically foot traffic.

Online reservation systems can do wonders for foot traffic, since many guests prefer the convenience of booking a table online rather than making phone calls or taking their chances on snagging a table without a reservation. Reservation tools allow customers to browse available restaurants, view menus, check table availability, and select their preferred date and time for the reservation.

Online reservation platforms such as Resy and OpenTable have wide user bases, so being listed on these platforms can significantly increase a restaurant's visibility to potential guests. Customers searching for dining options in the area might discover the restaurant while exploring the reservation platform. On the restaurant side, operators can use the reservation management system to view, modify, or cancel bookings, which helps optimize table occupancy, server rotation, and other operational aspects.

Geolocation services can be useful to restaurants in a number of ways, starting with basic search engine optimization (SEO). Optimizing the restaurant's online presence for local search is essential for increasing foot traffic. Ensuring the restaurant listing is accurate and up-to-date information on platforms like Google My Business and other local directories helps the restaurant appear in relevant searches for nearby users looking for places to eat.

Restaurants can also use geolocation data to target potential customers within a specific radius of their establishment. Location-based advertising leverages mobile apps, social media platforms, and location-based advertising networks to send targeted ads and offers to users who are physically close to their location. A suggestion in the "restaurants near me" search can entice potential guests to visit the restaurant, which increases foot traffic.

Similar to location-based advertising—but powered by and delivered through mobile apps—push notifications are targeted messages sent directly to a user's mobile device. Most large-scale restaurant brands have their own mobile apps, but smaller brands who don't can partner with food delivery and restaurant review apps to offer push notifications.

When users are in proximity to the restaurant, these apps can send notifications with special offers, discounts, or reminders about the restaurant's presence. Such notifications can create a sense of urgency and encourage users to visit the restaurant. Additionally, restaurants can use social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to run geotargeted marketing campaigns. Promoting special offers and deals to users in specific geographic areas attracts potential customers who are nearby and likely to visit.

Self-order kiosks have become increasingly popular in restaurants due to their numerous advantages, like being able to operate with fewer staff and higher sales due to automated cross-sells and upsells. While some early adopters committed to this technology pre-pandemic, it was COVID-19 that catapulted this technology into popularity, both among restaurant brands and consumers.

Contactless solutions minimize physical contact between staff and customers, reducing the risk of transmission of germs. Restaurants that prioritize safety through contactless ordering and payment are more likely to attract more cautious diners such as those who must be more diligent about their health due to preexisting conditions.

Kiosks can help increase foot traffic as well: Contactless ordering allows customers to browse the menu, place their orders, and make payments directly from their smartphones or tablets. This eliminates the need to wait for a server, reducing the time customers spend in line or waiting for a table. The added convenience attracts diners who appreciate a faster and hassle-free experience, increasing the likelihood of them choosing to dine at the restaurant.

Self-service kiosks also allow for faster service—an attractive restaurant feature in our time-pressed society. With contactless ordering, orders are transmitted instantly to the kitchen, reducing the time between placing an order and receiving the food. This efficiency leads to quicker service, which is particularly appealing for busy professionals or individuals with limited time during lunch breaks or between activities. When it comes to choosing between the place where diners know they can get in and out and the one where they are likely to have to wait in line for a cashier, some guests are inevitably more likely to choose the place where they can get in and out quickly.





People seem to either love or hate **QR codes**, but there's no arguing they do offer several benefits. They can reduce—or eliminate altogether—the need for paper menus, allowing sustainability and safety-conscious guests to make a reservation, access the menu, order, pay, and more. They are an especially useful tool when placed on window signage or outside the restaurant so that passers-by can learn more.

QR codes can also be used to make online reservations. Customers can scan the code to check availability, make a reservation, or join the waiting list remotely, making the process more convenient and attractive. Once inside the restaurant, they facilitate faster ordering by allowing guests to place orders directly from their smartphones, instead of waiting for a server to take their order.

QR codes can link to other things besides menus: think interactive content such as short videos, social media pages, or online reviews. By providing engaging and relevant content (especially while customers wait), restaurants can connect with their customers on a deeper level and increase interest in visiting the establishment.

Finally, QR codes can be linked to the restaurant's social media accounts, making it easy for guests to share their experiences online. This user-generated content can create positive word-of-mouth and attract potential customers who encounter mentions of the restaurant through social media platforms. To encourage QR code use, restaurants can incorporate them into marketing campaigns to offer discounts, loyalty rewards, or special promotions. Enticing customers with exclusive deals accessed through QR codes encourages repeat visits and attracts new customers.

There's nothing worse than waiting for the check when the table is ready to leave—a scenario which can put a damper on an otherwise enjoyable dining experience. Like contactless ordering via QR codes or kiosks, **contactless payments** can also impact foot traffic. They streamline the checkout process, reducing waiting times for customers by empowering them to easily settle their bills via smartphone whenever they are ready. Faster transactions mean faster table turns, which allows restaurants to accommodate more customers throughout the day—especially at busy locations and during peak hours. A friction-free payment process also positively impacts customer satisfaction in general, and encourages repeat visits.

Online surveys offer several benefits, such as allowing restaurants to gather valuable insights into what their customers want, like favorite dishes, desired menu items, and specific dining preferences. Armed with this information, restaurants can adapt their menus and offerings to better cater to their customers, increasing the likelihood of drawing them back for a visit.

Surveys also help restaurants improve their services based on customer preferences and needs, which enhances the overall dining experience and attracts more patrons. Restaurants can solicit feedback from guests in several ways, such as QR codes on receipts or packaging, email, SMS, self-service kiosks, or a feedback form on the brand website.

By collecting customer data through surveys, restaurants can personalize their promotions and offers. Online survey data provides valuable demographics which allows restaurants to target specific customer segments with tailored marketing campaigns, which increases the chances of attracting the right audience to their establishment. For example, if a customer expresses a preference for a particular cuisine or dish in the survey, the restaurant can send targeted promotions or discounts related to that item, enticing the customer to return.

Surveys give customers an avenue to share their feedback and concerns about their dining experience. By addressing and resolving these issues, restaurants can enhance customer satisfaction and reputation, which can lead to increased word-of-mouth recommendations and positive reviews online. By actively seeking feedback and engaging customers through surveys, restaurants demonstrate that they value their customers' opinions and are committed to improving their dining experience.

As an added benefit, positive survey responses and testimonials can be shared on the restaurant's website and social media platforms. This social proof helps build credibility and trust among potential customers, increasing the likelihood of attracting new patrons. To entice guests to provide this critical feedback, restaurants can offer incentives like discounts, freebies, or raffle entries to encourage customers to participate. This not only increases survey response rates, it also motivates customers to visit the restaurant again to redeem their rewards.

It may have taken longer for restaurants to go all in on digital than, for example, the retail industry—but now that it has, there's no going back. Technological advancement is not only essential for growth, it helps brands meet consumer expectations, which is critical to retaining customers and increasing lifetime value.





Shoot for the Stars

Innovation is in this fast-growing brand's DNA.

Mention Silicon Valley, and most people think of big tech, not fried chicken. But Starbird—the chicken-focused brand enjoying its fourth consecutive year of more than 25 percent same store sales growth—was born among startups.

Founded in Sunnyvale, Calif. by Aaron Noveshen, the head of renowned restaurant consulting firm The Culinary Edge, Starbird's success story is a testament to the possibilities of early adoption. Noveshen had already founded restaurant concepts such as Pacific Catch and World Wrapps, and in 2016, saw that chicken had growing appeal among consumers. He also saw a hole in the market—one that could be filled with a healthier, chef-forward take on fried chicken supported by digital innovation and thoughtful design.

First things first: no matter how much technology a restaurant has, the food must be good or all bets are off. Starbird definitely has that covered. With a menu featuring fried tenders, wings, boneless wings, a proprietary plant-based product called Garden Bird, plus brined and grilled chicken breast, none of their products are ever frozen or treated with antibiotics. The fried chicken features a gluten-free breading and is deep-fried in rice bran oil rather than the typical soybean, canola, or peanut oil typically seen in quick-serve and fast casual restaurants.

Chef-driven dishes pair a classic feel-good food—fried chicken—with global flavors and creative twists that keep the menu fresh and innovative. Take, for example, the Nashville Hot Tenders, Sweet Thai Glazed Wings, or the chain's most popular menu item, the Chicken Chop, which boasts Mexican flavors with Crispy Chicken, tomatoes, roasted corn, avocado mash, pepitas, crispy tortillas, cotija, cilantro, green onions, Chipotle Lime Dressing. Decadent items like Truffle Fries, house-baked chocolate chip cookies, and churros balance out healthier sides such as the Super Slaw (dinosaur kale, cabbage, carrots, sesame seeds). Starbird also boasts an impressive LTO program with revolving menu items that reappear throughout the year.

A hallmark of the brand is its tech-forward attitude: Digital innovation was built into the company's DNA. When the brand launched in 2016, carryout programs were nothing like they are today. The concept of ordering through an app was still fairly new, and when Noveshen saw how popular it was, he decided to expand the concept to one without drive-thru windows.

Another forward-thinking aspect of the business is its suite of virtual brands offered under the Starbird name, including Starbird Wings, Starbird Salads, Starbird Bowls, and the brand's vegetarian plant-based concept, Gardenbird. Starbird operates its own websites and ordering channels for each brand, offering pickup or delivery through a direct OLO integration. OLO accepts orders from the Starbird App, kiosks and website with POS integration, forgoing the need for tablets in the restaurant. In 2022, Starbird's virtual brands contributed to 11 percent of its total sales.

In total, Starbird's integrated digital platform creates 70 percent off-premise sales through its mobile app, loyalty program, in-store touchscreen sales, and delivery. To support this omnichannel approach, they employ a variety of tools.

The backbone of the brand's tech stack is its **customer relationship management** (CRM) tool, which is managed through its loyalty provider, Thanx. A robust CRM enables restaurants to gather and analyze customer data in order to create more personalized experiences for guests. By understanding customer preferences, dining habits, and feedback, restaurants can tailor their offerings, promotions, and communications to match individual preferences.

"Guests' habits are changing much more frequently than we think, so it's important to stay close to this data when pushing Starbird's marketing material," says Casey Hilder, director of marketing for Starbird. "With proper messaging, we're able to drive greater frequency and foot traffic into our restaurants."

Understanding segmentation is critical when it comes to the success of a restaurant's marketing program. Effective segmentation of customer lists helps restaurants categorize their patrons based on various factors such as frequency of visits, spending habits, special occasions, and preferences. This segmentation allows for more targeted marketing campaigns.

For instance, a restaurant can send specific promotions to high-spending customers or offer birthday discounts to loyal patrons. These hyper-targeted campaigns often result in higher conversion rates. Starbird segments guests based on frequency, items, day parts, locations and more.



A CRM also helps identify and nurture loyal customers. When sending marketing campaigns, it is helpful to understand who prefers which items, when they typically visit the restaurant, how often they visit, and how they are ordering. Starbird uses its CRM platform to measure all of these things and send targeted messages accordingly, limiting discounts and focusing instead on the brand's core messaging of chef-driven menu items and digital ordering options.

By keeping track of repeat visits and purchase history, restaurants can reward loyalty through exclusive offers, loyalty programs, or personalized messages. This fosters a sense of community or "brand love," that results in positive organic marketing and user-generated content—which, in marketing, is priceless.

Another tool used by Starbird is **geolocation**. While many restaurants use this technology to target potential guests with push notifications or to alert them when a guest enters the vicinity for a pickup order, Starbird uses geolocation primarily as a market planning solution tool for real estate and development.

"We partner with a company called Sitewise to help better understand the demographic of a particular area prior to entering that market," Hilder says. "It helps the brand understand where potential guests would be traveling from when they pass a restaurant, where they are traveling to, and how many potential guests pass through on a daily basis."

Starbird has also used other geolocation tools through its advertising partners like Waze and Yelp, which help the brand solidify a guest has actually entered our restaurant from a particular advertisement.





Contactless ordering is a huge part of the Starbird brand, with 85 percent of orders processed via its mobile app, third-party delivery partners, online catering, kiosks and more. Through its partner Bite, Starbird installed a self-order kiosk in 2019 as a test in one of the restaurants. Little did they know it would be the future of its in-store ordering platform.

By April 2020, Starbird had two kiosks at all locations, situated outside the front doors to accommodate safe service during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Its newest restaurants have three kiosk stations just inside the restaurant's entrance, with only one cashier ordering station available. The goal with digital ordering and contactless payments is to provide the ultimate convenience for guests.

"Not only do kiosks allow guests to take their time perusing the menu, they end up trying new things that would not have not considered ordering with a human," Hilder says. "This approach makes guests comfortable when ordering, driving more frequency. We also have contactless payment solutions at our registers, so if people decide they want to walk in and order with a human cashier, that is available."

Loyalty is an essential aspect of the Starbird brand, as more than 23 percent of all orders come from the web/app loyalty platform. Their recently-launched points program, Starbird Loyalty 2.0, allows that loyalty experience to be much more customizable. Guests collect 10 points for every \$1 spent and can redeem rewards starting at 250 points. The program is "customizable" because guests can redeem small rewards right away (cookies, fries, drinks), or save their rewards after multiple purchases and redeem for free entrees or even a custom swag pack. This time of customization meets the guest where their needs are and ensures most people are satisfied.

Finally, guest surveys—which Starbird conducts daily through its partner, Tattle—are an integral part of the brand's success. The brand uses survey data to upgrade service in its physical locations and nail down specific areas and menu items that need improvement. On a larger scale, the brand runs innovation surveys—both in-house and with multiple partners—with guests to present new menu items for them to rate. Surveys ultimately lead to refinement of products or new products, which in turn the brand is able to talk about with its guests. On average, Starbird runs four large-scale surveys a year.

"Starbird is constantly innovating, and a big part of its innovation is learning what guests want to see next," Hilder says. "New products excite people and drive them into the restaurant to taste the best next thing."

Strategically tailored to maximize digital real estate and drive sales through a myriad of channels, Starbird is paving the way for restaurants of the future with tech-driven solutions and virtual brand innovation. Its omni-channel strategy offers a seamlessly integrated experience that truly stands out in today's restaurant landscape.

Starbird's unrivaled customer experience coupled with an optimized menu and tech-enabled solutions is an outstanding example of how brands can meet consumers' increasing needs for convenience and accessibility.



Tell Me About It

In a digital world, word of mouth is still a powerful marketing tool for restaurants.

There is no better advertising than word of mouth. It's organic, genuine, and people trust their friends and family more than they trust flashy advertisements or even professional critics. Guests may forget what dish they ordered or how long they waited for a table, but they won't forget their personal experience.

Unlike other forms of advertising—which can be expensive and may not always yield the desired results—word of mouth is typically free. Though it may not have the immediate reach of mass media or the direct connection of push notifications, the cumulative effect of positive recommendations is a cost-effective and sustainable advertising strategy for restaurants of any size.

Word of mouth, however, is a double-edged sword: guests are just as likely to share negative experiences with a brand as they are to share positive ones. That means restaurants must excel at consistently providing outstanding food, service, and experiences. Over time, word-of-mouth can be a powerful vehicle to increase brand awareness and drive foot traffic. So what gets people talking about a restaurant? Use these tips to get the word out and drive foot traffic.

Give stellar service

Guests have more choices than ever when it comes to food, but exceptional service sets a business apart from its rivals. Little things such as greeting guests by name, asking how their vacation went, or remembering their favorite server or table can go a long way.

When guests feel valued, they are more inclined to share their positive experiences with friends, family, and colleagues, which can lead to new customer acquisition through referrals. Happy customers also tend to return more frequently and often become “brand advocates,” leading to higher customer lifetime value (LTV) that supports long-term growth.

Keep in touch

Newsletters can be a powerful tool for restaurants to increase foot traffic by keeping customers engaged, informed, and excited about new products and brand developments.

Start by collecting email addresses from customers, which can be gathered via the business website, customer relationship management (CRM) software, or even a simple sign-up sheet near the cash register. Consider offering an incentive such as a discount or a free appetizer or dessert for signing up.

Use the newsletter to promote upcoming events, seasonal menus, the restaurant’s loyalty program, or to share news like new location announcements. Always include a clear and compelling call to action, such as “Make a Reservation Now” or “Forward to a Friend.”

Respond to reviews

Online reviews and customer feedback can play a significant role in increasing physical foot traffic. Recent research shows 46% of consumers believe online reviews are as trustworthy as personal recommendations from friends or family.

Engaging with reviewers—both positive and negative—in a thoughtful and strategic manner fosters a positive brand image and attracts more guests to visit the restaurant. As a bonus, responding to reviews on platforms like Google, Yelp, and TripAdvisor can also improve the restaurant’s visibility in search results, since search engines prioritize businesses that have higher engagement with their customers.





The Social Order Lights a Spark

This dining collective is always at the right time, at the right place, with American Express **BY JOCELYN WINN**

EMBRACING A “PLAY HARD, WORK HARDER” mentality, The Social Order has been an integral part of the Oklahoma restaurant scene for almost two decades. After all, the term *social order* refers to groups and values working collaboratively to provide stability and order, moving ahead versus falling apart.

As an umbrella dining collective, The Social

Order lives on an accelerated timeline, spanning 2003 to the present. The four concept restaurants that comprise the collective—Fuzzy’s Taco Shop, Dave’s Hot Chicken, The Jones Assembly, and Spark—each offer a unique menu and atmosphere, and each differentiated from the other to provide a well-balanced, eclectic, and ever-growing portfolio:

from craveable Baja tacos at Fuzzy's to wildly famous Nashville-style hot chicken at Dave's to The Jones's all-star cast of refined regional options to Spark's nostalgic hamburger and frozen custard. A second location of Dave's is being built, slated to open mid-October 2023, a second and

2003," says Brian Bogert, CEO and co-founder of Social Order Dining Collective. Bogert's first introduction to the brand was through his Corporate Card relationship. "That's coming from when I was in the corporate world knowing when I was taking a team out to lunch, or my manager was taking us out to

"At 15 I started working in the restaurant business. And I've kind of known since then that that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to own my own restaurant. There was just something about that first, initial experience, maybe it was the full circle of providing hospitality to a guest and then making that guest happy and satisfied. Our philosophy all along has been hospitality. Making other people feel good makes you feel good," Bogert says, who still feels that way today.

Although the friends moved on to the corporate world—Bogert in management consulting and Leclercq in marketing—they eventually returned to their early passion. "We'd always loved our favorite college restaurant, and we were like let's bring this back to Oklahoma. The local college scene needs one of these. And that's a concept [Texadelphia] we have since sold. But it was a great intro into owning a restaurant," Bogert says.

There, the pair worked out the kinks of successes and failures while learning to do what they now do best. Alongside Texadelphia at the time, they opened another concept restaurant—a campus flagship for students and game-day headquarters called Seven47, which they only recently sold during the pandemic after running it for 15 years.

There is truth to being at the right place at the right time, and accepting those opportunities takes ingenuity and an entrepreneurial spirit, not to mention a penchant for taking calculated risks. Part of that calculation is being backed by reputable, recognizable companies, such as American Express, which earned the partners respect from the industry. As their reputation for



"We have such a variety of relationships with American Express. We have accepted American Express since we opened our first restaurant in 2003."

third location of Spark will open late first or early second quarter of 2024, and this past week (early September), the ninth Fuzzy's location is up and running.

It has been afforded and supported by this model in part thanks to the value American Express has provided since day one. "We have such a variety of relationships with American Express. We have accepted American Express since we opened our first restaurant in

dinner, or we were catering in, my American Express Corporate Card was the card I used in previous experiences."

But before striking restaurant gold by bringing Fuzzy's and Dave's to Oklahoma as well as the self-branded concepts of Jones and Spark, best friends Brian Bogert and Manny Leclercq were just two SMU college kids who loved their favorite campus hangout, Texadelphia.



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1. Based on the Feb 2023 Nilson Report.

2. Nilson Report #1.235, February 2023. Spend per card derived from U.S. year-end purchase volume divided by year-end cards in force (CIF), not from individual consumer-level data. CIF represents the number of cards issued and outstanding with cardholders. Average Non-American Express spend per card includes Visa, MasterCard and Discover credit and charge card card volume and CIF and excludes debit and prepaid volume and CIF.

3. Nilson Report #1.235, February 2023. Transaction Size derived from U.S. year-end purchase volume divided by year-end purchase transactions, not from individual consumer-level data. Average Non-American Express transaction size includes Visa, MasterCard and Discover credit and charge cards and excludes debit and prepaid volume and transactions.



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hospitality and operations grew, other doors began to open.

Fuzzy's Taco Shop based out of Fort Worth, Texas, approached them looking to expand outside of that market. "We ended up signing a development agreement and captured the entire state of Oklahoma," Bogert says. "We opened our ninth (Fuzzy's) location last Monday. It's been a fun ride to get in on the ground floor and help it evolve over time. It's allowed us the privilege to open other restaurants around concepts. We opened our first one in Norman, Oklahoma, in 2003, and other than a two- to three-year gap during the pandemic, we've opened about one a year since then."

A recent Barron's article cites that the fastest-growing customer base regards acquisitions and spending are Millennials and Gen Zers, accounting for 60 percent of new consumer proprietary accounts globally. Given the hip vibe and smart business acumen of The Social Order, more younger customers are carrying American Express Cards and spending their expendable income dollars eating out at their restaurants.

In 2017, when Bogert opened the Jones Assembly with another business partner, musician Graham Colton, it not only fulfilled a shared dream but also fulfilled a need to satiate this new, younger customer: to bring together the three upbeat concepts of food, spirits, and live music. This seedling engendered the full-scale 225-seat dining room restaurant, upscale mezzanine-level cocktail bar, and 1,700-capacity live music venue that is today The Jones Assembly.

Multitasking existing spaces for different uses and concepts is one of the smartest ways to capitalize on operations—offering cus-

tomers two-, or in this case, three-for-ones and certainly something for everyone. "That's been one of the highlights of my career. When someone travels to Oklahoma City or somebody's in town, you have locals saying, 'You've got to go to the Jones Assembly,'" Bogert says.

Their luck didn't end there. In 2020, a taxpayer initiative in Oklahoma City funded a new downtown central retail park, and The

two-year anniversary with leases signed for two more locations. "It's fun, bright. Everybody feels good in there. Our philosophy is to brighten someone's day. And that's what we aim to do at Spark."

Next up on this timeline is Dave's Hot Chicken, another instance of having a finger on the pulse of what's next, what's hot, and what's possible. "When we opened the Jones over six



Social Order was selected along with the Scissortail Park Foundation to create and operate a restaurant at the entrance to that park. Thus sparked Spark, their play on nostalgia. "We have a corndog on that menu and frozen custard shakes. We initially thought of the name like that spark of excitement and the action verb: 'spark an idea.' You find some employees that have that spark, all of those different things. It also made sense because of the Scissortail 'S' and 'Park,'" Bogert says. Although that opening was pushed back 10 months from a March 2020 schedule, it's now celebrating its

years ago, we had a Nashville hot chicken dish on our menu. And it stayed on our menu the whole time. Then somewhere along the way, I got into a hot chicken concept. So it's been with us from the beginning. It's perfect timing," Bogert says. "We knew somebody was going to take that sort of cuisine and bring it all over the country. We met with Dave's founders, met with their CEO, tasted the chicken, and fell in love. It's all the highest quality-chicken and we love the product. But just as importantly, they had the leadership posed to expand this type of cuisine nationwide. We bet on the



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right horse because Dave's I think is the fastest-growing concept in this segment now, opening the 175th location this week. We have plans to open eight in the Oklahoma City area and potentially more if it keeps growing and people keep eating hot chicken, which seems like they're going to."

A remarkable concept and even delicious food, however, are just part of the game plan when it comes to successfully operating multi-unit, multi-restaurant locations. Which is how The Social Order Dining Collective was born.

About 12 years ago, Bogert and his team wanted to provide all their employees with a career-based secure livelihood while also trying to diminish the repeat operating crossovers between and among all the individual restaurants. "We needed to form an entity that would be able to do that. Also, we wanted people, our community, to identify us as a group of restaurants rather than just, 'Oh, are you that guy from Fuzzy's?' 'Are you that guy from Dave's?' To put it under one portfolio to manage all our restaurant

services. It was a happy accident I guess. For a decade it's allowed us to grow and it's allowed us to take care of our people in a better way," says Bogert.

This story of expansion is rare in today's foodservice climate, so, how does The Social Order manage to continue to open restaurants, hire staff, afford food and labor—all the pandemic-forward and -afterward concerns? "Up until about six months ago, we were still really dealing with a volatile commodity market. Our food costs were all over the board. When we opened Dave's, for instance, chicken was at maybe \$4.60 a pound. We could not have opened that concept at a worse time, like in the history of chicken pricing. Then we just rode the wave and now it's leveled out back to where it was pre-pandemic. It's been a roller coaster."

Bogert also contributes this leveling out to two important business endeavors. One, he hired a comptroller who put them on track to forecast when they could and could not spend. And then, while they have always relied on

American Express to bring in high spending Card Members, the company itself would now carry American Express for its Corporate Card program.

Today, members of the leadership team use American Express corporate cards and can upload receipt codes to specific charge accounts. "It's changed everybody's life because reporting expenses was always a hassle, and then tracking down everyone to get the information: who had what card and where and how that was paid. Now it's all managed under one single account: American Express with The Social Order. That has been a lifesaver for myself and our comptroller," Bogert says.

This complementary, cyclical business model whereby American Express is a well-known proponent of small businesses while offering corporate benefits is not lost on customers: the caliber of American Express's reputation precedes it.

Nowadays, people are ready to come out, ready to experience, ready to share. According to a recent Datassential report (Operator Omnibus webinar, September 2023), the all-time low of flattened real growth for 2020 came in at -29.6 percent, indicating perhaps the very worst times are behind us. The next years will be price driven, with consumer spend in 2023 at \$845.7 billion predicted to increase to \$889.7 billion in 2024, with a real (versus inflationary) growth of .6 billion to \$1.8 billion.

Of those spending segments, the quick-service restaurant is the largest at \$312 billion spend, fast casual at \$76.9 billion, midscale at \$56.3 billion, casual dining at \$148.9 billion, and fine dining at \$8.3 billion. Moreover, about half of consumers of fast casual restaurants

go out mainly to satiate a craving, to get out of the house, and to socialize. The Social Order checks off all those boxes of restaurant type, customer spend, and growth. Now, the next hurdle to flatten will be labor and food costs.

At the end of summer 2023, the top 5 out of 15 pressing challenges for operators are, according to Datassential, rising food costs (63 percent), rising labor costs (41 percent), inflation (38 percent), recruiting and hiring hourly staff (32 percent), and retaining staff (27 percent).

Bogert is glad to report that labor issues haven't quite affected them in the same way it might have for one- or two-unit operators because they gave willing workers an alternate restaurant to earn an income during the pandemic even while reducing to partial service, closing several locations for 105 days, staff out for health reasons, and many leaving the industry altogether not seeing it as a viable future career.

"That's when we dug our feet in again and were like, Hey, this has to be a legitimate full-time career for all of our team members," says Bogert, who had already launched a competitive benefits package with matching 401K to every employee, now to include PTO for all hourly positions previously offered only for salaried staff. "I realized we've got bartenders working doubles and picking up as many shifts as they can before a week they go on vacation, then they get back and have to start saving up again. It made us focus on how we could better take care

"It is such a valued relationship that we have with Resy, I don't even know how we would operate without it."

of our people. I feel like now we're staffed right where we want to be and hopefully our team members are with us for the long haul because that's the type of restaurant group we're trying to create."

That commendable corporate model means a more satisfied workforce, in turn a more satisfactory workplace, and ultimately a more satisfied customer. Because Social Order restaurants are situated in and around the bustling, industrial Oklahoma City, Bogert says the top essential benefit for the Social Order's customer-facing and internal operations is Resy, a reservations software platform that American Express acquired in 2019.

Booking many of its reservations and all of its events, while capturing and collecting data has made Resy an irreplaceable tool for Social Order, filling seats and mouths. From pandemic days when they wanted to offer holiday meals and special dinners to today when they host Gospel Brunches and New Year's Eve parties, Resy's flexibility helps Social Order build lasting formats to engage guests even when they're not in the building.

"I mean, it is such a valued relationship that we have with Resy, I don't even know how we would

operate without it," Bogert says.

"So many of our customers, especially our fast casual, use online ordering. It's so easy for our customers to be able to use their American Express Cards as a form of payment," says Bogert. "Now that we've launched online ordering systems at all our locations, for instance, I was looking just last night at one of our Fuzzy's locations in Edmond, Oklahoma, really family-friendly with a ton of dine-in business: 56 percent of our business transactions came through online ordering yesterday. I just never would have imagined that our dine-in mix would be almost 50-50 these days, but it is. And so being able to have that ease of ordering online on our website or on the app, that's just been huge to us."

Over at their Bricktown locations, in an entertainment district with a movie theatre, ballpark, basketball arena, there's a lot of foot traffic to entice. "We of course have the American Express decals in the window, so everybody knows we accept it. And when Small Business Saturday happens, American Express always puts out a ton of great point of purchase materials we can use in our restaurants. I definitely think that brings people in, no doubt," says Bogert.

"We have such a deep relationship with American Express that it's just in our DNA. We don't even realize how entangled our worlds are, from being our corporate card to us accepting American Express at all our locations to utilizing Resy." ★

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