

THE GOAL OF RESTAURANT WEB SITES



by Michael Kasavana, Ph.D., CHTP
NAMA Professor in Hospitality Business
School of Hospitality Business
Michigan State University

Restaurant Web site effectiveness revolves around continuous design improvement, evolving technological applications and establishment of enhanced customer relations.

Can a Web site provide a restaurant with a market advantage? Can customer loyalty be enhanced through online interaction? Can Web site technology impact the restaurant's bottom line? Stated simply, the goal of a restaurant Web site is to drive traffic to the eatery so that competitive advantage, brand loyalty and dollar profitability are enhanced.

A significant number of Internet users rely on the Web to gather news and information relative to travel, lodging and foodservice offerings. For most restaurants the question is no longer whether to create and support a Web site, but rather *how to create the most efficient site to accomplish business goals*. As restaurant management considers the allocation of resources toward Web development, the effectiveness of Web site design becomes increasingly important. Many hospitality industry experts argue that an online presence offers unparalleled marketing opportunities, secure rapid transactions and unique customer relationship management. Restaurant Web site effectiveness revolves around continuous design improvement, evolving technological applications and establishment of enhanced customer relations. There are many features a restaurant may invoke to improve traffic at its Web site and physical structure.

Web Site Features

A set of popular restaurant Web site features include:

- 1 | Awareness** – List the important information such as location maps, hours of operation, sample menus, event calendars, special pricing lists and contact information. In addition, consider online discounts, gift cards, coupons, banquet plans and catering promotions.
- 2 | Amenities/Facilities** – Clearly and concisely list main and ancillary buildings, restaurant and lounge facilities, meeting and conference services and a variety of assorted venues your property provides.
- 3 | Menus** – With a breakdown by meal (breakfast, lunch, dinner, banquet, snack, etc.), by course (appetizer, entree, children's menu, dessert, wine, beer, etc.), and others (signature items, events and activities, catering, take out, home delivery, etc.), this feature is one of the most visited areas of a restaurant site. This area may also feature links to cooking tips, nutritional information and dietary information.



The goal of a restaurant Web site is to drive traffic to the eatery so that competitive advantage, brand loyalty and dollar profitability are enhanced.

4 | Customer Pipeline – Consider visitor registration, frequent diner program enrollment, customer comment cards, bulletin boards, e-mail inquiries and management correspondence links, which provide an avenue for collecting customer information. A restaurant e-newsletter option further extends this capability.

5 | News – Use the site as a medium for rapid distribution of market specials, staff news, event promotions, special event registration, press releases and other broadcast-worthy information. Offering current content may prove beneficial.

6 | CRM – The cultivation of relationships with customers and non-customers, purveyors, community leaders and other industry entities is also beneficial use of your site. Marketing, product and customer surveys and other feedback can be collected via your Web site.

7 | Transactions – Online purchasing technology provides a means to conduct secure electronic transactions. Retail sales of logo merchandise, menu items, catered items, home delivery, take-out service and specialty condiment items may be purchased and settled (i.e., credit/debit account, cyber cash).

8 | Employment – Prospective employees can download an employment application or complete an online ap

plication script. Somewhat less common, the Web can support labor scheduling, messaging and related personnel functions.

9 | Spotighting – The Web site can display on- and off-premises events, activity calendars, special celebrity functions, famous clientele, unique events, digitized photos, online tours and other newsworthy happenings. Spotighting can provide the restaurant with a virtual personality (décor, theme, entertainment, venue, etc.).

10 | Interactivity – Puzzles, trivia challenges, games, contests or other methods of interactivity can entertain while providing an opportunity for the visitor to earn

redeemable discounts, coupons or game points toward future transactions.

11 | Tips – A tip of the day, week or month can help promote Web site interest by arousing curiosity and interest in dynamic Web content. This can be especially important to promoting traffic and product sales.

12 | Web Links – Provide links to logical, related sites such as local points of interest, entertainment venues, recreational facilities, area attractions and the like. Care must be exercised to keep hyperlinks current, accurate and relevant.

13 | Intranet Support – The formulation of an Intranet, a private network

built using Internet protocols (i.e., TCP/IP), used for restricted communications among management and select staff can also be an effective Web site extension.

Web Presence

Restaurants that have ventured onto the Web have employed assorted Web-based technologies (text, video, audio, graphics) designed to accomplish a variety of purposes, including identity, promotion, communications and awareness. Part of the attraction of the Web is the fact it never closes and offers nearly unlimited access. While direct links to customers appear to be one of the primary motivations of e-commerce for the restaurant industry, few companies maximize this potential. In order to have an effective Internet presence, the restaurant should balance usable information and promotional content.

Similar to the quest for sustained competitive advantage, Web site sponsors strive to maintain and operate an attractive and efficient site. As newer applications become available, older scripts and page formatting, legacy site maps and navigational tools and tired interactivities and attractions need to be revised accordingly. Too often Web site applications are managed inattentively and may project a dysfunctional image for the restaurant. Care must be exercised to ensure that the quality of the site adheres to high standards and incorporates evolving technology as appropriate.

Best Practices

Entering the Internet without sufficient thought or planning can be at the least a waste of time and at worst a disaster to customer relations, business image and your operational performance. These best practices can help with goals.

Location – A Web site that is easy to locate is more likely to be visited. The URL assigned to a Web site should incorporate logical, recallable words or phrases (e.g., pizzahut.com, redlobster.com and burgerking.com are more likely to be remembered than cryptic or encoded locators). Similarly, using a proxy URL (PURL) that enables linking to a company's home page even if an approximate or logically incorrect address (such as misspelling) is entered. For example, entering www.kentuckyfriedchicken.com or

3 Ms OF WEB SITE DESIGN

Restaurant Web sites are typically designed, developed, financed and maintained by the foodservice operator or a contracted agent. Historically, restaurateurs have tried a variety of approaches. An effective Web site should take advantage of effective graphics and informative content rather than just merely applying sophisticated browser technology. Web site design should appeal to the largest possible number of visitors,

while relying on behind the scenes techniques to produce pictorial displays, site navigation, e-mail communications, secure transactions and linked Web pages. Designs range from telephone yellow page-like advertising content, to brochure-style promotional copy, to interactive games, dining room reservations, frequent diner memberships, special event calendars, dining room photos, virtual tours and other services.

Some Web site sponsors incorporate more complex Web designs through tiered pages and frame-formatted multiple windows. A well designed and developed site can be a valuable marketing resource for the property. The addition of hyperlinks and image mapping to information contained at the local site or remote sites (e.g., related channel members or direct affiliates) can prove helpful.

There are three Ms of Web site design that help summarize many important factors. The three Ms being: **Message, Magic and Method**. A restaurant Web site's message must be focused and provide meaningful information. A site typically works most effectively when it is organized in a non-linear fashion, thereby enabling the visitor to customize and/or streamline a site visit. It should feature logical and intuitive architecture for effective operation. The magic of a Web site is often dependent upon reliable and secure back-end systems, text, graphics, audio and assorted scripts. The site must be interactive and may include animation and access to an online database. The method of a Web site must feature a creative layout and artistically pleasing graphics and design features. Innovative developments can have a significant impact on site traffic.



www.kfc.com will lead to the identical Web page. In this example, one URL is a proxy for the other.

Navigation – *A site that is easy to navigate enables the user to become a quick study in efficient site usage.* The use of frames, buttons and hotlinks is deemed more user-friendly and therefore more intuitive. This is important for effective transaction handling and return traffic.

Content – *A site that fails to offer meaningful information, or information in a non-palatable format, is likely to be ignored.* A Web site has the ability to amplify a company's image and extend its business strategy.

Personalization – *Customizing Web content according to a user profile or frequent diner script can prove beneficial.* Also, enabling a customer with special dietary restrictions to search menus within defined parameters may represent a competitive advantage.

The Three-Click Rule – *There is perhaps no more critical factor of a Web site's success than the user obtaining rapid access to desired information.* As a rule, any information located at a site should be discoverable in three clicks or fewer. Anything slower is detrimental to success.

The 22-Inch Rule – *A standard typed page tends to be 8.5 by 11 inches and has led to an acceptable maximum Web page length being the equivalent of two typed pages, or 22 inches.* When faced with long Web pages users are forced to scroll through an array of information that may or may not prove relevant.

Site Mapping – *A site map is a critical component of Web site usability and user satisfaction and can contribute to increased return visits.* It is the overall layout and design of a Web site.

Communication Capability – *A Web site that offers two-way communications is more likely to experience improved transactions*

and services. Providing the script for an e-mail inquiry and other interactivities, such as reservations, gift certificates and printable discount coupons, can influence site satisfaction and effectiveness.

CRM Initiatives

Restaurants may provide incentives to repeat site visitors and offer features and services not available at a bricks and mortar site. Such unique and/or customizable products and services can revolutionize online connectivity. Web sites can provide more streamlined services based on customer preferences (e.g., frequent diner programming) as well as general information about the property's dining facilities, banquet and catering services, gift certificates and cards, décor and amenity availability, and the like. For example, a registered member may create a personal preference profile at a restaurant's Web site resulting in faster, customized services. Following online registration, customers can begin receiving special news items, sales promotions, online newsletters and advance notice of important Web site happenings as well as relevant e-mail updates. The site's registration feature may well provide the company a competitive advantage arising through the development of one-to-one customer relationships. Such a direct and close relationship should strengthen brand loyalty and incentivize restaurant visits. Developing an effective customer pipeline and attracting a broader range of potential customers appear to be critical factors in success.

There are many industry observers who argue that restaurant Web site efficiency should be measured by volume of traffic and the strength of customer relationship management (CRM). Under this premise, effectiveness revolves around the quality of the relationship the site helps establish with its visitors as well as the number of site visits. Although it remains somewhat elusive and difficult to measure, the CRM metric should not be underestimated or ignored when evaluating restaurant Web site effectiveness. While restaurant Web site effectiveness involves many complex dimensions, the goal remains to drive traffic from cyber space to the bricks and mortar of the physical world.

Michael Kasavana, Ph.D., CHTP, is NAMA Professor in Hospitality Business, School of Hospitality Business, Michigan State University. He can be reached at kasavana@pilot.msu.edu.