

Social media's top restaurant players

By Mark Brandau

ATLANTA (July 8, 2009) Whether they know the difference between Facebook and MySpace or tweets and texts, restaurants large and small are getting more involved with their guests on social networks, according to marketing firm Vitruve and its latest social-media index rankings.

Industry giants Starbucks, Subway and McDonald's led the pack in getting the most attention online and were ranked No.1, 2 and 3, respectively, on Vitruve's nationwide Top 25 Most Social Restaurants list for the first half of the year. However, smaller chains and regional favorites also are getting in on the act, including Krystal, Chick-fil-A, Pinkberry and In-N-Out Burger.

Vitruve chief executive Reggie Bradford said the companies atop the firm's rankings recognize the potential that various social-networking tools have for connecting restaurants with their guests.

"The encouraging thing that we're seeing," Bradford said, "is that all brands in the top 25 are seeing the benefits and value of social media, whether it's an individual pizza store messaging to Twitter followers or the largest restaurants in the world creating a comprehensive Facebook experience. It's not only cost-effective, but it also develops real long-term bonds between consumers and brands."

Starbucks continues to be the "Kleenex" of the restaurant industry, Bradford said, meaning that its brand name has become synonymous with an entire category, like Kleenex, Frisbee or Dumpster. The word "Starbucks" is mentioned online more than the word "coffee," he said.

For its part, Starbucks has more than 245,000 followers on Twitter, and the Seattle-based coffeehouse chain currently is running an ice cream giveaway promotion on its Facebook page through July 16. The company also recently inked a sponsorship deal with popular MSNBC morning show "Morning Joe," which airs nationwide five days a week.

Bradford noted that 17 of the 25 ranked companies, including the top nine brands, are quick-service chains.

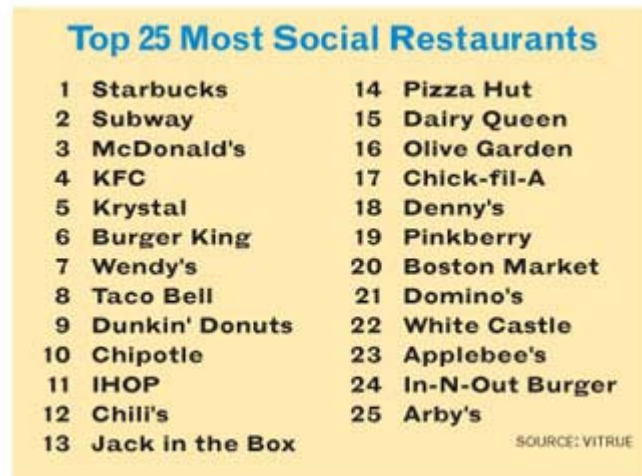
"All the bigger guys have been aggressive building out their social-media presence, from Starbucks to Burger King up and down the line," Bradford said. "Social media really is about instant gratification, and quick service is the same thing. There's a lot of impulse behavior in purchasing. They tie well together."

Krystal, a Chattanooga, Tenn.-based hamburger chain, made instant gratification the centerpiece of its most ambitious social-media initiative, the Krystal Giveaway Show, a live broadcast online, where the restaurant's fans could answer trivia questions in real time by posting responses on Twitter and Facebook.

A Krystal spokesman said **the May 27 broadcast attracted more than 1,600 viewers** who posted more than 500 comments on the brand's Facebook page and wrote about 300 tweets on Twitter with a "#KrystalHD" tag. Vice president of marketing Brad Wahl called the social-media event "encouraging" and told Nation's Restaurant News, "Customer retention and loyalty is a big deal, and anything we can do to develop our database of Krystal lovers will go a long way."

Bradford of Vitruve said many companies initially turned to Facebook to start their social-media strategies. That network continues to grow rapidly, especially among older consumers, and it conveniently groups people in networks by region.

"Marketers are more focused on Facebook because of the growth and size of the audience and demographics of the audience," Bradford said, "as well as the ability to order them nationally and geographically. Technology-wise, for a corporation to be able to roll something out systematically, Facebook is the best-developed method today."



Twitter, the popular microblogging site, allows restaurants great online versatility, Bradford said, because each unit of a chain can have its own Twitter feed for promotions and branding while the corporate headquarters can manage the brand's official messaging on the company profile.

"Certainly, with Twitter, you can have tons of activity with individual locations, as well as have Dunkin' Dave doing the corporate stuff," he said, referring to the man behind Canton, Mass.-based Dunkin' Donuts' Twitter feed.

Bradford singled out Pinkberry as a notable entry on the Top 25 list, at No. 19, especially since the frozen-yogurt chain opened its first store in 2005. The brand's rabid following in New York and Los Angeles have plenty of people talking about it online, however.

"With Pinkberry, what was interesting to us is that it's a newer concept, so we were surprised to see it make the list," Bradford said. "It's generated a larger buzz than bite, I guess."

The Vitruve chief executive wasn't quite so surprised to see Chick-fil-A on the list, as the chicken chain's fans, known to camp out in front of new units and wear cow costumes for free food, are likely to promote the brand online.

"Chick-fil-A has developed such a passionate audience," Bradford said. "A lot of people are such big fans, and they camp out in front of new-store openings. Their corporate brand is consistently high quality, and from a social-media standpoint, that translates into people who are satisfied with that relationship and want to talk about it."

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