



The **Griffin Report** of Food Marketing

Starting or Expanding Restaurant Operations: What Every Owner Should Know About Media/Marketing Efforts

By *Kim McGrath*

The *Griffin Report* gathered a range of people in the restaurant business: new owners, established veterans, public relations representatives, and food critics and asked them their thoughts on restaurant marketing and media.

As one type of cuisine does not suit all restaurants, neither does one form of marketing. Here's some "food for thought" for new owners and operators who may be looking to gain their footing in new terrain.

"Marketing is important. If you don't have the time or resources, it's possible that you should not be in the business," said **Dave Andelman**, chief executive officer of the Phantom Gourmet, Inc., which hosts the popular Boston television and radio show on the weekends in Boston on TV 38 and on Saturday from 4 to 7 p.m. on 96.9 FM WTKK.

The Big Opening Tips

As a new operator, you're a target for an incognito review, said **Kim Moore**, director of branding and communications of Finale, a dessert restaurant that currently has four locations in the Boston area. "That first review can't make or break you, but it will certainly impact business levels in the beginning – good or bad," said Ms. Moore.

If you are a small independent restaurant, you must have your operations flawless before you bring in the media, according to Erin Connors, who after a nine-year multiple-location coffee shop partnership, opened her own restaurant, Eatin' Healthy, in October 2005 in Quincy, Mass. Teach staff how to recognize when they might be serving a food critic, according to Ms. Moore.

Hiring a PR Firm vs. Going It Alone

Opening and running a successful restaurant presents an extensive laundry list of things to do: review finances, establish budgets, maintain inventory of foodstuffs, bar, and other supplies, review menus and train a new crew.

Hiring a public relations professional who has the time to constantly think of different story angles and media outlets to pursue may help lessen that burden. "As a new operator, you should spend your time making sure that you are delivering great experiences in your restaurant, not on trying to pitch media stories," said **Jen Beltz**, principal of Front Burner PR, LLC of Portland, Maine.

"Restaurant operators need to understand that even if they have the world's best chef and the best menu, if no one knows about the restaurant, no one will show up," added Dale Venturini, president and chief executive officer of the Rhode Island Hospitality and Tourism Association.

Is it feasible for a restaurant owner to also act the role of the PR rep? Yes, however, "My feeling is it's hard to beat the professional at their game," said Richard Grotton, FMP, president and chief executive officer of the Maine Restaurant Association.

An effective PR firm will not only help you saturate the press with restaurant reviews, recipe suggestions, chef profiles, and special restaurant event promotions, but it can also provide media training so that the chef or owners look and sound their best during television or radio interviews, said Ms. Beltz.

Websites

Everyone agrees it's necessary for a restaurant to have a website. But simply having one is not enough.

Tips:

- Keep it updated. And you have to sell on your website – it's where you'll be judged by how original, attractive, representative, easy-to-navigate, and cool your site is, according to Mary Catherine Deibel, co-owner and operator of Upstairs on the Square, a well-known Boston restaurant located in Harvard Square.
- List anything you can think of: holidays, hours, accessibility, whether you have a fireplace or water view. Are pets allowed? Provide directions from everywhere and a link to Google Maps, according to Mr. Grotton.
- Since everyone is on the web, it's great to use a restaurant marketing website such as BostonChef.com, RestReview.com and WhereToEat.com, according to Ms. Deibel.

E-mail Newsletters

E-mail newsletters or "blasts" are another commonly touted tool to effectively and inexpensively communicate. Remind regulars and inform new customers of what you're doing by sending event listings, upcoming specials and recipes.

Thinking Outside the Box/New Media

More restaurant owners seem to be embracing advanced technology such as MySpace, YouTube, and Facebook. Tremont 647 has a MySpace page at: www.myspace.com/tremont647. Chef Alison Barshak at Blue Bell in Philadelphia has her own blog where she posts about the trials and tribulations of opening a sister location.

"I know very little about Facebook and YouTube, but if you expect to attract customers who frequent those sites, and if the price is reasonable, you better be there or your competition will," Mr. Grotton said.

"Social networking websites are certainly the wave of the future. In a short period of time, the cell phone-text messaging-Facebook generation will soon gain the buying power to eat in your establishment. And they are currently spending a large amount of time on these sites. The companies that figure out how to connect with their customers in a meaningful way via social networking sites will be in the best position to win," said Ms. Moore.

"By the time we've learned how to maximize Facebook and YouTube, the younger generation is already on to something new. As soon as something becomes mainstream, it's deemed not cool and old. Trying to capture what the 'next' big Internet craze will be is the million-dollar question. What we do know is that we can't force a viral campaign, and we can't guess what they will find funny," Ms. Venturini said.

Tips:

- Don't rule anything out.
- Be selective about what's posted on public sites, whether it's casual podcasts or formal TV interviews, according to Ms. Beltz.

Advertising: Print, Radio, Television

"Television is still the dominant medium in America, and it's the best for restaurants because potential customers can see the food. Radio is the next best, then print," said Mr. Andelman.

And while most seem to agree, few seem to be able to afford it.

"I hate paying those bills and seeing no direct return. I think it drives restaurants nuts not to know where that media ROI is!" said Mr. Grotton.

Ms. Connors agrees. "Television advertising worked well for me but was a bit out of my price range with my limited budget."

Ms. Connors was unhappy with the money she spent on a typical print ad. "You might as well open the window and throw your money out of it...I knew I was in a paper and had to look through it twice to find us."

Tips:

- Consider your audience and your budget and find what works for you.
- Never ignore media requests, even from smaller publications, according to Ms. Moore.
- Don't target the world...focus on who your best customer would be, according to Ms. Connors.
- A common mistake restaurants make is to spend their entire marketing/advertising budget in the first few months, and then nothing for the remainder of the year, according to Ms. Venturini.

One Last Piece of Advice:

And while opinions vary as to what method is best, the general consensus seems the same: restaurants must be their own best advertisers.

“Don't be modest! Announce to the world – or at the very least, the neighbor – what you have to offer,” Mr. Grotton said.

“Restaurants need to understand that they are in show business. Stop being humble; let people know who you are and what you do,” said Mr. Andelman. ♦