

Catching Fire:

An analysis and marketing proposal regarding
Firehouse No. 37's use of social media

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Firehouse No. 37 Background

Firehouse No. 37 is American-style restaurant that opened in August of 2012 in the Marketplace Shopping Center in San Ramon, California. It currently markets itself with the tagline “Spirits, Food & Friends.”

It is owned by Dan Hawkins, a Danville, California, resident, who also owns an Italian-style restaurant in Danville, and a pizzeria in San Francisco around the tourist area of Pier 39.

Firehouse is made of two distinct areas; the main dining room and the bar. Each of these “dining areas” has differing and distinct atmospheres.

As a restaurant and bar, the primary consumer demographic is an individual between ages 21 and 55 that work or live close to its location. The sports bar atmosphere primarily appeals to men, but the clientele is made of both genders.

Barroom and Drink Offerings

The bar is one large room with an accompanying “side room” that can be used for large private parties. The barroom can seat as many as 80 patrons with an additional 30 in the bar’s banquet room.

The bar boasts 34 permanent draught beer selections and an additional 10 rotating taps that change seasonally. This selection of draught beers is made up primarily of craft beer, with the majority of those coming from regionally-based breweries. This is illustrated by the limited selection of American-style “light” lagers; Coors Light and Bud Light. By comparison, Firehouse No. 37 has eight offerings of IPA-style beers, all of which are brewed in California.

The fully-stocked bar also offers 14 specialty house cocktails.

Decorating the barroom’s walls are 20 high-definition flat screen televisions which are usually tuned to sports programming. This aspect gives the bar area a sports-bar atmosphere, which the bar exploits on Saturdays and Sundays during football.

The bar’s primary promotion is its Happy Hour, which runs from 3pm to 6pm, seven days a week. In addition to Happy Hour, the barroom hosts live music at least three nights a week (usually Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday evenings). The bar also hosts a “Pint Night” promotion on Wednesday nights, where a customer can purchase a pint of that night’s selected “specialty brew for \$6.50. The consumer can then keep their beer mug (which is often painted with that specific beer’s brand) and charged \$3.50 for each refill for the remainder of the evening. These branded mugs are provided by the beer manufacturer as a promotional tool at no cost to the bar.

Firehouse No. 37 used to hold trivia contests every Tuesday evening hosted by a local comedian, but that promotion has not be held since December of 2014.

Dining Room and Food Offerings

Firehouse No. 37’s dining room can host a maximum of 200 people, including an attached banquet room (separate from the bar’s banquet room) that can hold private parties as large as 40 people.

The menu has traditional barroom food options such as nachos, onion rings and appetizer platters consisting of various fried foods. Burgers and sandwiches are also standard items offered. Gluten-free buns are an option on all sandwiches.

Pizzas are another popular menu offering as the restaurant possesses a large-scale gas-powered pizza oven. There are 10 specialty pizzas offered at three different sizes; mini (6 inches), small (10 inches) and large (16 inches). A gluten-free crust option is available at the small-sized pizza and lactose-free cheese is offered on any sized pizza.

In addition to the traditional bar-food offerings, the menu also contains higher-quality items such as its fresh pear and bleu cheese salad. Most of these items are found in the “Specialties & Pasta” section of the menu and include food such as: baby back ribs, shrimp fettuccine, mushroom and leek penne pasta and Atlantic salmon. Gluten-free options are also available in all pasta dishes.

The large selection of health-conscious plates positions Firehouse No. 37 as a higher-quality restaurant and bar.

San Ramon, California and Bishop Ranch

San Ramon

Firehouse No. 37 is located in San Ramon, California. The 11-square mile suburban city is located in the TriValley area of East Bay region of the San Francisco Bay. The city has a population of 73,000, with a mean household income of \$120,000. The average monthly apartment rental is \$1,000, while the average home price is more than \$700,000.

San Ramon’s median age is 37, with drinking-age adults making up 68 percent of residents. The targeted demographic of 21-55 year olds make up more than 50 percent of the city’s population. Surprisingly, individuals 20 to 24 years of age make up only 3.3 percent of the town’s population, the smallest percentage among groups younger than 75 years old.

Caucasians are the largest racial group, representing more than 53 percent of the population. Asians are the second-largest race demographic (35 percent), with Chinese (11.8 percent) and Asian Indians (11.3 percent) representing the largest percentage of Asian citizens.

Family households make up more than 75 percent of San Ramon homes. Married-couple families represent 64 percent of homes.

The population consists of the highly educated. Among adults living in San Ramon, 97 percent are high school graduates, with 58 percent possessing a bachelor’s degree or higher.

This data, combined with the sport-bar atmosphere offered at Firehouse, suggests that the ideal customer is a 37-year old, upper-middle class, college-educated, married man. These men are either white, Asian or of Southeast Asian descent.

Bishop Ranch and Surrounding Businesses

Firehouse No. 37 is located at the intersection of Bollinger Canyon Road and Alcosta Boulevard. This site is one block away from Chevron’s corporate headquarters. Chevron is San Ramon’s largest employer with 4,200 employees.

The restaurant’s location is also a block away from the south end of Bishop Ranch, a 585-square acre commercial business park that possesses 9 million square feet of office space in thirty buildings. The area is home to more than 550 companies, start-ups and medical practitioners. Among those companies are many Global 2000 companies, including General Electric, Toyota and Wells Fargo. The demographic makeup of these employees is similar to the makeup of San Ramon’s citizens.

In addition to the city's residents, Firehouse should be capitalizing on this large, local concentration of potential customers with fast (less than an hour, in-and-out) food service during weekday lunches and cheap happy hour specials for those just getting off the clock.

Local Competition

There are 14 different dining options within the Marketplace Shopping Center. Of those 14 businesses, there are two competing restaurants that are almost identical to Firehouse in their dining atmosphere, menu offerings and target demographic; Buffalo Wild Wings and The Hop Yard American Alehouse and Grill.

These three restaurants sit within 500 yards of one another and traditionally have competed for the same base of consumers from the region.

Because of the similarities, these two restaurants will be used for comparison when analyzing both Firehouse and its competitors.

Yelp

Positive reviews have always been critical to the long-term sustainability of a restaurant, but online reviews, especially those found on Yelp.com, are becoming more essential for creating a profitable business.

A study from UC Berkley illustrated this importance by concluding that a half-star increase in a restaurant's Yelp rating typically leads to a 19 percent increase in the establishment's reservation bookings.

Harvard Business School has also researched the important of Yelp on the food service industry, concluding that a one-star improvement usually increases a restaurant's revenue by nine percent. This statistic is growing as online reviews continue to gain credibility among the mainstream.

For these reasons, Firehouse No. 37's primary digital focus should be on improving its Yelp score.

Current Analysis

Firehouse No. 37 had an average Yelp review score of 2.5 as of November 2014, but that score has improved a half-star and currently sits at three stars (out of five).

These numbers are crucial as the common understanding among Yelp users is that a three-star average signals an "average" rating, while a 2.5-star rating typically signifies a below-average quality of restaurant. Ideally, a restaurant should desire anything above a three-star average. In Firehouse No. 37's case, the goal should be to obtain a 3.5-star rating, as that appears to be the optimal score of an establishment classified as a "sports bar" in the TriValley region of the East Bay. A 3.5-star rating would reflect that Firehouse No. 37 is among the top places in the region to enjoy "spirits, food and friends," as the restaurant's tag line reflects.

Other sports bars have four-star reviews, but those restaurants are typically high-end, such as McGah's Pub & Piano in Danville, which is primarily marketed as a piano bar instead of as a traditional sports bar.

Online reviewers, especially those actively engaged on Yelp, are classified as “critics” within the Social Technographics ladder from Forrester research. These critics are actively engaged by posting reviews of products or services, comment on third-party blogs, contribute to online forums and help create/edit wiki articles online at least monthly. This classification is the third-largest social technographic group among American men, aged 35-44 (Firehouse’s target demographic).

After reviewing its current Yelp page, it is clear the ownership of Firehouse No. 37 values the way the restaurant is represented online.

Firehouse is well-represented on the site, as all pertinent business information has been updated, along with owner-generated photos and a full description of the menu. There are several reviews posted by key “elite” users that have been updated with improved scores after a poor review had been posted and a dialogue with ownership was established.

This kind of exchange between ownership and customer is the most productive way to obtain the valued 3.5-star rating. Yelp does not have a way for a restaurant to petition for the removal of negative reviews; therefore the only legitimate way of erasing these damaging comments is to convince the user to change it themselves.

Getting ownership to engage with these consumers and address their concerns not only erases damaging reviews, but often replaces these reviews with positive feedback. This “elimination of bad” while “creating good” helps improve the restaurant’s score two-fold and is the fastest strategy for improvement. This approach is already being utilized effectively and should be continued.

It is also recommended that several of these techniques be used on other review sites, specifically FourSquare and TripAdvisor. FourSquare has been losing relevancy in recent years and there is a movement within that organization to move away from the apps “review ability” and toward a “meet-up” concept for friends to organize dining/drinking excursions with their online and offline communities.

Firehouse No. 37 should work toward improving its image on FourSquare as the restaurant is not listed among the top 40 restaurants in San Ramon. Firehouse is listed on FourSquare’s second page of restaurant listings, but that page is rarely utilized by FourSquare users for dining recommendations. It is important for Firehouse to improve its FourSquare ranking enough to appear on the landing page for “San Ramon” queries.

While FourSquare’s popularity is waning, TripAdvisor has become the review site that is taking its place. With more than 315 million monthly visitors, TripAdvisor is becoming a bigger player in the mobile review application market, especially among business travelers in unfamiliar areas. Firehouse No. 37’s proximity to the Bishop Ranch business park, obtaining a respectable reputation on TripAdvisor is paramount, and will become more important as the mobile app continues to grow its market share.

Competition

Firehouse currently holds a three-star rating from 257 “filtered” reviews; while Buffalo Wild Wings has a 2.5 rating from 235 reviews and The Hop Yard has a 3.5 score from 259 reviews. The quantity of “filtered” reviews is almost identical, while the rating averages are remarkably different.

The differences in the rating of Buffalo Wild Wings and Firehouse can be attributed to the current Yelp strategy Firehouse is utilizing.

Having ownership personally respond to negative criticism also highlights one of the restaurant's competitive advantages among its local competitors. Firehouse No. 37 is locally owned and operated by one person while one of its primary local competitors, Buffalo Wild Wings, is one of 1,080 locations.

"Critics" within the social technographics ladder enjoy having their opinions heard and take pride when action is taken based off their feedback. Creating a personal response from management off one negative comment may be impossible for a publicly-traded global company, but can be easily done with a locally-owned small business. Firehouse's ability to personally respond to all comments, with follow-up action notated, gives the business a distinct competitive advantage against its rival. This advantage is highlighted on the Yelp page by not only a higher score but by the user comments listed within the restaurants' reviews. As user "KY" stated in a January review of Firehouse:

"I always appreciate hearing back from owners who really care about how their businesses are being run and look for ways to continually improve. After Dan reached out, we decided to give Firehouse another try in 2015."

The level of engagement shows potential customers that if bad service does occur (however rare it is), it will be dealt with by the organization's highest-ranking member. This level of accountability acts as a product guarantee to those relying on Yelp for dining information.

The Hop Yard holds a half-star rating advantage against Firehouse and possesses the valued "People Love Us on Yelp!" sticker on its front door, despite having the same information listed and almost identical number of reviews.

It is concluded that the primary reason for this rating discrepancy is due to The Hop Yard's focus engaging its consumers on social media platforms. The Hop Yard does a remarkably better job of interacting with its satisfied customers online than Firehouse, and this engagement level helps push The Hop Yard into "above-average" territory for local sports bars. Firehouse needs to engage its happy customers and turn those individuals into evangelists who become voluntary advocates, actively spreading the positive words on behalf of the restaurant.

Increasing Firehouse's engagement rate will be discussed in the Facebook portion of this proposal.

Recommendations

Firehouse's current strategy of personally addressing negative reviews is responsible for the recent rating improvement and should be continued.

In addition to ownership providing feedback, Firehouse should look at two more strategies for improving its score. As previously stated, there is no way for Firehouse to delete negative reviews, but there are two methods for minimizing their impact:

1. Create More Reviews
2. Create More Positive Reviews

Most people that rely on review sites, such as Yelp, look at three things; overall score, bad reviews and good reviews (in that order). Negative postings often outweigh positive shopping experiences. Finding a way to increase the number of non-negative reviews will help mitigate the impact of the negative scores by muddying up the review landscape. A large number of "average" reviews can make it harder for the negative reviews within Firehouse's Yelp page to "stand out" from the clutter. "Good reviews" (four- and five-star) will obviously help improve the score as well.

One strategy for increasing the number of positive reviews that Firehouse is not exploiting is asking for testimonials.

Yelp prohibits “fake” or “biased” reviews, and has sophisticated software used to identify businesses that are falsely inflating their review scores. While these reviews are frowned upon, Yelp does not have a policy against self-identified testimonials. Encouraging vendors to create positive “testimonials” affirming that ownership is committed to an excellent dining experience is an easy, and legitimate, way of improving a score.

Although they may not exactly be customers, they are certainly well positioned to leave a review of their business dealings with you. Just ensure they are honest in the review. Have vendors talk about how they “worked with your company and can testify to their level of customer service” rather than pretending to be a customer. There’s nothing wrong, or against Yelp’s policy, with leaving a high rating as long as it’s truthful and transparent.

Each vendor or live band that performs at Firehouse can leave a review like this, and in return Firehouse can do the same for them.

Another issue for increasing the number of reviews and improving Yelp scores is the problem of getting positive comments out of the “Yelp filter.”

Yelp is designed to algorithmically weed out people who the site doesn’t think are authentic users. When people give their first review, and it’s a 5-star review, Yelp is most likely going to throw that into the filter and not allow the review to be represented within the business’ final score.

Not only does Firehouse need more positive reviews for its Yelp site, but it needs more reviews from “active” users that have gained enough credibility to bypass this filter. This can be done by encouraging its more socially-engaged customers to post reviews. Identifying these customers and promoting their engagement will occur by fully utilizing Firehouse’s presence on social media, most notably Facebook.

It is also recommended that once Firehouse earns a 3.5-star rating, it should pay for Yelp advertising. Yelp advertising allows for ad placements on the Yelp website for defined groups of targeted customers (based on demographics and psychographics), but more importantly it removes the listing of its primary competitors on its profile page.

Among the information listed are “nearby, similar restaurants.” This listing not only highlights The Hop Yard’s similarities, but also the competition’s superior Yelp rating.

Once Firehouse achieves a rating superior to, if not equal to, its primary rivals it should look into ways of eliminating those references while encouraging references of Firehouse on the Yelp profiles of its competitors.

Facebook

Firehouse No. 37’s Facebook page is the third result listed after doing a Google search for the term “Firehouse No 37,” behind the restaurant’s home page and its Yelp listing.

In addition to being a primary information source for many potential customers, Facebook also allows for direct targeting of consumers based on neighborhood and demographic makeup. Targeting to an identified group of customers from a specific neighborhood is crucial to the marketing success of a locally-owned restaurant that does not possess the benefits of a national marketing campaign, like its competitor, Buffalo Wild Wings, enjoys.

Because of these reasons it is critical that Firehouse is able to maximize its Facebook presence.

Current Analysis

The most popular subject to be photographed on social media today is food.

In the last calendar year, Firehouse has posted only two pictures of its food on Facebook (as of March 1, 2015).

While the biggest trend in the world, on Facebook and other social media platforms, is sharing “what’s for dinner,” Firehouse has completely missed this opportunity and failed to capitalize on what should be a free avenue to engage its customers with the restaurant’s most valuable asset – its product!

Instead, the majority of Firehouse’s Facebook timeline is filled with photographs of pictures of promotional material highlighting its beer offerings. Most of these promotional images are provided by the breweries to highlight the beer brand, and contain no branding for Firehouse.

Firehouse should be promoting the 44 draught beer selections by highlighting the beers offered at Firehouse, not just promoting the beers themselves.

This unproductive trend is continued in other postings, such as the restaurant’s marketing of the NTN Buzztime trivia boxes. These electronic devices are synched with the televisions around the bar and allow for patrons to compete in broadcasted trivia and card games to other diners at Firehouse.

The majority of the postings highlighting these trivia machines are simply pictures of the boxes themselves, without any reference to Firehouse No. 37 or how the restaurant utilizes these games. This problem is compounded by the lack of in-store promotion for the trivia devices. If a customer sees these games advertised online and comes in to play, they will walk away disappointed after they discover that no other restaurant patrons are actively playing. This is a dangerous marketing gamble for a restaurant that is competing with Buffalo Wild Wings – a restaurant that traditionally has a loyal base of active Buzztime players.

Repetition is another major problem with Firehouse’s Facebook marketing. Instead of finding different strategies to advertise one event, Firehouse habitually posts the exact same message repeatedly.

This mistake most often occurs in its efforts to promote the restaurant’s Sunday morning all-you-can-eat/drink brunch buffet. Instead of several different postings highlighting the different offerings of the buffet (bottomless mimosas, eggs benedict, made-to-order omelets, etc.), Firehouse has chosen to post the same picture of a promotional poster that hangs in the restaurant seven times in the last calendar year. These postings are the restaurant’s only attempt to market this menu option and contain very little information other than the times and days offered the price and the inclusion of bottomless bloody marys and mimosas.

This uninspired attempt at marketing continued through other promotions on Facebook, such as a firefighters’ charity fundraiser (same poster picture used eight times in a one-month span) that was held at the restaurant.

The marketing effort also comes without any personality. Facebook is a social network, but nobody wants to be social with a “boring” business. Knowing what Firehouse’s customers are talking about and finding entertaining ways to infiltrate that discussion is key to engaging its customers. Firehouse fails to connect with its guests online because it has no online personality.

Bars and “watering holes” are supposed to be the after-work watercooler – a meeting spot for friends and acquaintances to discuss recent activities. While Firehouse’s tagline of “Spirits, Food & Friends” supports this idea, the restaurants’ online presence is completely contradictory.

Another major issue with Firehouse's Facebook efforts is the lack of consistent posting. Businesses that utilize Facebook to successfully engage its customer base average three to five postings per day. In the previous three months, Firehouse has 11 postings, or an average of fewer than one post per week.

This lack of frequency is compounded with the repetitive nature of those posts. Among the 11 sample postings, two were exact duplicates of previous postings.

While the majority of the restaurant's Facebook efforts miss their mark, there are a few postings that are successful. These successes most often occur when Firehouse takes an important current event and entwines the Firehouse brand within that occasion.

A posting from December 11, 2014 is the best example of when Firehouse correctly uses Facebook. The post reads [sic], "Because it's cold outside...ENJOY a warm clam chowder bread bowl!!" and is accompanied by a picture of the restaurant's clam chowder bread bowl and a pint of Guinness beer.

This post uses the current weather conditions, connects those conditions with Firehouse's product and provides an original picture to effectively market the restaurant and is, by far, the restaurant's most effective use of Facebook marketing.

The restaurant successfully used this strategy when marketing itself during the 2014 World Series by posting photos of the San Francisco Giants with captions that highlighted the restaurant's 18 televisions.

This marketing effort has resulting in 1,976 likes with only 45 people discussing the business. These numbers reflect a disappointing 2.2 percent engagement rate among identified customers.

Competition

While the Buffalo Wild Wings Corporation has a Facebook page, the San Ramon location has its own page as well.

This direct competitor has only 550 likes. This is likely due to the corporation's Facebook page siphoning "likes" away from the San Ramon location. The 10 percent engagement rate with those 550 people, however, is remarkable.

This engagement rate is most likely the result of the corporation's advertising budget. The San Ramon Buffalo Wild Wings takes advantage of a national advertising campaign through both traditional and digital media. Based on the high-level of quality and content of these postings, it is clear that the restaurant's daily updates and advertisements are created by national marketing department with deep pockets.

The Hop Yard, meanwhile, has almost half the number of likes as Firehouse (1,011) but more people talking about the business online (88). These metrics create an engagement rate of 8.7 percent.

Despite possessing a fraction of the advertising budget of Buffalo Wild Wings, The Hop Yard has created an online presence that is almost as successful.

Even though The Hop Yard and Firehouse probably have the same marketing constraints, The Hop Yard's efforts have proven to be four times as successful as Firehouse. This is due to The Hop Yard's superior level of effort in regards to its Facebook marketing.

While Firehouse posts non-engaging, repetitive advertisements on a weekly basis, The Hop Yard is posting daily. These postings cover all topics, and do not always try to sell the customer on The Hop Yard's offerings.

There are reminders of start times for the local sports teams that are playing that day. “Warriors host the Bucks tonight at 7:30 PM!” one post reads alongside an action photo of Warrior All-Star Stephen Curry.

There are goofy internet memes posted that celebrate the upcoming weekend and other internet-savvy postings that attract the electronically-conscious consumer.

The Hop Yard also successfully utilizes hashtags. During San Francisco Beer Week, The Hop Yard tried to piggy-back on the marketing by also using the hashtag “#SFBeerWeek.”

These successes illustrate why the restaurant is so productive while using very little resources, other than effort and creativity.

Recommendations

Posting more frequently and more uniquely is the key to optimizing Facebook’s value to Firehouse.

Firehouse should be posting at least twice a day. It is recommended that the restaurant post to Facebook at 11 AM and 4 PM, as this is the optimal time for highlighting the offerings of a bar and restaurant.

The restaurant should also follow a 2:1 ratio in regards to how often it attempts to sell compared to how often it tries to entertain. An example of this would be for every two posts that market the bar’s craft beer selection there should be one humorous post that illustrates how essential those beers will become at 5 pm on Friday.

Commenting about the successes and failures of the local sports teams is a terrific way to highlight the restaurant’s sports bar atmosphere while engaging its key demographic of middle-aged men.

Firehouse should also market its promotions with several posts that contain new and original copy. Instead of posting the same picture seven times to highlight the Sunday brunch buffet, one post should focus on the bottomless bloody marys and mimosas while another focuses on the custom-ordered omelets. This strategy keeps the concept fresh in the mind of the consumer while continuously highlighting the various features of a promotion and its value to the guest.

Promotional material provided by Firehouse’s beer partners should be customized to match the restaurant’s marketing efforts. This can be done by the breweries themselves or by the marketing content manager of Firehouse.

Any image that promotes Firehouse’s Pint Night promotion or advertises the bar’s craft beer selections should also come with a reference to Firehouse No. 37. These references should display the restaurant’s logo as well, in an effort to build momentum for the business’ branding strategy.

Basically, Firehouse’s brand should be the primary focus in any promotional material, not its vendors.

Lastly, Firehouse should also be posting more pictures of its menu options in all online forums (Yelp, Facebook, etc.). There is a danger in this, as a poor-quality photo might result in a reduction in sales for a particular item. This problem can be solved by hiring a professional photographer to take quality photos or by crowd-sourcing quality pictures.

Due to the high cost of a professional photographer, it is recommended that the restaurant attempt to crowd-source a “digital menu” through the Instagram mobile application.

Instagram

Instagram is an online mobile photo-sharing, video-sharing and social networking application that allows its users to take pictures or videos, and then share that media on a variety of social networking platforms, such as Facebook.

Instagram is significant marketing tool that continues to grow in importance. Statistics show 42 percent of millennial smartphone users interact with the Instagram app, with an average of 439 minutes per month spent on the platform.

As discussed in the Yelp section, word-of-mouth marketing is crucial to promoting a restaurant. No other social media platform helps broadcast this word-of-mouth, in as easily-digestible form, as Instagram currently does.

Instagram users are 58 times more likely to like, comment, or share a brand's post than Facebook users and 120 times more likely than Twitter users, according to a recent study by Forrester Research.

The reason for this unusually high engagement level is due to people's desire to visually share their stories, reactions, and experiences. Instagram offers a platform for this style of sharing with its unique ability to highlight visual content – which is crucial in an industry like food service, where the visual plating of food is so important. This explains why the most popular photographed subject on Instagram is plated food.

Current Analysis

Firehouse No. 37 does not have an active Instagram account.

Competition

Like Firehouse, The Hop Yard does not have an active Instagram account.

Buffalo Wild Wings, with its multi-million dollar marketing department, has discovered the benefits of using Instagram. Despite only 108 posts, the corporate Buffalo Wild Wings Instagram account has more than 11,500 followers.

Buffalo Wild Wings uses its account to show off its food, but does it so with personality. In addition to pictures of plates wings, there are funny videos (none longer than 10 seconds), logo designs for hypothetical fantasy football teams and seasonal messages like the Halloween jack-o-lanterns carved to spell out the restaurants tagline “Beer. Sports. Wings.”

Recommendations

With plated food being the most photographed subject on Instagram and the high rate of engagement with the platform's users, the lack of a Firehouse account on Instagram is a missed opportunity.

But that missed opportunity can be quickly erased and turned into an asset with the proper promotional campaign which properly rolls out the restaurant's account. This can be done with the creation of a new “Digital Menu” promotion for Firehouse No. 37.

This promotion includes creating an Instagram account for the restaurant that includes pictures of all items offered on the menu and branding those pictures using specific hashtags. The account is then advertised to seated customers still deliberating their dining options as an additional resource for obtaining information about the food plates offered.

Due to the restaurant's name, Firehouse No. 37, it is recommended that the restaurant begin branding its social media presence with the hashtag “#FH37”. This hashtag can then be adjusted to feature specific menu items.

Guests of the restaurant trying to decide between the Fish and Chips or the Station Burger can be encouraged to search Instagram for pictures of these offerings using #FH37FishandChips or #FH37StationBurger.

Guests can also search the @FirehouseNo37 profile and scroll through all of the menu items until a specific dish looks appetizing.

Other features from Firehouse can also be promoted on the Instagram account such as creating the hashtag #FH37Rocks or #FH37LiveMusic to promote its live music performances. Similarly, the hashtag #FH37HappyHour can be used to promote its happy hour specials or wide selection of craft draught beers. As potential customers begin to follow the Instagram account, which should be constantly updated to encourage more followers, the advertising reach of this promotion will also grow.

The Instagram account will initially be used as a platform to highlight its menu offerings, but that will change if the promotion is successfully utilized.

Just as they are encouraged to review the restaurant supplied postings about the menu, guests should also be encouraged to post their own photos of their order using the #FH37 system. This aspect will inspire the restaurant's guests to post their own pictures, thoughts and reviews regarding Firehouse No. 37, which will reach their base of followers. Creating a "Digital Menu" that incorporates user submissions helps highlight Firehouse's products and engages its customers in an efficient manner.

Another added benefit to the "Digital Menu" campaign will be the creation of a Firehouse photo library that the restaurant can use for future promotions – at no cost.

As discussed in the Facebook section, there is a need for high-quality photos of the restaurant's food. It is suggested in that section that a professional photographer could be hired to take photos of all dishes. This scenario could be expensive, however, as the restaurant would have to pay this photographer and deplete its kitchen inventory creating the dishes that need to be photographed.

By "crowdsourcing" these pictures, however, this cost is virtually eliminated.

Successfully implementing this "Digital Menu" can result higher sales, increased user engagement, more word-of-mouth advertising, build a stockpile of photos that can be used on other media platforms and come at virtually no cost to the restaurant.

SEO/Blog

Search engine optimization, or SEO in short, is a set of rules that can be followed by web site owners to optimize their web site for algorithms used by search engines to improve the business' search engine rankings.

As more business is conducted online, SEO has become more essential. The majority of search engines users are more likely to choose one of the top five suggestions in the results page. Consumers trust search engines and having a presence in the top positions for the keywords the user is searching increases the web site's trust.

In order to take advantage of these benefits, however, Firehouse needs to optimize their ranking as much as possible. Adding a constantly-evolving blog to the restaurant's already established website would help maximize this online potential.

Current Analysis and Competition

Neither Firehouse No. 37 nor its two primary competitors have a blog associated with their brand or website. This is especially surprising for a global corporation, like Buffalo Wild Wings.

Recommendation

Because Firehouse No. 37 is independently owned and operated, it is recommended that a blog “penned” by owner Dan Hawkins is created in association with the Firehouse website. Hawkins will be the “face” of this online platform in an effort to highlight the restaurant’s commitment to customer service – from top to bottom.

Just as in the case with Yelp, Firehouse holds a competitive advantage against Buffalo Wild Wings in regards to its owners’ ability to directly deal with specific issues. A customer complaint, for example, might be lost among Buffalo Wild Wings’ corporate chain-of-command, but Firehouse’s limited flow-chart encourages a feeling of ownership accountability among its guests. Having a blog in the “voice” of Hawkins, whether it’s written by Hawkins or ghostwritten, can accentuate this advantage, while aiding in SEO.

This blog should be centered on weekly blog postings that concern the events at Firehouse No. 37. Article topics can cover a variety of related topics, such as sports rants (highlighting Firehouse’s sports bar atmosphere), music discoveries (highlighting the bar’s live music) or employee profiles (highlighting the business’ commitment to customer service).

These postings can be written by Hawkins, but it is recommended that ownership outsources this responsibility to a professional writer with a background in SEO. This professional writer can integrate important features such as backlinks, key search terms and fresh content that will assist in SEO optimization.

In addition to weekly long-form posts, it is recommended that additional original content be uploaded onto the restaurant blog to benefit its online presence. Search engines love original content in various mediums on a website, and Firehouse’s search engine presence will only benefit from added original content. Examples of this added content include: a widget that displays recent postings from the “Digital Menu”, a streaming music tab that plays music provided by bands playing at Firehouse or an updated events calendar.

Creating and posting original videos is another tool that can be posted to the blog that can assist with SEO.

Firehouse has its own YouTube channel, but that channel is severely misused. There is currently only one video posted by the FirehouseNo37 channel and it’s a commercial for one of Hawkins other restaurants, Basil Leaf Café. Due to the misdirected and confusing nature of this channel it is no surprise the channel has been viewed only 46 times and has no subscribers.

A query for “Firehouse 37” in the YouTube search engine did result in a pair of Firehouse television advertisements, but those were posted to the channel belonging to the cameraman that filmed the commercials. This channel is used by the individual as an online portfolio highlighting his professional abilities – not the restaurant’s offerings.

It is recommended that Firehouse begin producing its own series of video shorts that it can post to its blog. The most effective YouTube videos used for marketing are typically 2-3 minutes in length and entertain as much as they inform. Quality HD video shorts can be easily filmed, at a small cost, using a pair of GoPro HD cameras, and edited by using free GoPro Studio editing software.

This report proposes two video series that will market Firehouse’s offerings, extend its brand, fit within the recommended time frame and open channels for additional marketing ideas.

1. Bartender Rob's Cocktail Minute

Firehouse No. 37 offers 14 high-end, house-specific cocktails to its guests. These drinks range from the Gentlemen's Manhattan (a traditional Manhattan made with Gentlemen's Jack bourbon) to the Moscow Mule (a vodka and ginger beer cocktail served in a drink-specific copper mug).

In an effort to highlight these drinks, 14 separate videos detailing the ingredients and explaining how each drink is prepared.

It is recommended that head bartender Rob Bilovocky host these videos in an effort to engage potential bar guests with their service provider.

2. Chef Louie's "Off-the-Menu"

Jonathan Louie is a manager at Firehouse No. 37 that primarily oversees production in the restaurant's kitchen.

As a result of this position, Louie has the ability to create dishes not offered on the menu using the kitchen's inventory. Louie is known among staff for creating dishes such as The Bacon Patty Melts (combining the bacon and hamburger from the Station Burger with the Texas Toast from the kid's grilled cheese sandwich) and the Heart Attack Fries (which place the toppings from the Firehouse Nachos onto a pile of French fries).

Highlighting the restaurant's menu offerings would be the video series' primary focus, but it could also be a cheap method of experimenting with menu changes.

Whatever item "Chef Louie" has created in the most-recent video could also be offered the "Off-the-Menu" item for that time period.

Viewers of the video series can be encouraged to come into Firehouse and order the unlisted Bacon Patty Melt. This strategy would help establish a "secret relationship" between restaurant and customer, similar to the one In-N-Out Burger has with its' famous "secret" menu.

The more popular "Off-the-Menu" items can then be identified and introduced to the full-time menu.

Getting this "in-store" feedback from customers would also be a valuable metric in measuring the success of this viral marketing campaign.

Twitter

With around 200 million users sending out the same number of micro-blogs (approximately) every day, Twitter has become one of the most effective channels for communication. Considering it costs very little to market a product on Twitter, small businesses have embraced this tool for boosting their internet marketing activities.

Current Analysis

Firehouse No. 37's Twitter account has remained dormant, without a post or reply, since August 31, 2014.

Unfortunately, this level of neglect is not a recent trend.

In the two months prior to Firehouse's most recent post, the restaurant tweeted nine times. This flurry of activity was preceded by another stretch of media silence as Firehouse failed to market itself on Twitter for more than half a year (Dec. 10, 2013 – June 7, 2014).

When Firehouse did communicate through Twitter it was always a repost of whatever promotional image the restaurant was using for its Facebook page. There was no attempt to edit

these posts to become more Twitter-friendly, instead they were simply copy-and-pasted into each platform and ignored.

Communicating through Twitter only nine times in a 27-month span, with those nine poorly-organized tweets originating in a two month period, gives the impression to potential customers that Twitter is not a valued communication tool for the restaurant.

This is illustrated by the fact that Firehouse has only 86 followers, many of which are vendors of the restaurant (such as Firehouse Trophies and SchuBros Brewery).

It is this proposal concludes that potential Twitter followers are discouraged from following the restaurants account, as its current online presence gives the impression that @FirehouseNo37 is used primarily as a business-to-business marketing tool instead of appealing directly to prospective diners.

Competition

Buffalo Wild Wings, with a massive global marketing campaign, has attracted more than 605,000 followers.

This was achieved by posting multiple times a day with clever, informative and topical postings. There are tweets that contain humorous photos that feature the Buffalo Wild Wings branding. There are tweets that contain videos that highlight recent Buffalo Wild Wings television commercials. And there are tweets that are simple, written statements. (ex: It's Wednesday. We know how you can make it Wild!)

Meanwhile, The Hop Yard posts daily updates. While many of these postings fail to inform or market to guests (such as "Dinner Time!" from a March 10, 2015 tweet) its consistency has allowed the account to build a base of 1,832 followers.

Failing to tweet any images or promotional activity hasn't hurt The Hop Yard's level of success, as the restaurant has assembled a communication network that is 21 times larger than Firehouse's efforts. A focus on consistent posting, not the quality of the tweets themselves, is the difference between The Hop Yard's Twitter success and Firehouse's failure.

Recommendation

The first step Firehouse should take to improve its Twitter presence is to delete all previous postings.

The restaurant's public history of inconsistent activity gives the impression to any potential follower that any attempt at reestablishing an active account would be a temporary effort. Firehouse should erase any history of this failed marketing approach and give itself, and its potential followers, a fresh start.

After erasing these past errors, Firehouse should begin posting multiple times daily. Following a similar posting schedule as the one proposed for Facebook (at least three times daily, spread throughout the day) would be ideal.

The messages posted to Twitter can be similar to Facebook posts, but they should be catered to the Twitter platform. This often involves shortening Facebook posts and turning announcements into questions. This strategy often shortens a statement and can lead to Twitter interactions with followers. Firehouse should avoid turning its Twitter posts using informal texting language to shorten its length.

Links should be added for posts that require more than the 140 character maximum. These links should never redirect a Twitter user to another social media platform (like Facebook). Instead

these links should redirect followers to the previously proposed restaurant blog, which should provide added information.

If Firehouse No. 37 decides it needs to market to the Bishop Ranch business community, it is recommended it use Twitter as a connection tool for those companies.

For example, Firehouse can look up the tenants of the Bishop Ranch district and their corresponding Twitter accounts. An alert can then go out around lunch time to those previously-identified businesses with a message, such as:

“Hey @Chevron, for the next 20 minutes we will be outside your office giving away free samples of our hot wings!”

Firehouse No. 37 can then be outside that office giving away samples and engaging in face-to-face marketing to prospective business park diners. This strategy will highlight Firehouse’s proximity to the workplace, promote its happy hour offerings and establish a social media relationship with the identified companies. This strategy would also work if the restaurant wishes to cater office parties, a revenue source Firehouse does not currently utilize.

Summary

This social marketing strategy focuses on increasing the online presence for Firehouse No. 37 with as little financial commitment possible.

Firehouse has set up many of the necessary media platforms, but most of these channels are underutilized, neglected or ignored altogether. These current efforts have created an online presence that is dwarfed by its local competitors. This presence is reflected in the restaurant’s uninspiring word-of-mouth marketing (Yelp) and placement among online listings for similar restaurants.

Firehouse should dedicate itself to creating more original, topical postings on a consistent basis across several social media platforms. These postings should entertain as much as inform and carry the “branded voice” Firehouse No. 37 strives to reflect. Despite carrying the same message, postings should also be tailored to the specific media platform that they are delivered on, not simply copy-and-pasted into various channels.

The restaurant should also position itself as the locally-owned neighborhood sports bar that is committed to excellent customer service through personal messages, photos and videos posted on a newly-created restaurant blog.

By implementing these recommendations, many of which come at no cost, Firehouse No. 37 can accomplish the following objectives:

- Influence “review communities” (Yelp)
- Increase Customer Engagement
- Gain Customer Feedback more quickly
- Build brand visibility and loyalty
- Promote products and services
- Increase Web site traffic and
- Improve target marketing