

1.

WHY GO DIGITAL?

Establishing a web presence is one of the simplest things you can do to help your business succeed. However, simple doesn't always mean easy. It doesn't begin and end with just having a website; you need to have a *good* website. It also means making sure that your information across the web is accurate. And that you're listening to what people are saying about you and responding accordingly.

Among the chief benefits of actively maintaining your online presence:

- **Controlling the messaging.** If you're not the one informing people about your business, then other websites will (and not always accurately or in a positive light). Ensure the right message and tone is conveyed throughout all consumer touchpoints.
- **Business updates.** Keep customers and potential patrons updated on your goings-on, and foster excitement for upcoming news/events.
- **Online reputation management.** Monitor your mentions for bad reviews or false information, and prevent more of the same.
- **Expanding your customer base.** Build a cohort of (loyal and future) customers for marketing purposes.
- **Creating foot traffic.** Lastly but most importantly, convert online tire-kickers into in-person sales.

Controlling the messaging

People go online primarily for information. For businesses, reliable sources include search engines like Google, business aggregators like Yelp, and articles from local food critics. These sources will often try to infer things about your business. For instance, is that particular dish vegan or vegetarian? Are your recipes Indian or Pakistani in origin? Do you close earlier on weekends? How much would that smoked rib sandwich cost with onion rings instead of fries?

As a business owner, it behooves you to be the source of truth. If not, then inaccuracies will spread, which are hard to completely rectify. Practically speaking, this means you should publish helpful information that conveys your brand messaging (what your product is, who you are, what your philosophy is, etc.). Another way to think about it: if a journalist or blogger wanted to write an article covering your restaurant opening, what information would they need? And are you providing said information on your website or other online platforms in an easy-to-find, concise manner?

Business updates

Businesses never remain static. Menus change. Prices change. Sometimes, even whole cuisines and business models change. As a customer, there's nothing more deflating or disappointing than being misled. If your outdated website menu lists a dish at \$22, but it's since increased to \$30, customers may feel deceived once they sit down and peruse the menu. If you've been unable to restock a rare/specialty ingredient for weeks, customers who make the trip specifically for that dish will be frustrated. If you're throwing a special ticketed event, but you're solely relying on posters on the wall of your restaurant to get the word out, then turnout will likely underwhelm.

It can be difficult to find time to make all of these changes yourself, but there are other methods of communicating with your customer base that will be covered in the marketing section in Part II.

Online reputation management

Nothing can sink a business faster than a bad review (or many). Regardless of how you feel about the (professional and amateur) food critic space - if you don't pay attention to how others are talking about you, then you're setting yourself up for failure. Reacting to and changing your practices based on customer feedback will lead to better reviews in the future, as well as repeat business. For instance, multiple reviewers may mention that your menu offers nothing for pescatarians or those with a gluten intolerance; or that your beer selection is too limited; or that there's no changing table in the bathrooms. Those are easy-to-address complaints. And if those pain points originate from online review sites like Yelp, you can reply publicly and show future readers that you're a responsive business owner who addresses customer concerns. Conversely, if there's a specific reason why you can't accommodate all customers, it provides a platform to explain your reasoning (and hopefully, future readers will be empathetic).

Expanding your customer base

The best way to discover and reach potential customers is online. Sure, you set up a clipboard at your host station and take down names, phone numbers, and email addresses, but very few people will have the time or inclination to fill those out; and you'll only be limited to the people who are already in your establishment. On the internet, all you need is an email address or a Facebook Like to start marketing to individuals en masse.

Creating foot traffic

Most importantly, a carefully maintained web presence will bring people into your physical space. Your website will showcase all the things you offer, with beautiful high quality photos and inviting descriptions. You've maintained accurate listings across multiple online business directories, and people use them to discover that you've recently made exciting menu changes. You

provide multiple avenues for booking a reservation, reducing the friction of getting people through the door.