



Building brand buzz with social media

By Carolyn Schierhorn

Key is to leverage the right tool at the right time for maximum impact

Beyond its private label offerings, a retailer's brand is the connection and chemistry the company creates with customers. Given that the vast majority of Americans today use at least one social media platform, supermarkets, mass merchants, convenience stores and drugstores need to leverage these channels to effectively communicate with consumers.

Social media's importance cannot be overstated, emphasizes Carol Spieckerman, founder of Spieckerman Retail in Bentonville, Ark. Retailers need to embrace these platforms — especially Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Pinterest — to tell the stories behind their store brands and showcase whatever the enterprise is doing in the realms of consumer health and wellness, environmental sustainability, animal welfare and other causes that resonate with shoppers.

“Retailers need to get the word out and get credit for the work that they’re doing and the investments that they’re making,” Spieckerman says.

Retailers should still maintain thorough, well-designed, easy-to-navigate websites that feature enticing photography so consumers can find the answers to just about any question they might have about the company and its brands. Social media drives traffic to a chain's main website and vice versa, notes Jessie Kuhn, content strategist for Dorothy Lane Market, a small grocery chain with three stores in the Dayton, Ohio, area.

In charting their social media strategy, retailers should recognize the synergies that exist not just among their social media accounts and websites, but also among all of the electronic and print communication tools used by shoppers along the path to purchase, Kuhn says.

“People consume content in so many different

ways,” she observes. “We’re just trying to feed them in whatever way they are consuming it.” At Dorothy Lane, that includes a monthly publication, an electronic newsletter and direct mail pieces as well as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram and Snapchat.

Unlike other channels, however, social media fosters fun, informal interactions among a retailer’s customers and potential customers.

“We use social media because we want to have conversations with our guests in the places where they are,” shares Amy Bailey, communications manager for De Pere, Wis.-based Festival Foods, a chain of 20 stores located mainly in the Green Bay area.

With dozens of social media platforms and apps available in the United States and new ones constantly emerging, it can be challenging for retail chains to keep current. Rather than risk spreading themselves too thin across multiple media, leaving unfavorable impressions as a result, retailers should concentrate on a handful of key platforms, Bailey suggests. Although different social media channels have different strengths and user demographics, it’s crucial for all content to be consistent and on-brand, she says.

Where to be

Used by 79 percent of Internet users and 68 percent of adults in the United States, Facebook not only is the grandfather of all social media platforms, but also continues to gain momentum, increasing its market penetration by 7 percent last year over 2015, according to Pew Research Center’s “Social Media Update 2016.” What’s more, Facebook draws its enthusiasts from all demographic segments: urban and rural, affluent and lower-income, college-educated and non-degreed.

While more women than men are on Facebook, the percentages are fairly close compared to most other platforms: 83 percent of women who are online use Facebook versus 75 percent of men, states the Pew report.

Just as significant is the amount of time people dwell on a platform. “We know that people on average spend 40 minutes a day on Facebook,” Bailey points out. “So, of course, we want to be in the places where people are spending their time.”

More than three-quarters (76 percent) of Facebook users report that they visit the site daily, while 55 percent visit several times a day, according to the Pew study. In contrast, 51 percent of Instagram users, 42 percent of Twitter users and 25 percent of Pinterest users report being daily visitors.

Thus, it is not surprising that digitally savvy retailers continue to devote attention to Facebook, which Mark Zuckerberg launched 13 years ago. Festival Foods has roughly 120,000 Facebook fans,

Bailey notes. Dorothy Lane Market has more than 21,000 admirers who have “liked” the company’s Facebook postings, according to Kuhn.

Bailey enjoys the richness and versatility of Facebook, which she likens to a theme park with a multitude of attractions. “If you’re at a theme park and a magician is performing, you might walk right by without stopping,” she elaborates. “But if a group has formed around the magician, you’re more likely to stay. That’s how Facebook works. You have to set something out and let an audience build around it.”

Facebook is less “in the moment” than Instagram and Twitter, Bailey adds, so Facebook would not be the place to start a real-time conversation during an event. But Facebook would be an ideal platform for touting a new private brand, for example.

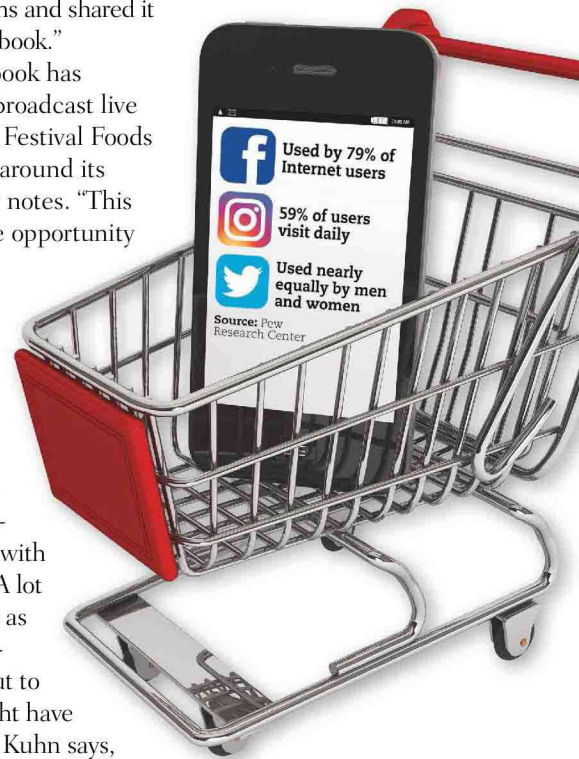
Festival Foods uses Facebook to promote the recommendations of the chain’s registered dietitians. “Each month, we pull together some of their top picks for the month to help people find out about new items that we’re particularly excited about,” Bailey says.

The ease of posting videos to Facebook has always been a big draw. This is a place where a store can introduce consumers to local farmers or to employees who work behind the scenes, for instance.

“At Dorothy Lane Market, we’ve really recognized the power of video,” Kuhn says. “For example, we have a wonderful salad bar that people in the Dayton area just love. And there are many things we do to make it so wonderful. Everything is cut fresh every morning, and a lot of the dressings are house-made. So we made a video of these preparations and shared it with our followers on Facebook.”

In the past year, Facebook has introduced the ability to broadcast live videos, which has helped Festival Foods generate even more buzz around its products and staff, Bailey notes. “This has given us an incredible opportunity to showcase our experts when it comes to recipe creation and cooking demonstrations,” she says.

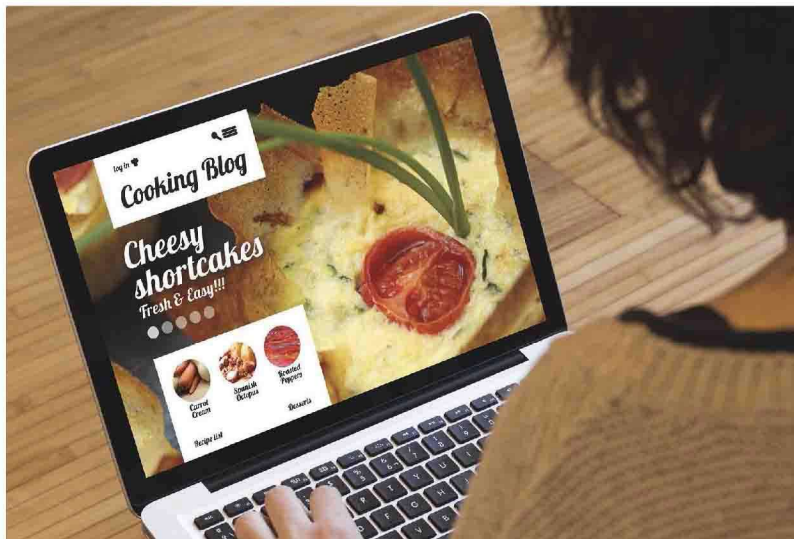
Dorothy Lane Market dedicates a Facebook photo album to snapshots of customers enjoying special moments in its stores with their family and friends. “A lot of times people will tag us as they are sharing these moments, so we can reach out to them if we think they might have a fun story to tell as well,” Kuhn says,



Connecting with Consumers

noting that Facebook is the best platform for posting short human interest stories.

Instagram, which is owned by Facebook, has also become a vital platform for retailers because it is so popular with millennials. Nearly 60 percent of online adults who are 18 to 29 years old use Instagram, the Pew report points out.



Millennials commonly use Instagram to share photos of food with one another. Grocery retailers, in turn, have found the medium perfect for showcasing their prepared food, signature baked goods, and other fresh own-brand offerings.

“We are fortunate to have a very talented in-house photographer who takes amazing pictures of the products we have in our store,” Kuhn says, noting that Dorothy Lane Market has around 3,500 followers on Instagram. “We’ve found that the Instagram community responds very well to those beauty shots.”

Media, Pa.-based Wawa, meanwhile, encourages its customers to post photos on Instagram of themselves enjoying the convenience chain’s branded coffee and freshly prepared sandwiches.

Used by 45 percent of online adult women and 17 percent of online adult men, according to the Pew study, Pinterest is another important platform for displaying food and beverage photos. Women commonly use the virtual pin-board for cataloguing recipes, Kuhn notes, so recipe sharing is the main reason grocery retailers are on Pinterest.

“Sometimes our recipes on Pinterest include our store brand products,” she adds.

President Donald J. Trump’s favorite social media channel, Twitter is another key platform for grocery retailers — in part because it is used almost equally by men and women (approximately one-quarter of online adults of both genders) and frequented by higher-income, better-educated consumers.

“Twitter is a great place to talk about events that are coming up,” Kuhn observes. “For example, we used it for our promotion on National Coffee Day last September and for March Madness last spring.

“We’ve found that a lot of media personalities in the Dayton area pay attention to what we’re saying on Twitter, so this is how we can get on their radar. And sometimes things we are doing get integrated into their stories.”

Festival Foods uses Twitter to promote tailgating-type snacks when the Green Bay Packers have games at Lambeau Field. “The Packers brand is really important, so we leverage that on Twitter in the days leading up to a game,” Bailey explains.

One of Twitter’s strengths, though, is its ability to stir emotion and generate feedback.

“We conducted a poll on Twitter in which we said, ‘The Packers are going to run the table. What would you like to eat on it?’” Bailey shares. “People could vote for our Oktoberfest brats, our taco dip, our potato salad, etc. It was a call to action-type initiative to get people interacting with us and make them aware of our brands. People were not only voting; they were also separately tweeting about our poll.”

Kuhn also likes the fact that Twitter users comment on events as they are happening. “This channel truly captures customers’ reactions,” she says.

What’s next?

Kuhn is experimenting with how best to use the fast and ephemeral Snapchat, a platform popular with teenagers and young millennials. For one event, Dorothy Lane Market’s Food & Wine Show, she created a Snapchat filter so attendees could share selfies framed with the retailer’s customized filter.

“The filter, which we paid Snapchat for, appeared only during the time of the event and in the location of our event,” Kuhn explains. “That was a cool thing to just try.”

As the youngest Snapchat users grow up, the platform will likely increase in importance for retailers, Kuhn predicts. “It’s good to understand how to use these tools so you can further develop them,” she says.

Without overextending themselves on social media, retailers need to keep abreast of the latest hot apps and new features on existing platforms.

“Whether it’s Facebook or a new platform that’s coming up, we need to be thinking of new ways to get people engaged,” Kuhn says. “I would encourage social media managers to test out a new feature or platform and see how it goes and then make a decision about whether it’s something that is right for your fans.” **SB**

Schierhorn, managing editor of Store Brands, can be reached at cschierhorn@ensembleiq.com.