

Social Study

Most grocers are investing in social media — so why aren't more shoppers following?

By Randy Hofbauer

For years now, social media has been a big deal for food retailers: Almost all are on social networks, while three-quarters are making significant or moderate investments in social-media-related outreach, according to research from Tampa, Fla.-based marketing and promotions management company Aptaris and Cincinnati-based analytics firm Dunhumby.

But while nine in 10 grocery shoppers regularly follow one or more social media sites, only one in four of that group is connected to her primary grocer, according to “U.S. Supermarket Shopper Update,” a recent report from the Retail Feedback Group (RFG), based in Lake Success, N.Y.

Why the disconnect? Some grocers simply might not be on social media. However, it could be more likely that many *are* on social media but terrible at offering compelling reasons to connect.

Therefore, grocers need to work harder to draw these people's interest.

“If the content is not relevant and updated regularly, shoppers will quickly lose interest,” says Brian Numainville, RFG principal. “Consider that content should include items that are helpful, fun and draw the shopper into a relationship with the retailer.”

Right Channel, Right Way

First and foremost, social media is social — it's not to be used just as a billboard, according to Margarita Fitzpatrick, Dunhumby's head of customer engagement, North America. Grocers have to be interactive and engage users, and make sure that they reflect the essence of their brand in the process.

However, there's no “silver bullet” strategy when it comes to succeeding with a specific platform, as different exchanges have channels more suited to them. Take YouTube, for instance.

“Channels like YouTube ... are great avenues to show videos, which can include informational topics, events or contests,” Numainville notes.

But while RFG's research shows 53 percent of consumers using YouTube, only 33 percent of



retailers are using the channel, according to an Aptaris study. This reveals not only a gap that needs to be addressed across virtually all age groups, but also a clear opportunity for grocers to connect with people in a specific manner on the social media channel.

Coborn's, a Minnesota grocery chain based in St. Cloud, incorporates videos through its YouTube channel, for instance, whether they feature recipes demonstrated by employees, or discuss the community — they're compelling media from a local grocer to local people.

Of course, not everything might draw strong interest on social media. A good way to know whether something will gain traction and generate excitement is if it first has a real buzz outside of the cyber realm. Reputations are built outside social media, and then expanded within it, argues Paul Lencioni, president of Blue Goose Market, an independent grocer in St. Charles, Ill.

Speedy Delivery

For platforms lending themselves more to two-way dialogue — such as Facebook and Twitter — many grocers don't understand the importance of responding quickly. Lydia McNabb, social media coordinator with Woodland, Calif.-based grocer Nugget Markets, notes that she's always finding room for improvement in terms of responding to

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shoppers in a timely manner.

“In an area where immediate response is expected, we want to make sure to balance lightning speed with accuracy and thoughtfulness,” she says. “If our guests share a comment or question with us, we want to make sure we’re giving them a response that is relevant and helpful, as well as prompt.”

U.K. grocer Sainsbury’s is a prime example of speed when it comes to conversing via social media, using its platforms to respond in real time to customers, even when they’re in the store.

“If a customer ... needs to find a certain item and they aren’t able to find it, they can go through the social media platform and engage with a real person in real time, if you will, to help them answer that question,” Dunnhumby’s Fitzpatrick says.

But whether in real time or taking a little longer, grocers need to remember that shoppers use social media to connect with individuals. That being the case, a grocery business must find a way to present itself as an individual would.

“Anything that’s institutional will bring a lack of authenticity, and will turn off a lot of folks on social media because they’re looking for authenticity and engagement,” cautions Fitzpatrick.

In return, grocers need to let their fans respond in their own individual ways. Instagram is a great way to do this, and one grocer taking advantage in this space is AJ’s Fine Foods, a banner of Chandler, Ariz.-based Bashas’. To kick off summer, the grocer — which operates in a region known for its scorching-hot summers — invites fans to cool off with its signature iced teas and rewards them for doing so: By posting a selfie taken while enjoying the iced tea and posting it to Instagram along with the #ajsicedtea hashtag, fans enter to win two iced teas every day for the rest of summer.

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Good With the Bad

Authenticity and engagement go beyond the good times, however. No matter how beloved a grocer is, in the end, every business at some point has its detractors on social media. Proper communication — though difficult — can still bring these folks closer, or at least keep them from turning fans into foes.

“Nothing says ‘I care’ better than a quick response to a frustrated comment left on social media,” Numainville assures. “Plus everyone else who sees that post will also see that the retailer is responding.” Reasor’s, based in Tahlequah, Okla., is one grocer that responds promptly to comments on Facebook, appearing both sincere and attentive.

Sainsbury’s sets a good example here, too: Instead of leaving social media to the PR department — as retailers often do — it boasts a “very highly trained, creative set of folks” to “engender and create two-way communication,” explains Fitzpatrick. While PR experts might handle negative comments the same way they handle negative press — off the wire — Sainsbury’s has embraced transparency and responded to negative comments where they’re placed, right in the open.

“It wasn’t something you would take offline and call a different number to get a resolution,” she says. “Part of the trend for social media within that customer service base is to resolve ... within the channel the customer expressed it in, both removing the barriers to engaging, but also being very transparent about the exchange in public.”

Always remember, though: Be quick, but not aggressive. Speed and openness are the most challenging parts of social media, as criticism moves quickly.

“You have to handle it in the moment, and you cannot get defensive,” advises Blue Goose’s Lencioni. “Opportunity comes and goes in an instant, too — you have to be on time in social media. Be honest, open and available.” **PG**

Conversational Commerce

For some time now, Facebook has been a great place for grocers to chat with their fans about everything from product favorites to suggestions on what to make for dinner. Now one East Coast grocer is using the platform’s chat app to help its fans receive those products and set the dinner table with ease.

FreshDirect, a grocery delivery service that operates in the Big Apple, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., metropolitan areas, partnered with Mastercard in April to use Masterpass-enabled bots to drive more seamless shopping via Facebook Messenger. The bots leverage artificial-intelligence technologies to let consumers interact with the New York-based e-grocer, build their order and securely check out via the Masterpass mobile payments app, all without

leaving the Messenger platform.

Masterpass-enabled bots work across multiple verticals, from restaurants to retail, making conversational commerce frictionless while delivering a more personalized experience. The bots allow consumers to engage with brands in new places where they’re already spending their time, as messaging apps and platforms such as Messenger currently represent many of the top 10 global apps used by billions of people worldwide.

