



Facebook spices up startups' food business

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FOLLOW the young crowd, hook it with the stuff they freak out on, and you will have customers checking into your food and cafe outlets in no time. This unique marketing mantra adopted by mushrooming restaurants in India is done using the social networking platform, mainly Facebook. And there are no advertisement spends on this innovative idea. Vipin Sachdev, who opened his Italian restaurant Toscana on the poth Khadar Nawaz Khan Road in Chennai three months back, was one of the first to have tasted success with this advertising model. He created a page on Facebook a month before opening his restaurant and kept up the excitement by posting something new everyday. Around 300 net-surfers booked it up and now Mr Sachdev claims that one has to book a week in advance for a table at his Bohemian 70-cover restaurant. Currently, the

place sees 200 walk-ins daily during weekdays and around 350 during weekends, much higher than the 70% occupancy it used to see when it started - and a good majority of visitors came to know about this eat-out through Facebook.

While advertising has its own reach, a social network group reaches the target audience more accurately. A Rs 1-lakh ad in a newspaper might reach 2 lakh homes but will be lost in a deluge of other ads, managing to catch the attention of just a few thousand pair of eyes, says Vipin. An update on Facebook reaches all fans, adds Vipin, who also runs the Subway franchise in Chennai. Though he spends around Rs 2.5 lakhs a month on advertising the 11 Subway outlets, he feels Facebook contributes in a big way in retaining his regulars.

"The marketing requirement for small businesses like restaurants or retail outlets is not too complex since their requirement is limited each day. Plus, the target audience is very local, something that can be easily addressed by the social media," says advertising agency RK Swamy BBDO chairman & MD Srinivasan K Swamy.

With funds on a tight leash, most small players have little left to spend on advertising. This is where the social networking sites score. All it takes is a few minutes each day to keep fans updated.

When Dutch national Lalita de Goederen opened Bagel's Cafe in Gurgaon last June, she depended on word-of-mouth publicity "since it was a start-up. I couldn't set aside much for my marketing budget". Bagel's saw 500 billings a month in July and August. September onwards, Lalita started updating the fan page regularly. Billings doubled within a month and in November, she opened a second 10-seater cafeteria in a commercial building.

"Social networking sites enable interaction with customers and tickles the curiosity of newcomers to check the place out," says the entrepreneur who worked with public relations firm Burson Marsteller in Amsterdam for three years, before shifting base to India.

Leveraging this new advertisement model are techies like Lakshmanan Narayan who is setting up a SAAS (software as a service)-based online application that would use social media to promote local businesses. Lakshmanan plans to apply the

'SNORT formula' - Social networks and Other relevant Tools - to leverage social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter and Orkut along with websites like Yelp, GroupOn, and FourSquare (many available only in the US) to work out online marketing strategies for shops and restaurants to help them attract new customers, bring in tourists and business travellers and connect with existing customers in a fun manner.

The social media has got a surprise fan following in local mom-and-pop stores and restaurants. From Facebook pages and groups to Twitter followers and Linked In connections, SMEs in the F&B segment are using every trick to grab your attention.

Lounge bar Pind Urban in Delhi's GK-1 marketplace opened shop nearly four years ago. Though its Facebook pages - it has three with around 2,000 fans - came only two years ago, co-owner Kashif Fatouq says they have helped popularise the lounge. "We started posting pictures of all our events on our fan pages. This created a buzz and we saw an increase in business after that," says Kashif.

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