

Restaurants using Facebook to drive online orders

More operators also adding "Like" icons to individual menu items | Nov 19, 2010

A growing number of restaurant chains are using Facebook to drive sales by connecting fans on the social network to their online ordering systems.

A handful of those chains as well as independents are going a step further by adding "Like" icons to individual menu items on Facebook, which they say increases connections with customers and helps them know which items are most popular.

"I'm especially excited about the integration of the Facebook Like button on our online ordering website," said Matt Schultz, e-marketing and social media coordinator for Bravo Brio Restaurant Group Inc., the parent company of 83 casual-dining restaurants under the Bravo Cucina Italiana and Brio Tuscan Grille brands.

"When users Like an item, it automatically shows up on their [Facebook] profile where their Facebook friends can click on the link and view the item on our online ordering page," Schultz continued. "The site also displays the number of people that have

Liked our items, which gives us and our users a snapshot of some of our most popular items."

The bottom line, Schultz contends, is that "this feature is highly viral and further integrates our brand on Facebook."

Officials at the Columbus, Ohio-based company said the Bravo Cucina Italiana chain has offered online ordering from its Facebook page for only about a month and haven't been able to measure a significant increase in Facebook activity.

Integrated Facebook ordering with Like buttons has been in place a bit longer at Wow Bao, a three-unit Asian steamed-buns concept in Chicago owned by Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises Inc.

"Facebook ordering has increased online sales by about 10 percent," said Geoff Alexander, a LEYE vice president and Wow Bao managing partner. "Also, we've gotten lots of Likes on people's statuses."

Both Bravo Brio and Wow Bao both have gained use of "Like," "Share" and "Suggest" buttons related to online ordering from Facebook through their relationship with Exit41, an online, call center and mobile device ordering systems support vendor. Exit41 officials said other users of the company's Facebook interface for online ordering include Bailey & Sage, a Boston-based independent salad-and-sandwich concept; Hello Pasta, a four-unit, fast-casual chain in New York; and Silver Diner of Rockville, Md., a 16-unit chain of retro full-service restaurants.

Other chains with online ordering systems accessible from their Facebook pages include Dallas-based Pizza Hut, which got the ball rolling two years ago by offering its Facebook fans an add-on software application. That app permits fans to access the chain's online order functions supported by QuikOrder Inc. and then easily return to their Facebook activities.

The Jimmy John's Gourmet Sandwiches chain of Champaign, Ill., through its technology services vendor orderTalk Inc., has online ordering support embedded into its Facebook page that mirrors the ordering interface on its website. Facebook users must download an add-on to access that functionality.

California Pizza Kitchen, a Los Angeles-based casual-dining chain that contracts with Kudzu Interactive for online ordering support, added an ordering tab at the top of its Facebook page. That tab generates a pop-up window, where the chain's Facebook fans can enter their zip code to move directly to the relevant pages of CPK's online ordering system.

In an even simpler approach, regional player Dion's Pizza of Albuquerque, N.M., regularly posts an "Order Online" button on its Facebook wall with a link that takes visitors to the chain's regular website and online ordering pages powered by ONOYSIS Online Ordering.

The move by chains to link online ordering with Facebook is taking place at a time when the social network is enhancing functionality for its more than 500 million users worldwide. Facebook recently unveiled its Social Inbox, which permits users to receive and manage e-mails, instant messages and text messages using a single interface. Also new is Facebook Deals, which enables businesses to offer discounts or other rewards to Facebook friends who “check in” at the particular store or restaurant location.

Wendy McReynolds, Bravo Brio's director of marketing, said her team believes that as Facebook expands and adds features, users are finding less of a reason to leave its pages. She said that makes it important that the company to provide a “brand experience” at its Facebook pages that is similar to the brand experience provided at its websites.

At the same time, McReynolds said, the Facebook connection to the company’s e-commerce back end “makes it easier to get in front of users that may not otherwise be aware or willing to try our online ordering feature.”

Aric Nissen, vice president of marketing for Famous Dave’s of America Inc., said the company is working to add Exit41 online, mobile device and Facebook ordering support for its 53 casual-dining restaurants. He said he anticipates that some, if not all of that functionality, will be in place during the first quarter of 2011.

Nissen said five of the Minnetonka, Minn.-based company’s multi-unit franchisees are pursuing a similar course.

As the Internet changes to reflect social networking influences, “the idea of the guest promoting menu items and certain brands will hold great sway in the marketplace,” Nissen predicted. As part of that change, he added, “brands, too, are becoming social” because they

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