

Houlihan's dials back print advertising to go social

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There's no question that social media is playing a big role in advertising.

In fact, Kansas City-based Houlihan's is shifting the way it operates its marketing department, putting more emphasis on fans who already are doing marketing for the restaurant, said Jen Gulvik, senior vice president of marketing for Houlihan's.

Gulvik knows that to reach consumers, she has to take the brand to them.

To do that, Gulvik and her marketing team at Houlihan's are relying heavily on social media. It's a sign of a rapidly changing world of advertising and a shift in consumer sentiment toward those marketing campaigns. For the restaurant industry in particular, social media can be rewarding.

"If you're a restaurant or bar, your customers are already out there marketing for you, whether you like it or not," Gulvik said. "You have to engage with them."

The engagement found in social media, she said, is one key element that traditional forms of advertising lack. Even if the subject of a conversation has nothing to do with the product or service, it's still building a key component of the relationship.



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Jen Gulvik

Houlihan's

"That's how brands like Harley Davidson and Apple have cult-like followings," Gulvik said. "People love the companies because the brands have connected with their people. When there's an opportunity to be real and authentic and realizing that customers are not out there just waiting for your ads to fall into their laps, you see that there are ways to connect more emotionally with customers that can turn into brand love."

Not only that, but how consumers react to advertising is changing. Millennials in particular, she said, don't want to be the target of blatant advertising. It's the reason DVR and TiVo exist today, she said. Social media can be much more subtle and integrated into the lives of people who already are on those platforms having conversations.

To focus on its social platforms, Houlihan's has added about four employees to its marketing team to assist with posting, responding and tracking social media. But the boosted head count was offset when the company scaled back its print advertising by 75 percent during the past five years.

Another social platform that restaurants, in particular, need to take into consideration: review websites, particularly for mobile platforms.

Gulvik said that according to her research, the single greatest search conducted on a mobile phone is for restaurants. And that usually converts into same-day visits, she said. So she encourages her customers to visit those sites and post reviews.

"In my view, one of the lowest hanging fruit that exists for restaurateurs is reviews because the more there are, the more it affects your search ranking," she said. "If you're on your phone searching for a restaurant, likely you're looking for one to go to right then and there for dinner that night."

Houlihan's next campaign serves up what Instagram serves best: food and beverage photography. It's a phenomenon that restaurants nationwide are starting grasp and incorporate into their marketing efforts. Houlihan's next campaign focuses on its Long Island iced tea, which is the restaurant's most photographed item.

"Food photography is something that consumers are already doing," she said. "We don't have to ask them to do that — they already are. It's using that to capitalize on your strengths."

But perhaps the biggest mistake a business can make on social media is to ignore it altogether, Gulvik said.

"If you're a brand that has people out there chatting about your product and services and you're doing nothing about it — what's the return on ignoring there?" she said. "You have to focus on where your consumers already are, rather than spin your wheels to get consumers to change their behavior and to be where you are."

<http://www.bizjournals.com/kansascity/news/2013/07/15/houlihans-dials-back-print.html?page=all>