The essential guide to restaurant marketing
The restaurant business is one of the most competitive industries there is. With a million things to juggle every day just to keep things running smoothly, marketing often falls to the wayside. But it’s the most important thing you can do to keep regulars coming back and attract new diners.

Marketing requires ongoing investment and should be part of your weekly to-do list, as essential to keeping the restaurant afloat as paying your suppliers. But for busy restaurateurs, deciding which marketing activities are worthy of your time and money can be daunting. Here’s a guide to help you think through what’s important plus tips for getting started.
Take charge of your online presence

Most prospective diners will find your restaurant online, and it’s your job to make sure that it’s really easy to find. There are many ways to build a strong online presence.

**Your own website**

A great website is the best place to start. Take the time to decide what information you’d like to feature on your website and how often you’ll need to update it. Once you’ve narrowed down the essentials, [evaluate whether or not you need to hire a designer to build a custom site or whether a templatized site is a good solution for your needs.](#) The cost of building a website varies greatly—from very expensive custom design to low-cost site builders, some of which are specifically targeted for restaurants and bars, such as BentoBox.
Recipe for a successful website:

Essential Ingredients
- Location
- Hours of operation
- Reservation information
- Food and drink menus
- About us/history

Presentation
Your website should be easy to navigate—visitors should quickly and easily locate the information they need and get a sense of who you are.

Aim for:
1. A simple, straightforward design
2. Clear navigation or links to separate pages or sections for each type of information
3. Clean pages with minimal text: Make every word count
4. High-quality photos that pop:
   - Invest in professional photos if possible
   - Include bustling restaurant interior photos
   - Feature people in your photos
   - Shoot all your best food porn
Social media

Having a presence on major social media channels like Facebook and Instagram is a free and easy way to build your brand online. However, you can’t simply set it and forget it. You need to regularly respond to comments and post content: share photos and videos to keep your followers up to date on what’s new and take them behind the scenes (more on social media later).

Reviews

Don’t forget review sites like Yelp, TripAdvisor, and Google My Business. Many diners turn to these sites for restaurant recommendations, so it’s important to keep your information up to date. For your Yelp page, regularly log in to your business owner account to upload photos, respond to reviews, and update your seasonal business hours.

How to stand out on Yelp

• Understand how Yelp search works
• Make sure your business information is accurate
• Add your story to the “About this Business” section
Give diners the inside scoop

While delicious food is what draws diners in, the story behind a signature dish or drink can build a connection that keeps them coming back and motivates them to tell their friends.

What makes your burger special? Is it a secret signature sauce? Was it inspired by your line cook’s favorite hometown diner? Call it out on the menu and encourage your servers to tell the stories when diners ask for menu recommendations.

Share the stories with your followers on social media in photo captions or even short videos. It’s a great way to make a connection with diners and build enthusiasm for a return visit.
Create a VIP experience

People love to feel like a VIP. Use that to your advantage, and host exclusive events for regulars, friends and family, community leaders, press, social media influencers, and industry insiders. Invite them to taste a new dish and hear the story behind it, to be the first to experience a new monthly event, or to try the seasonal happy hour menu. Let them know you value their opinions by asking for their input—and by acting on what you learn from them. Those genuine connections can create great buzz in your neighborhood, the industry, and social media.
Partner with other brands

Creating alliances with like-minded businesses that are a good fit with your offerings provides powerful cross-promotion opportunities. Consider local makers, artisans, and other small businesses in your area. Is there a seasonal beer release from a local brewery you can offer? Maybe locally made candles can add ambiance to your bar tables? It can even be as simple as getting a lifestyle blogger or food stylist with a major social media following to take and share some fun photos of a gorgeous tablescape featuring items from your seasonal menu.

Don’t be discouraged if you struggle at first to come up with ideas or to find other businesses to partner with. Once you start collaborating with other brands, you’ll begin seeing partnership opportunities everywhere. When both brands promote each other in your respective physical and online spaces, you’ll each gain exposure to new audiences who will have a positive feeling about your restaurant because of your affiliation with a brand they already know and love.

Once you’ve identified a promising candidate for partnership, a good place to start is to invite a representative from the business for a meeting over food or drinks at your restaurant so you can brainstorm the ways you might collaborate.
Be a good neighbor

One of the most important and authentic ways to market your restaurant is to become an active member of your community. Join your neighborhood association, host a community event, or donate food or a gift certificate to a local fundraiser. Residents and people who work in the neighborhood will likely become your most beloved regulars, especially on slower nights.

As an added bonus, forming close bonds with your neighborhood regulars will increase your chances of hearing any constructive feedback first-hand from people who care about you and your business, instead of through a one-star Yelp review. It’s a great opportunity to stay in tune with what the community is saying about you and to make adjustments as necessary.
Say goodbye to slow nights

Mondays and Tuesdays are typically the slowest days of the week for restaurants. If you’re open six or seven days a week, challenge yourself to find creative ways to entice diners to visit your restaurant on those quiet nights. Create a buzz with exclusive happy hour specials, live music, or discounts on bottles of wine. Struggling for a compelling offer? Ask your regulars what they would be excited about.

How to drum up business on a slow night

• Provide meeting space for a nonprofit or organization
• Offer a percent of sales one night a month to a local organization
• Give a discount to service workers or teachers on a specific night
• Place flyers or coupons in nearby businesses or on parked cars

Special weeknight events and discounts are also a great way to get noticed by local bloggers who are always looking for interesting bar and restaurant specials to add to their “best of” lists.
Tap into your staff

Your own staff can be a great resource pool for marketing help—their hobbies or career aspirations may line up with your needs. Is one of your bartenders a budding photographer? Is your host studying marketing? Your employees would likely appreciate a side job that adds to their portfolio or resume. And you benefit from working with someone who already deeply understands your restaurant and your customers. Don’t ask them to work for free—be sure to agree on compensation for these additional responsibilities.
Start an email newsletter

Amid the growing popularity of social media and other channels, email is still a very effective way to reach your diners. A monthly or quarterly email newsletter is a great way to share what's new at your restaurant and inspire people to come in.

To build your email database, simply include a card in check presenters with space for diners to add their email address. Make sure your servers are keeping an eye on these cards: collecting them when they've been filled out and replenishing them so there's always an opportunity for diners to sign up. Once you have a good stack of addresses, sign up for an email marketing service like Mailchimp. Their Mailchimp 101 resource is an excellent, step-by-step guide to building your email list and creating and sending your first email campaign. You can even add a short form to your website to collect newsletter subscriptions.

Worried about what to include in your newsletter?
Keep it short and simple:

- Talk about new dishes and menu changes
- Tell the stories behind signature dishes
- Promote upcoming events
- Consider offering exclusive discounts for subscribers

Need inspiration?
BentoBox rounded up this list of great restaurant email newsletters.
Get social

Social media channels are ideal for showing off your food, your space, and the humans behind your restaurant. With social, it’s more important to select only a few channels so you can maintain an active presence, rather than spread yourself thinly across all of them.

**Facebook and Instagram are excellent places to start.**

Both platforms are highly visual: perfect for photos and video of your food, dining room, and kitchen. Make sure you’re posting engaging and relevant content with lots of information and stories in your captions. Include images of menu items that are visually appealing, communicate any specials or promotions you’re running, and give followers a peek behind the scenes. Consider using a publishing platform like Later or Hootsuite to schedule posts in advance—that way, you can sit down and plan several days or a week of content in one sitting.
Thank you!