Restaurant Websites 2.0

Monica Shaw INVESTIGATES HOW RESTAURANT WEBSITES ARE KEEPING UP APPEARANCES IN THE AGE OF THE DIGITAL DINER

With over 38 million UK adults online, the web is becoming an increasingly important marketing tool for chefs. Diners not only use the web to read text and look at pictures, they also get directions, read reviews, interact on social networking sites, make reservations and browse the web on their mobile phones.

The vast wealth of information on the web allows diners to be increasingly discerning when choosing where to eat. To keep their attention, restaurant websites need to deliver the goods that diners are looking for when deciding whether your restaurant is the best choice. However, given the vast range of restaurant websites out there – from simple one-page affairs to flashy websites with moving pictures and music – it's not exactly clear what those 'goods' are.

THE BALANCE BETWEEN BRANDING AND FUNCTIONALITY

Ask any chef why they have a website and invariably the subject of 'brand awareness' comes up. It's true – a website is a powerful branding tool for any restaurant, big or small, and it works remarkably well for many chefs.

"It's subliminal," says Paul Kitching, Michelin-starred head chef at 21212 in Edinburgh (**www.21212restaurant.co.uk**). "People look at a website's logo, its colour scheme, and slowly the brand filters through. If you go to McDonald's, you see a big yellow 'M' and you know what that is and you identify with it. We have to do the same, and the website does that perfectly for us."

> **Some websites are just way too clever. Customers don't want to go into a realm of fantasy, they just want to book a table.**
> Paul Kitching

However, Paul admits that branding is a 'drip drip' effect, something that happens over time. When it comes to actually filling tables, information is key. "Some websites are too vague," he explains, "and some are just way too clever. Customers don't want to go into a realm of fantasy, they just want to book a table."

It is clear today that far too many websites trade features for functionality – just because a website can have moving pictures, fancy animations and pretty music doesn't mean it should. After all, diners don't go to restaurant websites to watch movies or listen to a song; they go because a friend invited them and they want to read the menu, or they're out shopping and want to find a place for lunch, or they read a good review and want to book a table.

"We all know the cool stuff the web can do," says Shamil Thakrar of London's Dishoom Bombay Café (**www.dishoom.com**). "But the animation and music of a few years ago can now feel very clunky and irritating." He adds; "Now we're more interested in information. The challenge is to give functional information in a simple way, while still communicating something of the experience."

SIMPLICITY RULES IN THE DIGITALLY COMPLEX WORLD

Web users, especially hungry ones, want information as quickly and simply as possible. A recent internet survey of restaurant goers showed that the top three reasons diners last visited a restaurant website was to read the menu, find the location and look up the opening hours. Only 21 per cent of respondents were looking for general information about the restaurant itself.

This need for simplicity is growing with the increased use of iPhones, Androids and other smart phones. According to the Office for National Statistics, 31 per cent of internet users connect via mobile phone (up from 23 per cent in 2009). These users don't have the patience to wade through excessive photos and options on a small screen – if they can't find the information they need, they might not bother with the restaurant.

This doesn't mean that branding is out of the window, it simply means usability should be given the same attention. "The basic function of a website is for potential customers to find out where you are, what your menu is, when you're open and so on," says Thakrar. "If you can then give some flavour for the experience through pictures and words, it's even better."

PRACTICALITIES OF CREATING A WEBSITE

Depending on your time, budget and flair for web design, creating a website can be as easy or as complex as you like. Many restaurants work with a web designer who can create a website to their specifications.

"We chose our current website provider based on their design ability," explains Thakrar. "You need someone who really understands the web and how it's used today but don't sign someone up if you don't like their previous work."

But even smaller restaurants with smaller budgets can create stylish websites. Bertie van der Beek of Brighton's Pizza Face takeaway worked with his partner to create a simple, one-page website based on the takeaway's flyer (**www.pizzafacepizza.co.uk**). "All of the information that the customer wants – number, menu and so on – is on the first page. The colours, font and design fit with our flyers and the shop. It's also easy to read on a phone," he notes.

However, van der Beek is quick to point out the limitations. "The whole page is currently an image, which isn't great for Google, so we'll be changing that," he admits, "it might also be nice to add more about us and our plans on another page."

Like van der Beek, most restaurateurs agree that creating a website is an iterative process and so it's vital that a website be easy to update.

"A website needs to be a living, breathing thing," says Megan McIntyre, PR and Marketing Manger at chef Jun Tanaka's Pearl Restaurant and Bar in London (**www.pearl-restaurant.com**). Pearl hired Chalk Design in 2004 to create its website, which has been tweaked over the years to keep it fresh.

McIntyre elaborates, "the site's development is fluid – one of the joys of the internet is the ability to update and reinvent the content constantly. While the overall design has stayed the same, different pages have opened to hold recipes and videos."

As the website evolves, usability and branding should be at the front of your mind, regardless of your interest in technology or the internet. "As a chef, I just cook bits of meat and bits of fish," says Paul Kitching, "but I'm slowly getting into the business side of the website." He continues, "it's all about brand awareness, which may sound a bit humdrum but these are the rules we have to play with. A website is too important a tool to pass off."

> "
> ## The basic function of a website is for potential customers to find out where you are, what your menu is, when you're open and so on.
> Shamil Thakrar
> "

BEST PRACTICES FOR RESTAURANT WEBSITES

WHAT, WHERE, WHEN AND HOW

At the bare minimum, your website must communicate what you're selling, where you're located, when you're open, how to book and awards and recommendations if you have them. Cover all of these bases with the following:

NAME AND LOGO CLEARLY DISPLAYED

Menu and prices
Address with a map
Contact telephone number and email address
Nice photography
Awards and testimonials

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Make it as easy as possible for people to find the information they're looking for. Use clear navigation, put your opening hours and contact information on the front page and make sure the menu is easy to find.

TEST YOUR WEBSITE ON MOBILE PHONES

When you build simplicity into your website, you improve the chances that your website will look good on mobile phones. To be sure, test your website on real mobile devices and ask yourself, "Would I eat at this restaurant after using this website?"

PUBLISH YOUR MENU AND MAKE IT ACCESSIBLE

Most diners don't like downloading PDF or Word files. Make your menu available as a webpage – this will also make it easier for people to read on mobile phones.

INCLUDE A MAP

Don't just link to a map, put it on your website. You want to eliminate all barriers that might stop someone from visiting your restaurant, so make it as easy as possible for diners to find you.

MAKE SURE YOU'RE EASY TO FIND ON GOOGLE

Most internet users find websites through search engines. Add your restaurant to Google Places so that it shows up in Google Maps. Also, add your site to Google Search so that it shows up in general search results.

Add to Google Places
http://www.google.com/local/add/businessCenter

Add to Google Search
http://www.google.co.uk/addurl/?continue=/addurl

"

One of the joys of the internet is the ability to update and reinvent the content constantly.
Megan McIntyre
"

TOP CHEFS WITH WINNING WEBSITES

RACHEL DEMUTH, DEMUTHS RESTAURANT
www.demuths.co.uk
"One can't do without a website. Ours has a simple design with stylish colors to match the fresh, seasonal experience people have when they dine at the restaurant. A key element is easy navigation – all websites should have this. Even for the simplest takeaway, people need to know when they're open, what they sell, the prices and how to find them."

PAUL KITCHING, 21212
www.21212restaurant.co.uk
"We made our website as simple and clean as possible and used colours and the logo to get the brand across. Now, 75 per cent of my business comes through the website – it's massive."
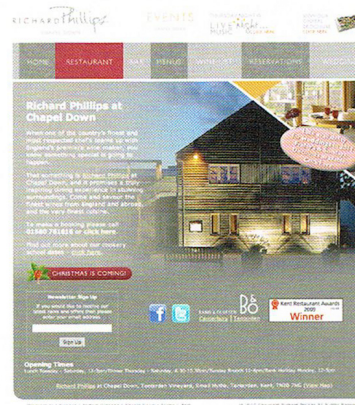
RICHARD PHILLIPS, CHAPEL DOWN
www.richardphillipsatchapeldown.co.uk
"Our websites reflect the character of the restaurant and helps our customers gain a feel of the experience. Customers can gain reassurance through a good website – especially with dining. If a restaurant is new to them, they can obtain as much information as possible to ensure they are confident of a great experience when they actually arrive at the restaurant."

SHAMIL THAKRAR, DISHOOM
www.dishoom.com
"The first thing that people do these days before going to a restaurant is Google it! So it's important to have a decent website where potential customers can make a decision."