



Creating a winning website

A website is the window of your restaurant and the most effective way of encouraging people to pay you a visit... so it had better be good

With more than 70% of UK households online, and more than 200,000 Google searches for restaurants every hour - 33,000 of which are for the UK - you're missing a marketing opportunity if your website isn't up to scratch.

Research by Livebookings identifies that 39% of restaurants surveyed don't have a website, meaning they are invisible to the 53% of consumers who often research restaurants online before reserving a table.

For most customers, a visit to your restaurant starts online, so it is vital your website portrays it in the best light. But a good website should also make it easy for a visitor to find what they are looking for, be able to take bookings, build a guest database and direct customers to a Facebook or Twitter page. And, crucially, convert lookers into bookers.

Encouragingly, creating a useful website doesn't require a big budget. Sites such as Tumblr.com, Posterous.com and Wordpress.com can create an easy to update and navigate, mobile-optimised site for free using existing templates. Or,

for an additional fee, they can apply custom templates unique to you for a bespoke site. So what are you waiting for?

Design and navigation

How your website is designed will play a pivotal role in ensuring it meets these goals. It should be easy to navigate and full of information in a logical layout, so it's worth sticking to a few golden rules.

If you choose a background colour, ensure your chosen text colour can be read clearly. Fonts from the sans-serif family are the easiest to read and the size of the text should be no smaller than 10pt. Italics are difficult to read online and should be avoided, and all text should be left aligned and non-justified. Also, don't sacrifice speed or usability for fancy design - few things are as off-putting as a website that doesn't load quickly enough.

Furthermore, it is imperative everything about your website design directs the user to salient information, such as menus, directions and booking information. Menus must be readable - and not just available as PDF files - and avoid drawn maps. Opt instead for an internet map

service such as Google or Bing maps, which can be zoomed in on and are easily printable. Ensure your contact details and reservation information is easy to find, with your address, a link to a map and your phone number in the footer of every page.

Other considerations should include your website's landing page. Visitors don't always arrive at your front page - if they have clicked a link from another website or from an internet search - so it's important to ensure the content on any page has a clear connection to what the visitor is expecting. "If you are searching for YO! Sushi restaurants in London you will enter our London page rather than our home page," says YO! Sushi marketing manager Mark McCulloch. "People come through the side door rather than the front."

It is also important to ensure your website works equally well on a mobile device, such as an iPhone (for more, see *Marketing on the move*, p74).

Don't get too hung-up on making your site a must-visit destination, however. These days websites are more a jump board to find other sites where your brand is active, such as social networks like

Facebook and Twitter, and location-based marketing services such as Foursquare. Rather than trying to convince people to come to your website, you need to ensure your brand is where people are, and also ensure these sites make it clear why they should then visit you or make a booking.

Your website is likely to be placed in the hands of an external design company, so set out clear expectations and ensure it will be easy to maintain. Provide them with pictures of your restaurant to help with how the site should look, and keep close communication with them to ensure deadlines are met. And set a clear budget.

Content

In order to provide the best possible content you need to know your customer base, anticipate what they will be looking for and understand why they are on your site. To do this, it is worth asking questions such as 'what is their thought process?', 'what are they looking for?' and 'how can we meet their needs?'

Your website should feature the fundamentals - contact details, interior photography, up-to-date menus, opening

hours, maps and directions - but a comprehensive site will contain much more. Only 44% of restaurants include the bare minimum map and contact details on their site although 81% of consumers expect it. And, despite 85% of Brits now preferring to book tables online, only 18% of restaurants are offering the service.

Information on up-coming events and special offers and links to your blog and Twitter and Facebook pages encourages brand interaction. And, if your restaurant has a well-known chef, a biography could be useful, as could photographs of your dishes.

"The most important single investment when building a website is imagery," says John Pallagi, director of Flatcap Marketing, a specialist in the hospitality industry. "Your website is likely to be a potential customer's first point of interaction with your restaurant. It is essential the true essence of your business is reflected online."

Keeping your website up to date and analysing what can be improved is key.

Finally, people read differently on the internet compared to print media, with around 75% of users merely scanning web text. Generally this is done in an 'F'

Dos and Don'ts

Do

- ◆ Reflect the brand and feel of your restaurant
- ◆ Have an online booking service, and on more than one page
- ◆ Include a printer-friendly map on your website
- ◆ Make the menu easy to read and easy to update
- ◆ Include clear contact details and information such as opening hours
- ◆ Use good photography
- ◆ Keep your customers up-to-date on the latest developments, special offers and promotional campaigns
- ◆ Encourage visitors to join a mailing list to build a customer database and run regular email-marketing campaigns
- ◆ Publicise private dining or events
- ◆ Promote your à la carte menu and special offers
- ◆ Open up your availability for online bookings
- ◆ Remove barriers that slow down visitors from reaching what they need
- ◆ Keep your information up-to-date
- ◆ Ensure your site is accessible from mobile devices

Don't

- ◆ Use clichés or pompous phrases to describe your restaurant, or 'vision'
- ◆ Sacrifice speed for design
- ◆ Only use the PDF format for menus
- ◆ Clutter your website with information or design that doesn't add overall value
- ◆ Have the option to 'skip intro' on the front page - it implies the page normally takes too long to load up
- ◆ Have an abandoned Twitter feed on your website
- ◆ Play irritating music
- ◆ Try to imitate human actions with 'page-turning' designs
- ◆ Feature out-of-date prices/menus
- ◆ Use photography that isn't anything but brilliant
- ◆ Over-use Flash

“A good website should maximise a consumer commitment to making a booking. Just getting information out there is not enough”

▶ pattern, so place the most important information at the top of the page.

Generating bookings

Most importantly, there's more to a website than looking pretty and providing customers with information. It should be driving traffic to your restaurant by bringing in the bookings. "If a restaurant's website is just about design, they need to stop," says Magnus Hultberg, strategic advisor at Livebookings. "People aren't interested in being wowed by a flashy site. An unusable website doesn't help the diner, the restaurant or the search engine."

"Better-known restaurants and chains have websites that take bookings but there are thousands that don't," adds Andris Berzins, chief marketing officer at Livebookings. "This is caused by a misunderstanding of what a website is. It should maximise a consumer commitment to making a booking."

Having a real-time booking interface with instant confirmation is vital. According to Livebookings, one in five people that see its interface on a website will book online. The more you link to your booking interface the more likely a customer will book - display it on your home page above the fold and include a 'book now' button at the top of every page and at the end of each menu page.

Livebookings adds that 14% of bookings are made outside normal opening hours (10pm-10am) and 44% are taken during service when staff may not be manning the phones - having an online booking system avoids missing potential custom.

Livebookings' system also works in 13 different languages allowing international diners to make a booking easily. ■

Case Study YO! Sushi

YO! Sushi knows a thing or two about web design - the sushi chain is the current holder of the title Best Restaurant Website in the World, no less, after claiming the title at the international Webby Awards last year.

Its secret is understanding that a brilliant website is something that is continually evolving but also, ironically, that a website's importance as a single entity is not as important as it used to be, according to marketing manager Mark McCulloch. Today's websites have to be so much more than mere depositories for company information, he says, and need to link up across cyberspace for maximum impact

"People's perceptions about what a website should be are changing almost daily," says McCulloch. "When we first decided to relaunch our site we had it firmly in our minds that we wanted it to be talked about. That is almost old hat now."

McCulloch believes YO! Sushi's website has been so well received because, on the one hand, it adheres to the basic rules of web design, but on the other it is able to evolve depending on how its customers use it. "We wanted to make it usable, reflect the brand and let people find what

they want easily, such as menus, how to book and where to find us, but also cottoned on early that it had to be sociable as well."

As such, the website links up to the YouTube channel to show its videos and has an image library on its home page that encourages people to upload their photos. It also has a clear link for people to join its Yo! Love Club to receive news and promotions and access an otherwise locked area on the site. McCulloch says: "We wanted people to spend a bit of time on the site. Not because they are lost but because they find it interesting."

Yet the biggest impact of its site, adds McCulloch, has been integrating it with other forms of social media. So visitors to Facebook and Twitter can be directed to its site. "More and more people are using Facebook as their home page and for searching for things. They're leapfrogging Google. You need to take little bits of your website and put it out on other channels to get it noticed.

"A website is important but more important is making it social so it becomes an active feed. You don't own your brand anymore - all you can do is be part of the conversation."



Checklist

- ◆ Do you have all the basic information diners are typically looking for?
- ◆ Can you take bookings online 24/7?
- ◆ Is the link to your online booking page obvious on every page with a 'book now' button?
- ◆ Do you send newsletters with links to book on your site?
- ◆ Do your links take customers to the relevant landing page?
- ◆ Is your website user-friendly?
- ◆ Does your website reflect the brand and feel of your restaurant?
- ◆ Do you have a printer-friendly map or Google map?
- ◆ Is the information on your website up-to-date?
- ◆ Do you regularly check and analyse your website to determine what can be improved?
- ◆ Does your website load in three seconds?
- ◆ Is it easy to maintain/update?