



FAPC-251

Why social media marketing matters: Food businesses

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Introduction

Social media is now the most powerful tool for shaping consumer opinions, surpassing traditional media marketing options such as print, radio and TV advertising. The effectiveness of social media marketing has been recognized in every industry, particularly in the food industry. Over half of Americans on social media interact with food content every day. The content includes recipes, cooking tutorials, reviewing restaurants and promoting brands (Mintel, 2025).

Knowing the potential impacts and risks of social media and using it effectively can help both large and small food businesses better market themselves and their products. Social platforms are simply tools to help spread your message. The message must have a foundation in a clear brand identity, with a specific audience defined and consistent business goals set.

Before spending time and money on social media, businesses must be clear on who they are, who they want to reach and what story they want to share.

The role of social media in today's food market

Traditional advertising (e.g., television, radio and print media) has been replaced by platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube as the primary way people discover new food products, brands and trends. Mintel (2025) found nearly 90% of Americans report daily activity on social media, and 56% say social platforms help them discover new foods and recipes. Younger generations are treating social platforms as their “digital cookbook,” helping them decide which new products and recipes to try.

Research shows that online interactions on social media significantly influence the attitudes and behaviors of consumers (Rini et al., 2024). Social media now impacts what people eat, how they perceive “healthy” or “local” foods and which information sources they trust. Influencers and social media creators now hold more influence than traditional advertising.

Unlike traditional media marketing, social media creates a great feedback environment, providing almost immediate impact/effectiveness data. Every post invites engagement, which builds visibility for businesses and credibility with the viewers. For a small business, the impact is very cost effective, with each comment, tag or share expanding their reach without any major expense.

Psychology behind social influence

People use social media as a way to connect, explore and express. When marketing food, those connections are often emotional and/or cultural rather than transactional. Rini et al. (2024) found that there are three main reasons for engagement with food content:

- **Inspiration:** Discovering recipes, products, restaurants.
- **Information:** Learning about ingredients, sourcing, nutrition.
- **Belonging:** Sharing experiences that express personal values.

These motivations display the importance of having authentic content. Maksi et al. (2024) found audiences respond better to consistent, relatable messages compared to formal, traditional advertising. When brands are transparent and align with their audience's expectations and values, trust is built. For local Oklahoma food producers, that means including real people and a genuine connection to their community in their media content.

Businesses should be aware of their target demographics' preferences. Some respond best to high-quality content, some to verifiable credentials and others to a high number of views, likes and comments. Researching preferences of age groups, geographical zones and niches of their specific audience can help a business focus their efforts on specific content to maximize response. (Mintel, 2025)

Know your brand, audience and goals

Many small food businesses jump into posting online without first identifying marketing fundamentals. It is important to determine a few important ideas before diving in to ensure there is a strategy for the social media content to support:

- **Brand:** What do you stand for? Heritage, tradition, sustainability?
- **Audience:** Who are you trying to reach? Families, students, distributors?
- **Goal:** What achievements are important to you? Increasing website traffic, attracting wholesalers and increasing brand recognition?

Be consistent with messaging in social media posts. Without clear messaging, even high-quality content can be ineffective. Consumers quickly spot inconsistency. Over half of consumers say that a top thing they look for in content is information they can trust (Mintel, 2025). Messages that do not align with a brand's identity can make a company seem unreliable. Keep in mind the socio-demographic makeup of your target audience and customize messages by target customer age, values and platform trends to perform significantly better than a general post. Think of things like who prefers content such as deals or discounts and how to target them; the entertainment factor — what caters to each generation's preferences and what viewers seek in social media content; and the role of discovering new products, shopping and cooking hacks, and finding trustworthy information.

What works? What does not?

A successful social media campaign is intentional, consistent and connected to the brand's story. A poor plan is random, reactive and inconsistent.

Good example:

A small salsa company identifies its target audience as farmers market shoppers and young families and decides to focus on Facebook and Instagram. The owner posts short videos of ingredients being chopped, tells stories about family recipes and encourages followers to share photos of meals made with the salsa. The owner posts three times a week, quickly responds to comments and uses local hashtags. With consistency, this steadily increases the business's social media exposure and engagement.

Why did this work? The content reflected brand value (authenticity, family, tradition), involved the audience and built trust before sales.

Weak example:

A snack company opens an account on every major platform without identifying a target audience. They post infrequently and inconsistently: photos of the product one week, random memes the next, not posting at all another week and leaving comments unanswered. Their promotions are more sales-driven than engaging, and their social media budget is spent on boosting posts without ever tracking results. Although they greatly increase their number of posts, sales growth remains relatively flat.

Why did this effort fail? There was no clear audience or tone, the team diluted its impact by using too many platforms, irregular posting and inconsistent content confused algorithms and followers, and off-brand or unrelated material damaged credibility.

When brands forget their audience

When a business loses focus of their audience, it can be costly. Social media can cause a landslide of reaction and response, good or bad.

Recent examples:

- **Budweiser:** Known for patriotism and telling communities' stories, Budweiser strayed from its core audience and traditional identity with its digital campaign in 2023. The customer reaction underscored the importance of message alignment. Social media amplifies everything—connection or backlash—which Budweiser learned the hard way.

- **Cracker Barrel:** In 2025, Cracker Barrel decided to modernize its image. They changed the logo and menu, leaving many loyal customers feeling the restaurant had abandoned its roots. The online response forced the company to revert to its values and reaffirm its identity.

As evidenced by the nationwide responses to the examples above, even a large brand with a lot of support can forget its audience and lose its credibility. As previously stated, it is important to know your brand identity and be consistent in messaging (posts, labels and contacts) across all social media platforms where you and your audience interact.

The bottom line

Social media is no longer an option for food businesses. Rather, it is the primary source of modern advertising and, as such, must be incorporated into the marketing strategy. It shapes how consumers become aware of a new product/business, determine the trust they will give the business, and make purchasing decisions regarding a product. Successful social media usage depends on how well the firm prepares to express its brand identity in a consistent manner and engage with consumers.

Before posting, take time to identify and understand your brand and seek to understand the preferences of your audience, including which factors might trigger a response (positive and negative) related to your products. Don't get overzealous or anxious about engaging on social media before planning each step of your marketing strategy. Set realistic goals and use social media to highlight what already makes your business unique and special.

The goal is not to go viral, but to build genuine relationships through honest, lasting communication – one post at a time.

References

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