

Social Media's Good Influence

Everyday people have built massive followings thanks to social media; here's how restaurants can work with foodie influencers.

BY JESSIE SZALAY

In November, Austin, Texas-based social media food and lifestyle influencer Jane Ko went to a Thai restaurant to try its new breakfast options and take photos for an Instagram post, which would go on to receive nearly 800 likes. She was brought steaming-hot dishes, which she immediately took outside into the chilly morning. Ko loved the marble outdoor tables and natural daylight. She carefully laid out the dishes and conducted a photo shoot. Only after she'd completed the task to her satisfaction did she sit down and enjoy the dish. The owner was shocked.

"I eat every meal cold," Ko says. "People think [social media is] so easy, but it's a big production with costs."

Ko, who blogs and Instagrams at A Taste of Koko, wasn't surprised by the owner's reaction. Despite restaurants becoming increasingly aware of the power social media influencers hold, many are still unsure of how the process works. Ko knows the new media landscape can be daunting but emphasizes that ignoring it is a lost opportunity for businesses.

Although influencers have their own unique aesthetic and methodology, restaurants can develop a sense of what to expect—perhaps starting with being ready to re-heat cold, photographed meals. Most importantly, brands need to work *with* the influencer, Ko says, by being open and flexible to their needs and ideas rather than trying to unilaterally control the collaboration.

At Los Angeles-based Burgerim, that mindset has led to an exciting partnership with one of the biggest names in food influencing. Jonathan Cheban, also known as Foodgod, has more than 3 million Instagram followers, as well as a YouTube channel and website. In October, he went into one of Burgerim's many L.A. stores. He knew of the brand through another blog but went in with little knowledge or expectation. "I was hungry," he laughs.

Once inside, he was blown away by the concept, which offers multiple 3-ounce burgers per order. Burgerim features 11 types of patties, as well as a wide variety of sauces and toppings prepared in endlessly customizable ways. He filmed an on-the-spot video describing his "out of control" experience. It quickly went viral, leading Burgerim to reach out to him and establish a multi-million-dollar deal. Last November, Foodgod became the face of Burgerim.

It's not your typical celebrity sponsorship deal, Cheban says.



Jonathan Cheban, also known as Foodgod (top left), and Jane Ko of a Taste of Koko (bottom left and right), command thousands of followers via social media.



"We'll do a Foodgod burger, a cool shake, videos, cutouts. ... It's going to be the coolest franchise. I'm going to put my touch on it, and I'm pretty good with that stuff."

How exactly Foodgod will put his own touch on things has yet to be nailed down. "[Cheban] is going to do what he does well," says Tom Meiron, CEO of Burgerim. "I want him to have the ability to flourish on his own and see where this takes us." Foodgod's fans range from teenagers to septuagenarians, but regardless of age, social media followers care about authenticity—something that Meiron thinks this organic, naturally evolving campaign will encourage.

Influencers must maintain authenticity and trust because their followers are "really good call-to-action people," Cheban says. "You post something, and they will respond." That can increase business and awareness of a restaurant. It also means that if an influencer is fake or misleading, followers will know.

This sort of real-time feedback gives influencers valuable insights into the tastes and preferences of their audiences. Influencers can turn that knowledge into collaborative products—as Cheban hopes to do—or curated experience guides—as Ko sometimes does—and know that they will be popular.

OPERATIONS

“A lot of people tell me they use my feed to determine where to eat lunch or dinner that week,” Ko says. Followers message her questions about dishes to order or avoid, what to eat during a visit to Austin or another city Ko has covered, or where to take their dates. “For a brand, it’s more personable than being featured in a newspaper or magazine. There’s that trust.”

But in order for any collaboration with influencers to work, restaurants need to grant some degree of freedom, allowing influencers to maintain their brand authenticity. Though Foodgod will not post about direct competitors during his Burgerim partnership, he is free to post about mom-and-pop burger joints or burgers that directly tie into his brand of over-the-top offerings. “If someone’s got a ridiculous burger with chocolate on it, I’m going to post about it,” Cheban says.

For Ko, a “micro” influencer with more than 50,000 followers, restaurants should work with her busy schedule, photography demands (she only shoots during the day in light-filled locales), quality-control requirements (what she posts must reflect what any customer would receive), and financial constraints. She carries high production costs from camera equipment and sometimes needs to hire photographers or rent shooting space.

Since each influencer works differently, restaurants that want to work with them need to do their research to find the right fit. Ko recommends operators begin by examining their own social media followings to see who is tagging them and talking about

them. “I have brands I just love and talk about but who unfortunately don’t respond to me,” Ko says.

Restaurants can also focus on the market they want to reach. That may be geographical or another niche. “If you have pizza, find the pizza guy,” Cheban says. “Influencers live their brands every day. Find the guy with pizza everywhere.”

For most restaurants, the niche and personality of the influencer is more important than the number of followers they have. As Cheban points out, you never know when something will go viral.

Once a restaurant has found an influencer it would like to work with, there are several options for reaching out. Many influencers, including Ko and Cheban, have agents or public relations teams who interface with brands. Both also get hundreds of direct messages and e-mails every day from brands eager to work with them. But that doesn’t mean that restaurants should be shy.

For Cheban, it’s important to keep an open mind and determine whether or not he has a rapport with the brand in question. “Send an email—sometimes really cool things can happen. Be willing to work with [influencers],” he says. “For me, it’s got to be where it feels right.”

Similarly, Ko sees no harm in reaching out; the greater risk is missing an opportunity. “Just be friendly. Say, ‘Hey, we don’t know if you’ve tried us before, but we’d love for you to come in for lunch,’” she says. “There are a lot of brands that are missing out on having good relationships with influencers.”



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