How to Build a Successful Restaurant Website

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Define Your Digital Presence

With new restaurants popping up each day vying for consumers' attention, having a thoughtful and effective website for your establishment can put you top of mind with potential customers. Investing the necessary time and money to craft a successful restaurant website can spur increased brand awareness, a good return on investment (ROI) for your business. Notably, an industry survey found that 77 percent of diners check restaurant websites before visiting, and of that group, 70 percent have been discouraged from visiting the restaurant because of its website.

It's crucial to capture a visitor's attention the second they land on your homepage because if it doesn't interest them, they won't stick around for long. There are numerous components that go into building a website, from hosting providers and development platforms to themes and user experience mapping. Each piece of the puzzle plays an important role. The overarching goal of a restaurant's website is to strike a balance among a user-focused layout, beautiful photos, and powerful copy that incites action.

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Getting Started

The first step in building a website is to nail down some of the basics such as your domain name, hosting provider, and web development platform. You can decide if bringing these aspects of the website in house makes sense for your bottom line, or if it's more affordable to outsource to a web partner and/or digital agency. Since website development has become a bit of a commodity there should be cost-effective avenues available for whichever option you choose. Although it may be tempting to jump ahead to the design component of the site right off the bat, remember that the above building blocks need to be laid down first.

Securing Your Domain Name

There are some easy-to-use sites for searching and purchasing various domain names, which will be your website URL. Frequently used domain purchasing sites include GoDaddy, Network Solutions, and Bluehost.

When selecting a domain name, try to make it as close to your restaurant's name as possible and account for other names/words customers may use when searching for your website. It's considered a best practice to purchase multiple variations of the same domain name to ensure that you own all the digital real estate surrounding your restaurant's name. For example, if you own the restaurant, "Neighborhood Pizza," you

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could secure the following domain names, if available, to cover all your bases.

- NeighborhoodPizza.com
- PizzaNeighborhood.com
- NeighborhoodPizza.net
- NeighborPizza.com

In the end, all of the domains will bring visitors to your homepage and you can always obtain additional domains in the future.

Choosing a Host

After you have your domain name(s) secured the next step is purchasing a hosting package. A web host is a company that provides the technologies and services required for your website and all its webpages to be viewed on the Internet. Buying a domain name and signing up with a hosting provider can often be done through the same company, but it's not necessary. Popular hosting companies include GoDaddy, Bluehost, and HostGator. Regardless of which hosting provider you choose, an SSL certificate is recommended. Standing for "Secure Sockets Layer" this digital certificate creates a secure link between a website and a visitor's browser. Without an SSL certificate your website may be at risk of being hacked and may not rank well in Google search results.

Picking a Platform

Now that you have your website's name and hosting provider squared away, it's time to decide how you're going to build your restaurant's website. If you're planning to outsource the site creation to

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a web developer or digital agency, these professionals will most likely provide you with web platform options, showcasing all of the capabilities and pricing structures. Keep in mind that if you want the ability to edit your website content yourself, you should alert the web partner at the beginning of the process since this can impact the type of content management system (CMS) they choose to utilize.

There are also a variety of online website building platforms available that allow restaurant operators to build, design, and manage their site. These platforms can automatically modify your site's design to optimally render across all mobile devices, such as tablets and phones.

WordPress

One of the most popular website development platforms, WordPress, is easy to use, customizable, and offers a large variety of plugins. All themes are responsive, meaning they're mobile-optimized for tablets and phones. WordPress offers a variety of plans to fit any budget, with the lowest starting at $4 a month.

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Squarespace

Another website development platform, Squarespace, provides capabilities to build your own website, online store, or portfolio. With mobile-ready themes, the platform is also able to seamlessly integrate with a variety of apps and plugins. Squarespace plans start at $12 a month and increase from there.

Wix

A leader in cloud-based web development platforms, Wix, provides users with a plethora of templates that are all responsive, meaning they're phone- and tablet-friendly. Featuring drag-and-drop functionality, this platform allows users to easily add, remove, and customize many aspects of their website. Plans start at $17 a month and often include a free domain for one year.

Mapping Out the User Experience

The next step is to map out the user experience. This means how a visitor to your site will be able to navigate through your different webpages, sections, buttons, forms, etc. A website is one of the most impactful marketing tools you can have as a restaurant owner, so it's important to set it up for success from the get-go. Whether you're building your site on your own or employing the skills of a professional, an essential first step is to establish the overall framework of the website. This will lay the foundation for choosing a theme, deciding the navigation structure, creating the design, and crafting the copy.

Nailing Down Your Nav

Now, you can determine your navigational structure, the sections that appear at the top of a website. A common restaurant website navigational structure may include About, Menus, Locations, Events, Hours, and Reserve a Table. Below is an example of how your top navigation items might look if you also have sub-navigation pages/sections.

TOP NAVIGATION EXAMPLE

ABOUT	MENUS	LOCATIONS	EVENTS	HOURS	RESERVE A TABLE
Overview Staff	Happy Hour Brunch Dinner	Chicago New York San Diego			

It's important to keep the navigation "depth" fairly shallow on your site. A good rule of thumb is to not make the user click more than three times within any given section — for SEO purposes and the user experience.

Sitemap and Wireframes

The top-level snapshot of a website's structure that lists all of its pages is called a sitemap. Typically, a sitemap diagram will showcase the top navigational structure, sub navigation, call-to-action (CTA) buttons (prompting a visitor to take an action such as "Get Coupon," "View Menu," or "Make a Reservation"), footer information, and most importantly all the pages and their subpages that are contained within your website.
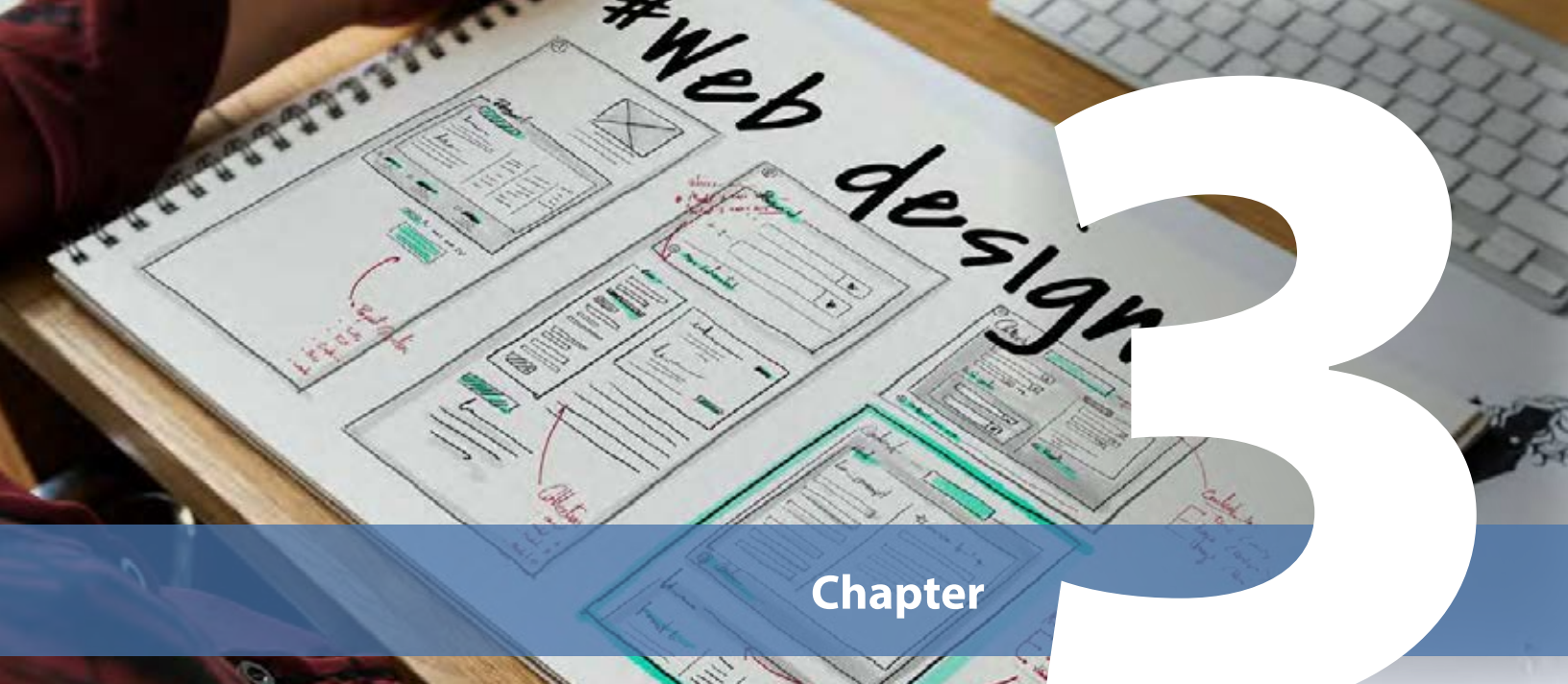
Once the sitemap is solidified a wireframe is generated. This is a blueprint of the skeletal framework of the website. It's during this phase that the "bones" of the pages are laid out, including headline copy, image, CTA buttons, and any other important content areas that need to be highlighted. No final copy or design elements are needed for this phase since it's just a blueprint to account for layout and space. If you're working with a web developer, they will drive this process and if you're building your site via a third-party platform it may have capabilities for laying out the site prior to entering content.

Selecting a Theme

With the skeleton of your restaurant's website in place, it's now time for the fun part, selecting a theme. There are usually hundreds, if not thousands, of themes to choose from on website builder platforms. A few facets to consider when selecting your theme:

- Content width design
- Homepage header design
- Navigation menu structure
- Logo positioning
- Multilingual capabilities
- Video areas
- Online reservation functionality (this is key!)
- Event plugins

It's ideal to choose a theme that can grow along with your business, allowing you to easily add more content and pages to your website. There is usually a one-time cost associated with purchasing a theme that's determined by the theme's offerings and popularity. When in doubt it's helpful to check out the reviews and ratings tied to each theme to see what other business owners have liked/disliked.

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Bringing Your Website to Life

You've selected a theme for your website, now it's time to flesh out the rest of the content and design components. Copy and design need to work together to provide a visually enticing and emotionally compelling experience for the user. The longer a user stays on your page the more apt they are to take the actions you want them to take, like "Reserve a Table" or "View Menu."

Concise Content That's Built to Convert

When it comes to writing for the web, less is always more. You have a short amount of time, 0.05 seconds to be exact, to grab a visitor's attention and encourage them to stay on your site. A homepage should have an obvious and strong headline with an even stronger CTA that's front and center — the first thing a user's eye is drawn to. Best practices deem that the top navigation menu should be as simple as possible with the titles clearly defining the type of information that can be found on that page. A restaurant's brand voice and personality should take center stage on the homepage as it's a customer's first introduction to your establishment.

Take the time to run an SEO keyword audit to see what words and phrases people in your area are searching for as it relates to your type of restaurant. If you or your developer are unable to perform an extensive audit, there are some great free tools that can help. Google Keyword Planner can help you research how often certain words are searched and how those

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searches have changed over time as well as which keywords are the most relevant for your business. Then, you can use these findings in the copy on your website to ensure that your website bubbles to the top when the applicable search terms are entered.

Delicious Design and Mouthwatering Photos

Killer copy is just one half of the equation, it needs to be married with purposeful design and professional-grade photography. Allow your design to reflect your brand's core, keeping it uncluttered and easy for the user to navigate, this holds true for your digital menu design too. The more visually interesting you make your content by displaying information next to icons, in infographics, and with dynamic rollover functionality, the more pleasant the user's experience will be, hopefully compelling them to return again.

The most pertinent information — such as the main CTA, location, hours, menus, and contact information — should be easily accessible and clearly displayed. It's also a great idea to add your restaurant's social media buttons for Instagram, Facebook, and Yelp, to the footer of your website's design, since most users know to scroll down to this area.

Now, for the photography! If hiring a food stylist and photographer isn't within your budget, have no fear. Many restaurant owners can take compelling photos themselves with their camera or mobile device by following a few tips:

Clean Your Plate

There's nothing more unappealing to a potential customer than drips, drops, and residue hanging off the side of a bowl or plate. After you plate your dish, wipe all the edges

with a clean, damp cloth, being careful to leave no streaks or smears behind. Re-plate if necessary, taking care to slowly pour or position food into place.

Set the Stage

Take time to properly stage your shot. Remove water glasses, silverware, napkins — everything except the food and the plate it's served on. You don't want anything to distract from the star of the show — your food. If desired, include clean, unobtrusive utensils or glassware in the shot.

Light It Up

When photographing food indirect, natural light is best. Sunlight is going to provide the most even tone and best clarity of color, with minimal shadowing. Flash is not your friend as it will flatten your subject and obscure details. If sunlight is not an option and the only light available is harsh, fluorescent lightbulbs, try replacing them with daylight-balanced (blue-toned) bulbs that give off a more natural feel.

Sharpen Your Focus

Who wouldn't want to see your stellar dishes up close and personal in all of their glory? Take extra care to focus on the food in the shot because a customer needs to be able to crave the smell and taste of this dish through their screen. A tripod can be helpful to steady your camera or phone to ensure a crisp, still, and focused shot is captured each time.

Highlight Your Showstoppers

Pick and choose your most popular and drool-inducing dishes to feature on your website. Maybe it's an elaborate brunch cocktail that no other local spots can lay claim to or a neighborhood-favorite appetizer that's perfect for game day gatherings. Whatever your it-factor is, you can spotlight it because the quality and uniqueness of the food photography featured is what matters, not necessarily the number of shots.

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Planning for Success and Tracking It

After your website design and structure are in place, the next step is to set your business up on Google My Business and Google Places to ensure you show up at a favorable spot in search rankings. Once this is done, you're ready to push that big red button and launch your site! The fun doesn't stop there though, it's a good idea to consistently monitor how well your website and its individual content areas and CTAs are performing so you can continually update and optimize its performance.

Google Places

Setting up your restaurant on Google Places is a crucial part of helping new and current customers find you online and in real life.

This service works by listing the location of local businesses that have registered with Google and are relevant to the visitor's search. In a quick snapshot a user can view your address, operating hours, and contact information as well as links to your website next to the map.

Google My Business

With Google accounting for 75.74 percent of worldwide desktop and laptop searches and 86.11 percent of worldwide mobile searches, having your restaurant correctly set up on Google My Business is a savvy move. This free tool allows businesses to manage their digital presence across Google including Search and Maps.

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By adding, verifying, and updating your restaurant information, you can make sure that customers looking for your spot are able to easily find it. The Google My Business platform also allows restaurant operators to read and respond to customer reviews.

Google Analytics

Your site is live and ready for people to enjoy, now what? Websites are not a "set it and forget it" type of marketing tool. To get optimal insight and ROI from a website, it's important to track what's working and equally vital to determine what isn't performing well. This can be done via Google Analytics, a web analytics service offered by Google that tracks and reports website traffic and trends. Most cloud-based website builder platforms have a Google Analytics plugin component that's easy to set up. This comprehensive tool provides all the information a business owner could want to know about the types of visitors on their site and what actions these users take.

Establish a Maintenance Plan

It's a good idea to set aside time each week to perform upkeep on your website, including updating plugins, ensuring all images/content are rendering correctly across desktop and mobile, and adding/removing pages. This doesn't have to be a solo effort, encourage your staff, family, and friends to let you know if they notice anything wonky with your site. Along the same lines, pick their brains to see how easy/difficult they find the experience of navigating your new website. Impromptu real-life focus groups can sometimes be the best gauge of how well the site is resonating with visitors.

Keep Your Content Fresh

Now that you have a beautiful and professional website, it's important to keep it that way with updated information.

For example, if any changes occur to your menu, operating hours, etc., you can update that content as soon as possible on your website so that customers aren't confused or disappointed when they visit your restaurant.

Along with these light refreshes, it's recommended to give your site a stronger "facelift" once or twice a year. This can be as simple as changing out your main homepage image/video for one that ties better with the current season, touting a promotion you're running, or featuring some new food shots that make repeat visitors stop and stare. The changes don't need to be drastic; you still want your site to feel familiar to users, but while also being relevant and modern.

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Promote Your New Site

You can have the best-looking website in the world, but if no one knows it exists, it's not going to move the needle for your restaurant. Start by sharing the exciting news on your other marketing channels such as Facebook, Instagram, Yelp, and emails. You can also add your new website URL to the bio sections of these social platforms to drive more web traffic your way. In addition, you should also place your URL on your business cards, delivery menus, delivery cars, coupons, and more.

Once your own collateral and digital real estate is up-to-date, you can try reaching out to other local businesses to see if you can help each other's websites and services through cross-promotions. For instance, you can promote the local animal shelter that you do events with or the movie theater down the road on your social channels and ask that they do the same for your restaurant. Low-cost and low-effort initiatives such as these have the ability to reach and drive user traffic that otherwise may have remained untapped.

Place your URL on your business cards, delivery menus, delivery cars, coupons, and more.

A Lasting First Impression

In the digital world you only get one chance to make a memorable first impression that leaves users craving more. Often your website is the first aspect of your brand that customers will experience before setting foot inside your doors, so it's important to make sure it's set up for success. Taking the time to thoughtfully choose a platform and theme, lay out your site design and hierarchy, and create meaningful images and copy will help create an ideal user experience.

With 90 percent of guests researching a restaurant before dining — more than any other business type — making an investment in a solid website can end up paying for itself in new business. Whether you decide to partner with a developer or build your new site yourself, being armed with the best practices of website development will ensure your restaurant's site is not only aesthetically pleasing, but strategically built to convert visitors into long-time customers.

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"**Every night we get about 20 to 25 percent new customers, which is unbelievable…we're on a national level now and to have the capability to reach over 17 million people, it's huge.**"

— Troy Ganter
Papa's Raw Bar, Lighthouse Point, FL

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