

## Serving up a tweet

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The social networking site Twitter is gaining ground as a great place for getting noticed and drawing in business. Should your pub or restaurant have a presence on Twitter? We look at the advantages and disadvantages and offer you some tips to get started.

The most important thing that Twitter can potentially do is drive web traffic to your website. How this turns into diners at your tables is up to you. When you make an offer or promote an event through Twitter, you need to monitor the response - how many more visitors did it bring to your website?

One of the first restaurateurs to realise the potential of Twitter was Lisa Tse, of the Sweet Mandarin in Manchester. A diner used Twitter to book a table for Valentine's Day. Lisa replied promptly with a special offer code and within hours, all her other tables were full.

Show off your work Craig Wilkinson of The Bay Horse Inn at Forton uses Twitter to share photographs of dishes he has prepared, using a photo sharing application called Twitpic. You could also show photos of rooms, landscapes or promote kitchen prep tutorials.

'Nose-to-tail' chef Fergus Henderson keeps followers up to date with what he's cooking at the St John Restaurant in London's Clerkenwell.

Ask a question Once you've built up a following you can ask a question in public and you'll often have an answer within the hour. Twitter experts like Nikki Pilkington will point you firstly to places in their websites or blogs where you'll find an answer, and secondly to other people who can also give you an insight.

Nikki's tips for using Twitter in your catering business include:

- Communicate last-minute offers
- Use Twitpic to show pictures
- Post customer testimonials
- Request feedback from guests

Reward followers If people follow you on Twitter, Nikki suggests you can send them direct personal messages (DMs) with a special Twitter code to claim their offer.

Get celebrity endorsement Celebrities post the fine detail of their life on Twitter - that often includes where they stay and where they eat. Masterchef judge Gregg Wallace (AKA puddingface) is one. Wallace also met his new Cumbrian girlfriend Heidi on Twitter, but that's another story!

Knowing that the recipient was playing in Manchester, Lisa Tse recently sent this message:

@MrPeterAndre looking forward to cooking u and the kids a lovely well deserved meal. good luck with your music and new life! Luv Lisa & wok.

Note the confident informality. Try it!

#### Disadvantages

Twitter eats your time There's no doubt that Twitter can eat into your time, so you need to schedule some time to spend on it then turn it off! Social Oomph! helps you time your posts ('Tweets') so that you can send them when you're in the restaurant but your followers are on line.

Missed bookings Don't use Twitter directly to take bookings &ndash; as you build up followers you can miss urgent messages while you are switched off. Direct people to your website or your phone number and make your call to action clear, for example 'Call us!' 'Book now on &hellip;!' Le Petit Square in Newbury, Berks has a good example of an online booking form.

Dodgy dishes If you can put photos of your dishes on Twitpic, your diners can, too. And send them to all their followers. We won't name and shame, but it's happened at a pub in Cumbria recently. Here's the caption for the pic:

How not to do desserts. My husband ordered Apple Pie and Custard, this is what turned up. Served on a dated black plate, absolutely covered in cocoa powder and surrounded by a ring of strawberry/raspberry sauce. It went back.

The photographer in question is well known locally and has more than 300 followers. Take care!

Unwanted followers When someone asks to follow you, ask yourself - what value does this person add to my business? Knowledge and insight? Potential customer? Well-connected? They won't add value if they offer saucy photos, get-rich-quick schemes or get-more-followers schemes. You do have to block the spammers one-by-one and occasionally weed them out with Twitblock, but a single click and they're gone.

How to get the balance right What should you talk about in your 140-character limit? Variety is important. Lucy Whittington also answered our question on Twitter:

I follow a lot of hotels and pubs on Twitter and the ones that do it well are those that don't just send out special offers all the time! It's important to get a balance between promoting your business, and promoting you as an individual/personality. It's about building up a picture of what you do, what's going on where you are, what new things you have, so when you do mention a special offer its not 'in your face'.

Add value with feedback on other twitterers you follow and retweet [forward other people's interesting posts] that show you aren't 'all about you.

We say&hellip;&hellip; go and have a look. Follow some people and see how they do it. Follow us! AWOL Solutions for Kim's insights into the catering business, and chefgoneawol for James's photos, recipes and chat. Oh and vacancies, of course, that's what we're here for! And follow quirkytraveller Zoe Dawes, the best connected Twitterer in Cumbria.

Be brave. Write a few posts. Tell us how you get on!

