



# Cash in online

## A GOOD WEB SITE MAKES IT EASY FOR YOUR CUSTOMERS TO SPEND MONEY WITH YOU

by Sonya Bice

**O**n a recent weekend afternoon, Hans Weissgerber III, veteran restaurant operator, was on the deck of a boat in Lake Michigan, surveying several dozen boats and scores of partiers who had met up at Rip Tide Bar and Grill, Weissgerber's new seafood restaurant on the lakefront.

The gathering had meant that Rip Tide's tiki bar had been packed at 11:30 that morning. The event, Weissgerber said, had actually been set up by a customer, and organized completely via MySpace, the online social networking site to which Rip Tide's web page is linked. The restaurant also has its own MySpace page, set up about six weeks ago and already generating strong response.

Rip Tide's use of the Internet to connect with customers is one example of the new ways restaurants are rethinking their web sites and getting more from them: more sales, more leads for business, more frequent contact with customers, more brand building power.

By now, the necessity of having a presence online is self-evident to most operators. These days, however, a good web site is no longer merely an online version of a phone book ad or newspaper ad that points customers to your door. As Weissgerber put it, "Your web site is your door."

"People under 40, people who work with computers all day, don't pick up the Yellow Pages to find a restaurant – they don't pick up the Yellow Pages to



find anything," Weissgerber said. "There definitely is an over-40 market who still looks at the Yellow Pages, so you do have to have a Yellow Pages presence. But for most people, the Internet is the new Yellow Pages." Weissgerber finds a web site is "100-to-1" better than a print ad in terms of the cost-benefit ratio because of its reach and versatility.

WRA members are focusing their sites to accomplish more in three areas: selling more, building brand loyalty, and defining the brand.

### **Selling more: banquets, gift certificates, meals**

Rip Tide's site makes it very easy to find the information customers need to book a party.

"We've posted pdf files of our banquet menu right down to the order forms," Weissgerber said. "We have people send

a deposit form on a 15-minute phone call—versus a 30-minute conversation and ten more calls back and forth. It gets people to a purchasing decision. They call us to book a party, not to talk about it.

"People want to do [party planning] on their time, not on the restaurant's time. If they get home from work and are sitting down at 7:30 p.m. or midnight to plan something, nobody is available at the restaurant to give them the information on the phone, but they can go online and find all the details, then call us with their decisions already made."

Though the streamlined system minimizes phone contact, customers are happy because they appreciate the convenience. "They feel they've gotten service because the level of information on the site is so high."

JoAnne Anton, owner of La Perla Restaurant, said their site "is in a constant state of redesign." Anton relates to her customers based in part on her own experience using the Internet. "I'm a working mom, and I know I am planning things at 2 a.m. in my kitchen, and that is when I want to be able to get the information I need."

Gift certificates have always been available for purchase on the site, but as the software has grown more sophisticated, Anton has been able to integrate the site's sales with her point of sale system and merge the databases, which allows her better tracking capabilities.

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## Internet-savvy customers expect more from sites

As the number of households with Internet access continues to grow, and as consumers continue to get more sophisticated about Internet use, consumer expectations about how much information they will find online are rising. About 75 percent of American consumers are using the Internet on a daily basis, and about 50 percent have broadband access at home, according to research by the search engine company Google.

Sam Sebastian, director of the restaurant segment at Google, spoke at a seminar at the National Restaurant Association show in Chicago in May. "When you look at how consumers typically consume media over the course of a week, Internet has taken on as much if not slightly more now than television and the other media out there."

Sebastian told operators at the seminar, "Your consumers are jumping online using search engines on a daily basis to find information. We did an online survey of a group of your customers who had eaten in a quick-serve or casual restaurant within the prior month. We asked these consumers about the types of activities they are doing online.

"About three in four of respondents are actually going online to look for restaurant information. About 30 percent of all respondents are using search engines and going online to look for a specific location for a restaurant. And when they're actually getting ready to purchase, whether its hours of operation or getting driving directions, they're going online to find that information. So the key message here is you've got to make sure in your web presence or online advertising, that you're meeting that customer need, you're giving them the information they're looking for, and you're getting it to them very quickly and very easily."

Researchers have noted an interesting shift in consumer attitudes. In an article called "Trends in User Behavior" in *Online Publishing Insider*, Deb Levin wrote, "Even as recently as two or three years ago, Web users tended to blame themselves for their inability to find information or complete tasks online. Most research sessions I conducted during this time started off with a lengthy apology from the participant, explaining that he or she was 'not very technical' and 'might make mistakes.' Not so today. People not only expect to be able to use Web sites in a seamless fashion, they expect sites to anticipate and meet their every need. A refreshing expectation, but one that places additional pressure on companies looking for customers."

Sebastian cited a third-party study that showed the interplay between what consumers saw in "offline" advertising such as newspapers, television and radio, and what they did online. In the study, 43 percent of consumers followed up and did a related online search due to what they saw on television advertising.

"Not only does online advertising make sense for direct advertising to the online consumer and brand-building, but also it is a plug for an integrated marketing plan. There is a lot of symbiosis between your offline campaign and what folks are then doing online.

"We see this across various industries—when you are running an ad campaign, there is a nice spike in search query volume, so it makes a lot of sense to try to be there as you are running offline campaigns."



La Perla's site was designed by the web design firm BlueVista Innovations - an endorsed WRA member service provider offering a 20% or better discount exclusively for WRA members ([www.bluevistainnovations.com](http://www.bluevistainnovations.com)).

Owner Steve Belinkoff said the newest technology is expanding possibilities for gift card programs.

"What is new is the ability to tie in gift card systems and purchasing systems live into the point of sale terminals in the restaurant," according to Belinkoff, "Users can check their gift card balance live online, or refill their card online as well. This is all reflected in the P.O.S. server and will be 'real time.'"

With online shopping growing, he said, many restaurants are finding online gift certificate sales profitable, especially during the holidays.

When she considers new online marketing applications, Anton is single-minded about what she wants them to accomplish: "We're going to keep going with things that lead more directly to sales. That's what it's all about."

That focus on sales as the *raison d'être* of a restaurant web site is shared by Bob Ford, senior director of marketing, Papa John's International. Ford spoke at the National Restaurant Association seminar on online marketing in May at the national show.

"You can go online and order pizza, and 30 minutes later, it shows up at your house. Papa John's is very sales oriented in its online initiatives. Our site isn't what you'd call attractive; we try to be very functional. It's about giving the consumer what they want, and what they want is a deal. When you get to our home page, it's about the deal. At Papa John's, it's about transactions, not about entertaining."

Sites also help to fill tables through online reservations.

Gary Campbell, marketing director of Coast Restaurant in Milwaukee, said the restaurant's site allows online reservations, which are confirmed by automatically generated emails. "They can go online, see what is available, make a reservation, and get a confirmation," he said. "It makes it very efficient for the restaurant, and the staff can focus on the guests in

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the restaurant.”

Coast makes available online extensive fact sheets for each of its meeting rooms, complete with virtual tours and photos, and Campbell said the site yields a lot of leads from event planners. But he is working to take it to the next level of service, he said. “The biggest question we get is ‘what room is available when?’ We are working on an interactive calendar, which would be a great help to the people in the event planning industry.”

## Building brand loyalty

A July 1 article in *Restaurants & Institutions* describes how chains are rolling out web sites designed to “keep customers engaged longer online and entice them to return often.” The ultimate goal for these companies is “to establish their brand with teens and young adults—notoriously difficult to reach through broadcast and print media.” The sites are heavy on video games and other sorts of interactive entertainment.

Weissgerber recently created the MySpace page for Rip Tide that sparked the tie-up on the lakefront near the restaurant. The site has attracted more than 100 “friends.”

“It becomes part of their social community. It’s people’s virtual social scene,” he said. “You can blog things on it. It takes a little effort – 15 minutes a day to update and post news on it, but it keeps you pretty engaged with your patrons.”

WRA member restaurants which have established MySpace pages include County Clare Inn and Pub, Carnevor, and Fratello’s.

La Perla’s Anton is still unsure about whether to create a MySpace page, though she has found her restaurant frequently mentioned on the site. “We are looking at it. The music and entertainment industry have really capitalized on MySpace and YouTube,” she said. But for La Perla, for now, “the jury’s still out.”

Other ways to create two-way dialogue with customers are email exchanges and e-newsletters. With electronic mail, the

## Common mistakes

One of the biggest mistakes web designer Steve Belinkoff sees in restaurant web sites is a disorganized site that is poorly laid out and difficult to navigate to get to the desired information.

“Most visitors do not want to spend all day on your web site,” Belinkoff said. “They want to get the info they need, and at that time make their decision.”

In an unscientific survey of web sites linked to the WRA online Dining Guide, WR found a few flaws and flubs:

- Hidden information, unclear labels. For example, one site had information tabs to click on, such as hours and menu, and one of the tabs was labeled “more.” A click on that took the viewer to information on karaoke night events at the restaurant. But if you didn’t know that, you might never find it. Another put the location information, complete with a link to a MapQuest map, under the “contact us” tab. Most people would be looking for a tab labeled “location,” “directions” or “map.”
- Outdated sites. Some had information that was nine months old and had not been updated since.
- Unresponded-to email. Numerous emails sent to many sites at the email address given on the web site never received a reply, even though they requested specific information. If you are going to provide an email address, check for responses. And remember to make it easy for customers to email you by merely clicking on the address rather than cutting and pasting or retyping the address.
- Dead-end links. One hotel with a restaurant had a link to the restaurant on the hotel’s page, but the link dead-ended at a “page not found” message.



expense is limited to the nominal cost of establishing and maintaining the mailing list.

Any site should give the visitor the chance to sign up for email contact from the restaurant, and the site should be designed to manage that database.

## Defining a brand

One of the reasons people visit a web site, Belinkoff said, is “to get a feel for the general ambience of the establishment.” A well-designed site can communicate volumes with a click of a mouse, even without fancy flash animation or sound (though a soundtrack is very cool, and definitely sets a particular mood).

“A web site immediately establishes a persona for your restaurant,” Weissgerber

said. “My big thing is putting people on the site. It creates a community. Our theme is a casual, beach theme, and people want to be a part of that. You see the pictures on the site, and that’s totally who they are.”

When Anton recently had La Perla’s web site revamped, she had a specific goal in mind: “We really wanted anyone who visited the site to instantly understand what kind of place La Perla is.” The design, complete with audio of Latin music and video shot like a home movie, gives the impression of a lively atmosphere with wall-to-wall fun, friendly people. “If you visit the site and the restaurant, they’re virtually identical. You’re seeing everything on the site that you will see in the restaurant.” **WR**