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Connecting with restaurant customers in the heart of the city

The Charles Bar uses social media to attract and keep customers in competitive environment

BY JENNY LEE, VANCOUVER SUN NOVEMBER 7, 2011

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Twitter contests are one of the tools that marketing manager Brooke Windatt (left) and general manager Chris Hannan of The Charles Bar use to get an edge in a competitive marketplace.

Photograph by: Les Bazso, VANCOUVER SUN

Food and drink is a brutal enough business without attempting to market trendy cool in a gritty, transitional area of town.

Barely 14 months old, The Charles Bar is striving to draw a young, moneyed crowd out of the dark streets of Vancouver's old downtown with its uneasy mix of entrenched poverty, up-and-coming design firms, social service agencies and cool social media startups.

The Charles Bar's nine-foot television screen, the largest in the city, helps a lot, as do the 10 other TV screens in the 3,000-square-foot sports lounge on the ground floor of Vancouver's historic Woodward's building.

On hockey nights, the place is packed.

But The Charles must attract and retain customers in a fiercely competitive foodie city, where bloggers will pan you at the drop of a Kennebec fry, where Groupon-style discount deals, street-food carts,

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pop-up restaurants, Twitter and Facebook comments all swirl in a dizzying maelstrom and force restaurants to work ever harder to stay top of mind.

Marketing and promotions manager Brooke Windatt puts a heavy emphasis on social media and collaborates closely with general manager Chris Hannan.

“Once I get them in the door, he keeps them coming back,” Windatt said.

She uses Facebook as a secondary, more interactive website, where customers can easily comment and share postings.

She updates the welcome page graphic (www.facebook.com/thecharlesbar) regularly.

It might feature a Halloween party poster, a sporting event or a DJ night. She writes three to five posts a day.

“If there’s been no posting for six months, people wonder if that business is open or not,” she said.

A post might be that day’s lunch feature with a photo, or ticket giveaways for Canucks and B.C. Lions games at The Charles’ events. Closer to the weekend, she might post YouTube videos of songs the DJs will be playing.

She also runs a Facebook ad (www.facebook.com/advertising), which costs a “dirt cheap” \$20 a week, she said.

Twitter, on the other hand, is better for up-to-the-minute messages on the daily lunch special or that evening’s event.

“I just go on in the morning and do all my tweets for the day,” Windatt said.

She figures she spends an hour or so a day on social media. Hootsuite allows her to schedule her tweets and manage all her Twitter accounts.

“I do schedule some of my tweets, but I check back up to 10 times a day on Twitter to see if we have mentions or messages,” she said. “If someone mentions us, I always respond to everything they say. We’re not just a machine that pumps out tweets.”

Twitter contests have proven to be one of the best ways for growing The Charles’ Twitter following. “Sometimes, I can get 20 to 30 followers in a week, which is pretty fast,” Windatt said.

When she ran a Canucks ticket contest in September, one post was re-tweeted more than 100 times. “At least 100 people saw it and those people have followers and Twitter is completely free,” she said.

As Twitter is fairly anonymous, Windatt has found she tends to get more honest and more frequent feedback from customers. A couple of months ago, a guy tweeted on a bad experience at the lounge. Windatt and Hannan followed up by email.

“It gave us the opportunity to have a second chance and prove ourselves to him,” Hannan said.

“That’s the nice thing about social media. Sometimes people don’t like to complain face to face.

“One of the nice things about Twitter that’s invaluable is you get to [directly] see who your audience is.”

Windatt doesn’t respond directly to negative blogger reviews. To start with, most blogger sites aren’t set up for comment, but generally, she keeps all postings positive anyway. The bar does take note of any

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patterns in negative comments and looks into making improvements.

While food carts are trendy right now, it's hard to socialize on the sidewalk.

"We offer the experience of going out with your friends, having good food and drinks and mingling with others around you who are doing the same," Windatt said. "We use social media to extend that experience. So if they have tweeted us during their visit, we can reply once they have left and thank them for coming in, or if they attended an event, they can go to our Facebook page and see the photos.

"This keeps The Charles Bar brand in people's minds and helps us to build a community around our establishment."

And while pop-up restaurants may be new and exciting, "the fact is people don't always want something new and just want something trusted and familiar," Windatt said.

The Charles did experiment with offering a Groupon-style daily deal. They sold 1,100 \$10 vouchers for \$20 in food and drink.

"If we did it again, instead of a blanket deal allowing people to use it whenever they wanted, we would focus on a specific time of day when business was lacking," Windatt said.

Windatt said she also uses traditional mailouts to buildings in The Charles' neighbourhood and advertises in newspapers and Rogers Arena. Weekly, Hannan invites a local business for drinks after work.

"We take care of their first round just to get them in the building," he said.

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