

# PR'S a whole new game

*A conversation  
with Ellen Malloy*

BY LAURA TAXEL

**W**hen Ellen Malloy started handling public relations for restaurants 18 years ago, she wrote and mailed press releases, assembled elaborate press kits to pass out at events, and acted as a go-between, working her editor and journalist contacts on behalf of her clients. Not anymore. Responding to the digital revolution, in 2007 she launched Restaurant Intelligence Agency (RIA), based in Chicago, to make information available online.

Instead of pitching ideas and hoping someone would bite, she saw a better way: provide easy access to everything writers needed for the stories they were pursuing. Then she and her team went a step further, developing groundbreaking proprietary software that fundamentally changes the game. Launched last year, it supports a virtual space where, for a monthly fee, chefs, restaurateurs, sommeliers and mixologists can create content and interact with media pros, the dining public and each other.

Malloy's approach to PR reflects the qualities that define this era of 24/7 connectivity through technology—personal, engaged, immediate, networked and free-flowing. But everyone can participate through blogs and social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Yelp, to name just a few. She's an enthusiastic user of these tools and strongly encourages chefs to take advantage of the opportunities they offer. She shares some insights on the value and the challenges of the new communication platforms and advice about how to make them your own.



## WHAT DO CHEFS NEED TO UNDERSTAND ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA AND HOW TO MANAGE IT?

Connecting with people via social media is not a fad. It's not going away. It represents a fundamental change in society. Chefs no longer need to rely on traditional channels—magazines, newspapers, TV and radio shows—to tell their story. They can and must interact with diners directly.

But you can't just jump on the bandwagon and expect immediate success. It's about relationships. You have to invest in cultivating an audience of fans and followers so they're there when you need them, say, for promoting a special event you're doing. If you do your prep work, then you're ready for service, right? Same principle applies here.

Communicating is no longer something to be sloughed off onto an outside publicist. You have to do it yourself. People tell me they don't have time. My answer is, marketing is important, you make time for it. It can't be an afterthought. You're not working all the time. You do it on the edges of your day, in the moments in between things. You can certainly designate someone within your organization to help, someone intimately involved with you and in what happens at the restaurant on a daily basis. But the magic is in your head. You need to be the communicator, an assistant just executes.

## WHAT ARE SOME TIPS ABOUT HOW TO BUILD AN ONLINE PRESENCE?

There are many options. Everyone has to choose which forms are the best fit, and then be active and regular in using them.

Be rigorous about getting information out into the marketplace, but remember that this is not advertising in the conventional sense. Think of the social media world as a huge cocktail party. There has to be a level of sincerity and realness in how you represent yourself. This is not selling cars.

You need an overall social media strategy so that everything you do supports the concept behind your restaurant and your cooking. For example, Paul Fehribach of Big Jones in Chicago, which features dishes inspired by traditional Southern food, reinforces his brand by blogging about his interest in heirloom ingredients, old recipes and cookbooks.



Journalists are still important, but not as important as they used to be. It amazes me that chefs still put so much weight on magazine and newspaper reviewers but dismiss the blogger with a large and loyal readership that gobbles up what they write. You have to embrace the world as it is now, not mourn the loss of the world the way it was. Figure out the new model and learn to operate effectively in it.

## DOES THE QUALITY OF WHAT YOU POST MATTER?

Yes. If you're not a words person, get help. Learn the basics of taking pictures, even if it's only with the camera in your phone. Commit to becoming a better communicator. The old kind of publicist as spokesperson and appointment-maker is no longer essential. But a good one can provide strategic thinking and guide you in promoting yourself, your food and your restaurant. That would be a worthwhile investment.

## IS THE RESTAURANT WEBSITE STILL PART OF THE EQUATION?

Websites are less significant than they used to be, because they are, for the most part, static and not interactive. But they have a real value for customers who are not yet followers online. It's a place where they can find the basics about you and your restaurant. To be most effective, the site should develop and evolve and new content should be added often, for example, with a blog where you post regularly. The real key is not to silo your information. Everything should be linked.

ABOVE: On Restaurant Intelligence Agency's Spoonfeed, chefs, restaurateurs, sommeliers and mixologists create content and interact with media pros, the dining public and each other.

## Do your homework

Be aware of the various social media sites and understand how they work and what they're for. You don't have to use them all, but you must be regular and consistent with those you choose. It's as essential as touching tables, and should not be considered optional.

### THE MOST POPULAR SITES

Facebook		Create personal and restaurant pages, post thoughts, news, photos, links, and interact with fans and friends.
Twitter		Send and receive text-based posts of up to 140 characters, aka microblogging.
LinkedIn		Create a profile, network with select professionals.
Yelp		Post personal experiences and opinions.
Foursquare		Geo-locator app for smartphones; let people know where you are.
tumblr & Ow.ly	 	Tools for sharing text, links, photos, music, etc.
Instagram		Enhance and post photos.
YouTube		Post videos.
YourBuzz TweetDeck HootSuite	  	Help businesses manage social networking via a single centralized application.

## Q ANY ADVICE ON HANDLING ONLINE CRITICISM AND MANAGING YOUR REPUTATION?

The fact is, every individual customer has become more important. Whether it's on Yelp or similar opinion and rating sites, Facebook or their own blog, people have platforms that allow them to publicize their views of your business. Because of the reach of social networking, they can influence many other people.

When their restaurant gets a bad review, whether it's from a professional or an amateur, I always remind chefs to ask themselves, "What can I learn from this?" If your response is to come back screaming and insisting they are wrong, nothing will be achieved. You may get some personal satisfaction by venting, but you won't gain anything professionally. You don't do yourself any favors by being mean or angry. If someone has a legitimate complaint, is misinformed or mistaken, deal with it graciously. Think about that cocktail party metaphor I used earlier. Be sorry. Ask for an opportunity to do better. Leave your ego out of it. Handle problems privately when necessary.

It's true that sometimes people who post negative comments online hope to be invited back and given free food. My response is, "So what?" It's a small investment. Look at the big picture. It's a win for you if they leave happy and say something positive. This is the hospitality business. Be hospitable.

That said, you can't do anything about the trolls. [These are people who post provocative, outrageous, inflammatory remarks, not necessarily true, to bait others, disrupt discussions and prompt arguments.] Ignore them. Do not engage under any circumstances. These are not rational people, and you can't win a battle with them.

## Q CAN YOU OFFER SOME DOS AND DON'TS ABOUT WHAT TO PUT OUT ON THE INTERNET?

These days, as a chef, you have to accept that you are a public person. So you shouldn't ever post anything you don't want the public to know. My rule of thumb for chefs is that you should only post something you'd want a future investor to see. As for language, same rule applies. If you wouldn't say it across the table at an investor meeting, you probably shouldn't put it online.

## Q ANY FINAL THOUGHTS ABOUT USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO PROMOTE YOUR BRAND AND GROW YOUR CUSTOMER BASE?

I encourage chefs to look to the future and adapt to a changing world. I'm not saying it's easy. It's a lot of work. But participating is part of how you take responsibility for your own success. You have a chance to talk about who you are and what you do. Take advantage of it.

I've built a system for how this works, and you don't have to be my client to see the road map I lay out. Go to my website [restaurantintelligenceagency.com]. See the information we've collected from chefs. Answer the same questions. Copy my ideas. It's okay with me. In this new world, it's all about sharing. ■

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### Social media maxims

- Be genuine.
- Find your own voice.
- Don't outsource.
- Stay focused on what's good for your business and enhances your brand.
- Communicate, share, tell stories; don't sell.
- It's always about dialogue and exchange.
- Engage with others through comments and replies.
- Respond thoughtfully and politely to issues about a dining experience raised online.
- Feed the beast: Connecting with people via Twitter, Facebook and other sites must become part of your daily routine.



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