

A Foursquare way to build business

by Liz Farmer

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This spring, restaurant owner Eddie Dopkin had never heard of social media website Foursquare.com. But he took a chance anyway on building a promotion geared toward users of the site, and three months later — during the industry's slowest time of the year — sales at all four establishments have jumped.

Dopkin, owner of the Crazy Man Restaurant Group in Baltimore, which is comprised of S'ghetti Eddie's, Roland Park Bagel Co. and two Miss Shirley's Café locations, said sales are up between 10 and 18 percent, depending on the restaurant.

"It's very 'all of a sudden,' it's kind of unbelievable," said Dopkin of the buzz created by the social networking campaign.



Foursquare is a location-based social network that allows users to "check in" at certain locations to let their friends know where they are while also earning points. Miss Shirley's began a promotion in April that allows the customer crowned "Mayor" — the person who has checked in via Foursquare the most at its Roland Park or Inner Harbor locations — to skip to the head of the line. (Miss Shirley's does not take reservations, and wait times on the weekend can run up to an hour.)

Dopkin's other two restaurants are also giving away a goody to users every five times that person checks in via Foursquare.

Dopkin said it was difficult to tell how much of the increased traffic was directly due to the promotions because his restaurants are also active on Facebook and Twitter and use mobile marketing to send customers coupons. But the Foursquare idea is the most recent campaign.

Ryan Goff, director of social media marketing at Owings Mills-based MGH Inc., pitched the campaign to Dopkin in April. And even after the restaurateur asked him to run a focus group at Loyola University Maryland and just one of the students had heard of Foursquare, the idea got the go-ahead anyway.

It also helps that campaigns like this one don't cost anything, Goff said.

"I approached him very delicately," he said of Dopkin. "It's kind of one of those 'out there' ideas. Luckily, Eddie's a great client and willing to try new things."

Goff said it has become easier to get clients to try new things because of social media's growing use. Foursquare, for one, has grown exponentially. The website celebrated its first birthday in March with 500,000 users — by the time Dopkin launched his promotion in late April the site had grown to 1 million users.

"A year ago, I was having to build really robust presentations for clients," Goff said. "Now most of our clients come to us and say, 'What else can we be doing?' I'm rarely having to sell people on social media anymore."

Greater adoption of cell phone applications, and mobile devices that make it easier to connect online while on-the-go have also helped break down the barrier between online marketing and real world results, Goff said. And getting these results isn't just limited to retail or restaurants.

Chris Montanti, director of business development at Fulton-based Three Stage Media, is taking the same approach with business-to-business clients. Ten months ago, the company created eventSocial, an application designed for business conferences and conventions. Registered attendees can scan their contacts and connections from their e-mail accounts, LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter to see who is attending the event. From there, users can see who from their contact lists are attending and can send meeting invitations to their friends.

"It uses social media to generate a following around an event and generate buzz and interest," Montanti said. "It's really a peer-to-peer communication. ... If you get an e-mail about an event from one of your industry contacts, you're much more likely to read it and consider it."