

The 2018 SOCIAL MEDIA Awards

CSD's sixth annual social media review focuses on trends and best practices in the year ahead and c-store retailers making strides on social platforms.

By Erin Del Conte, Senior Editor

For the sixth consecutive year, *Convenience Store Decisions* reviewed the Facebook (FB) and Twitter pages of 80 c-store chains and is recognizing those chains working to grow their audience and using creativity to expand engagement.

In 2018, "social media is going to grow in importance for c-store retailers, especially as Gen Z increases their influence," said Sheila Murray, COLLOQUY editor-in-chief and assistant vice president of marketing, global solutions, for LoyaltyOne. "Even more so than Millennials, these young shoppers expect personalized and mobile-enhanced in-store experiences and social media offers a great opportunity to do both."

In the New Year, Murray expects to see c-stores continue to offer followers personalized or exclusive deals via social as well as introduce new products.

"Social can also be used to build excitement for in-store events like 7-Eleven's 'Bring Your Own Cup Day,' which wouldn't have gained the prominence it has without fans talking it up on Twitter and FB," Murray said.

In 2018, c-store retailers should keep an eye on Instagram and Snapchat. Snapchat is the preferred network for Gen Z and younger Millennials.

Stories is a must-use feature in 2018 on Instagram and FB. "Brands should consider using time-limited features across platforms to create

must-see, in-the-moment content," Murray said. Photos and stories posted to Instagram are successful when they have a purpose and offer value.

Augmented reality (AR) is also expected to become more prominent on social media in 2018.

"Enhanced or digitally augmented experiences are an excellent way to get younger shoppers into the store, so it makes sense that AR will make its way into retailers' marketing budgets," Murray said. "Social media is an important tool for promoting these experiences by offering reach, access and sponsored opportunities within the platforms themselves. Snapchat has already made significant inroads in creating catered AR-user experiences, and the more you can incite customers to share with their networks, the more value you'll get out of those efforts."

Consider using an influencer strategy. Murray pointed out that studies show younger consumers trust "influencers" more than traditional advertising. According to a 2016 LoyaltyOne proprietary study, 21% of Millennials distrust advertising altogether.

"As c-store brands look to appeal more to those demographics, working with influencers to create original content on Facebook, Instagram or elsewhere is going to become table stakes," Murray said.

Meanwhile, live streaming offers "an immediacy" that can help chains stand out. "Working with a dig-

ital influencer to broadcast a live in-store is a great way to create ‘appointment viewing’ and build buzz,” Murray said.

But above all “authenticity” is perhaps the most important quality successful social media pages provide. “Influencers should align with your brand and what it represents, these need to be collaborative relationships connecting like-minded individuals via a brand experience,” Murray explained.

What’s more, Murray stressed that social is a channel, not a tactic, and as such it will continue to evolve. “Using it successfully requires an agile, test and fail mentality,” she said. “As with any new, still developing marketing tool, social efforts will only be as strong as the backbone of your brand and the process you use to bring your efforts to market.”

THE AWARDS

FAN-BASED GROWTH AWARDS

Most overall growth on FB and Twitter combined. This award calculates the number of new FB fans (number of people who like the page) and Twitter followers between Dec. 2, 2016 and Dec. 5, 2017.

Winner: Speedway grew 138,168 new FB fans and 32,000 new Twitter followers in 2017 for a total of 170,168 new fans/followers.

Runner Up: Wawa grew 46,378 new FB fans and 104,000 new Twitter followers in 2017 for a total of 150,378 new fans/followers.

MOST FACEBOOK FAN GROWTH IN 2017

This award recognizes the chain with the most fan percentage growth between Dec. 1, 2016 and Dec. 5, 2017. To be considered chains needed a minimum of 10,000 fans.

Winner: MAPCO grew from 48,945 fans to 71,243 (46% growth).

Runner Up: Salt Lake City-based Maverik grew its fan base from 117,638 fans to 157,576 (34% growth).

This past year, MAPCO grew its audience on Facebook by applying feedback from its core demographic.

“MAPCO has focused on great content that displays our brand personality and culture. We listen to what our audience wants to see from us and on the channel they want to see it,” said Bobbe Morhiser, senior guest experience manager.

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MOST TWITTER FOLLOWER GROWTH IN 2017

This award recognizes the chain with the most follower percentage growth between Dec. 2, 2016 and Dec. 5, 2017. To be considered, chains needed a minimum of 5,000 followers on Twitter.

Winner: Wawa grew its Twitter followers from 216,000 to 320,000 (48% growth).

Runner Up: Cumberland Farms, a 560-store chain based in Westboro, Mass., grew its Twitter followers from 13,000 to 18,000 (38% growth).

SHOUT OUTS

Numbers are only part of the story when it comes to social media. This year’s Shout Out award recognizes a chain using promotions or ongoing campaigns on FB to connect with its core consumer base in a particularly creative way, consistently throughout the year. While there were many nominations, we’ve narrowed it down to two chains that exemplify the art of creative posting.

BEST OVERALL ENGAGEMENT THROUGH ONGOING CAMPAIGNS

Winner: Rhodes 101 Stops, a 31-store chain based in Cape Girardeau, Mo.

Rhodes 101 Stops used numerous creative, omnichannel campaigns in 2017 to engage customers on FB and drive them into the store. Here are a few.

This May, the Missouri chain aspired to break the Guinness World Record for largest glass of soft drink, and engaged customers in the attempt. On FB, Rhodes presented a “press conference” on the event and via subsequent posts, challenged fans to visit Rhodes and buy fountain drinks between May 26 and July 31—each purchase would add one ounce to the size of the giant cup, helping it topple the world record.

“We announced 25-cent drink hours every other day (\$1 is our normal price),” said Lindsey Wagoner, vice president of marketing and Rhodes. The timing of these 25-cent hours was a secret, and announced via social media only 15 minutes before the hour began. Fans could then dash to Rhodes to take advantage of the promotion.

“This approach kept our customers watching and engaging with us on social media throughout the summer,” Wagoner added.

Rhodes used a “news theme” in posts throughout the summer, using actual Rhodes employees and held 25-cent drink parties that it publicized on FB. Images of the giant cup appeared on FB looming over locations and landmarks to draw excitement.

In a salute to National Lemonade



Day, Rhodes on Aug. 20 hosted a party where the giant cup was filled with lemonade and consumed by the public, as a Guinness World Records adjudicator evaluated the attempt. The party was advertised via FB.

"Leading up to the party, we made Snapchat Geofilters available at several locations. They marked the number of days until the party and our official Guinness World Record attempt," Wagoner said.

Rhodes also used the event to unveil a new fountain drink cup design. FB followers were invited to offer suggestions on what the refreshed style should look like. "We made a special Snapchat Geofilter available at the party for visitors to take photos of themselves with the giant cup."

Rhodes exceeded the previous 3,200-plus gallon record and now holds the world record at 4,795 U.S. gallons.

In conjunction with its world-record attempt on National Lemonade Day, Rhodes tied in an ongoing creative promotion to spread the word about its fruit-flavored lemonades throughout the summer. It partnered with a local kids drama group and created video stories about the kids' lemonade stand competing with a Rhodes' fruit-flavored lemonade stand. The videos included actual employees.

"Highlighting our team members in our social media campaign gets our customers excited to watch and pay attention making our advertising much more effective," said Wagoner. "Many of our customers visit their favorite Rhodes location on a daily basis. Over time, they get to know our team members personally... On social media, people want to see people they know and interact with them."

As football season kicked off, Rhodes introduced a FB campaign about being in-stock on "HomeGating" products, i.e. enjoying a football game at home with snacks and other items. Rhodes again incorporated its employees into its video and photo series depicting them as a football team—complete with special Rhodes jerseys—making "plays" with in-store products. The campaign included weekly giveaways via a drawing publicized on FB for a HomeGate Party. The promotion drove fans to the store as winners could redeem their party at a local Rhodes location

to enjoy the following weekend.

This holiday season, Rhodes introduced its Christmas "How To" Video Series on FB, playing off the YouTube "how to" craze, focused on incorporating Rhodes-branded products into typical Christmas traditions. Several posts were paired with giveaways and also drove fans to the store with a call-to-action related to giving Rhodes' gift cards as Christmas gifts.

"Engagement can't be deposited in the bank, but increased foot traffic increases sales potential... That's why our Facebook videos and posts include calls-to-action that result in store visits," she said.

BEST ENGAGEMENT WITH A SERIES OF SINGLE PROMOTIONS

Winner: Parker's

Parker's used a range of creative promotions to engage with fans. Here are a few.

Its March Madness promotion included all Parker's-produced food and drink items facing off for each bracket. FB fans used reaction buttons (heart or thumbs up) to vote.

"It's easier to vote with a reaction button and you get more interaction that way," said Jillian Stafford, who handles social media for Parker's, which operates 51 c-stores in Georgia and South Carolina. "Page posts that have a lot of reactions trend higher in the algorithm, therefore increasing the exposure of each voting post."

Another FB promotion that thrilled fans featured a horse who loves the chain's signature Chewy Ice and sweet tea. The horse works at a nonprofit organization that provides equine therapy to disabled children and adults and the post boosted awareness about both Parker's products and the equine therapy initiative.

In another unique post, Parker's celebrated the solar eclipse with a video showing a moon pie moving across a bag of sun chips.

When Hurricane Irma came barreling into the chain's area in September, Parker's posted videos to

FB to show customers it was there for them. Twice daily the chain updated customers on which stores were open as staff had to consolidate at specific stores.

On Veterans Day, Parker's again connected with its community by featuring its employees who have served the country. Parker's recently entertained fans on FB with its Very Merry Gas Giveaway, in which company mascot Chewy surprised customers with a free tank of gas. **CSD**

