

THE UTILIZATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS A MARKETING TOOL IN FOOD TRUCK BUSINESS

Farah Adibah Che Ishak^{1*}, Muhamad Ariff Nordin², Hazrina Ghazali³, Ungku Fatimah Ungku Zainal Abidin⁴ & Ainul Zakiah Abu Bakar⁵

^{1,2,3,4,5} Department of Food Service and Management, Faculty of Food Science and Technology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor

¹farahadibah@upm.edu.my *corresponding author

²ariffnordin.ib@gmail.com

³hazrina@upm.edu.my

⁴ungkufatimah@upm.edu.my

⁵ainulz@upm.edu.my

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Abstract: *The food truck industry in Malaysia shows continuous growth since it was first introduced a few years ago. However, the increasing number of food truck businesses in Klang Valley flags a question on how the owners strategize their businesses to stand up from the competitors. The limitation surrounds this business environment forces food truck owners to be creative in marketing their products to ensure the sustainability of the business; and one of the strategies is by using the social media. This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to identify the strategies used by food truck owners in using social media account as a marketing tool to promote their business. The data collected from semi-structured interviews with a group of food truck owners around Klang Valley area, explaining the way they use social media. Input from social media observation also equipped as supporting data. Results show the strategies used are live update, usage of tagging (hashtags) and wall maintenance. New strategies are also discovered which are paid advertisements, scripted copywriting, mobile application and video production. This study provides an understanding on how food truck owners use social media as a marketing tool and will benefit the current and future food truck owners.*

Keywords: *Food Truck, Social Media, Marketing Tool, Hashtags, Advertisement*

Introduction

The simplicity of social media application as a modern communication technology has enable the food truck industry to grow rapidly in Malaysia (Yusri, 2016). According to Ibrahim (2011), experts and consumers agree that social media is the key in driving food truck business as a cultural icon in the culinary industry. Realizing this current trend, hence, this study was carried out to explore the strategies used by food truck owners in setting and planning their marketing activities through their social media accounts. Studying this particular niche of business will

discover the perceptions of new emerging trends as entrepreneurs and how they position their operation in this challenging market (Pohopien, 2013).

However, despite the popularity that it claims, food truck business faces some issues that need to be resolved. According to Malaysian Digest (2016) in its posting on *Rising Number of Food Trucks, Encouraging the Younger Generation to Become Entrepreneurs*, when the food truck trend set in Malaysia in 2014, there were only three food truck business around Klang Valley. However, the number keeps growing about five new food truck each month and has a total of 70 by October 2016. Random surveys conducted by the team showed that 60% of the consumers chose food truck as it is more convenience, while others preferred permanent foodservice establishment such as restaurant, due to the comfort offered. The benefit and importance of having social media account in food truck business are also highlighted by the researchers, looking at the nature of the business which are mobile, no definite building and did not stay in one place for long. Food truck businesses occasionally move around for bigger opportunities and hoping for higher profit. Because of its mobility, the owners will have difficulty in reaching customers using traditional marketing and this will be a disadvantage to the food truck business without social media platform.

On the other hand, Malaysian consumers are aware with the concept of mobile and convenience of food truck business, but this type of commercial activity faces it's major concern – gap in communication (Ghazali, Bakar, & Din, 2016). The biggest challenge for food truck business is to create awareness among the potential customers and ensure the sustainability of the food truck business (Ideris, Zainum, Mustafa, Nordin, & Zainol, 2017). This increases the difficulties to reach customers especially when food truck owners did not have a definite platform to spread the information about their business to the public. This is supported by Anenberg and Kung (2014) when without mobile communication, the uncertainty of food truck location can reduce the customer's demand as the customers need to go out to confirm if the food truck is at the usual location. With mobile communication technology being embraced by food truck owners, they can broadcast to the public their exact location as well as opening hours.

This study focuses on how the food truck owners utilize the social media platforms as a part of marketing tool and a medium of customer relation. It is specifically identifying the strategies that food truck owners implement in social media account for their business. Despite many researchers have studied about social media in business, there is still lack of information on how food truck owners use social media to broadcast information about their business, particularly in Klang Valley area. Therefore, it is hoped that the findings from this study will fill the gap in the body of knowledge and at the same time benefits the entrepreneurs.

Literature Review

The term “food truck” generally refers to a food supplier which is operating from a mobile vehicle (Hernández-López, 2011). Today, food truck is widely known among the consumers through various names such as gourmet food truck, catering truck, mobile food vendor, and rolling or roving restaurant (Tester, Stevens, Yen, & Laraia, 2010). Other researchers also refer the term “food truck” as a customized motorized vehicle which an operator sells food to consumers. These trucks typically contain cooking facilities that the operator uses to prepare food, and it is sometimes modified as according to consumer's need (Linnekin, Dermer, & Geller, 2014). A food truck usually has a compartment for a driver in the front of the vehicle and a much larger space in the back of the vehicle that the operator uses to take customer orders, cook and serve the food.

Recently, the mobile food facilities or mobile food trucks are showing up everywhere such as on road corners, at school area, in front of businesses, and at special events (Brenda & Joyce, 2013). A contemporary condition that exemplifies the intersection of information technology and the social life of cities is the growing mobile food truck industry. Vital to the achievement of this endeavour are online social media platforms, which not only allow for vendors and customers to communicate various types of information, but also allow vendors to mobilize around a city and activate urban areas (Wessel, 2012). The expanding use and availability of smart phones, global positioning applications, and social media platforms enable food truck vendors to market and announce their businesses offerings and locations (Wessel, Ziemkiewicz, & Sauda, 2016).

Obviously, social media had given chances to both consumers and business entrepreneurs to communicate effectively (Shabbir, Ghazi, & Mehmood, 2016). For the noteworthy advantage of online of social media to the food truck business owner, vendors find Twitter to be a valuable and free mass- marketing tool to communicate to a localized audience their latest locations in a city, daily or hourly menu items, or if they are sold out or out of service. Besides promoting their business, vendors also use Twitter to strategically pick locations to serve on their daily route. For example, vendors find it convenient to check tweets (i.e. 140-character public messages) to understand the locations of their fellow food trucks to avoid an overlap of vendors at the same location (Wessel, 2012).

Since the industry's rapid expansion, food truck owners are increasingly challenged with regulations coming from spatial and economic concerns of municipalities and restaurant owners. In the beginning, parking regulations were loosely defined by municipalities allowing chefs to serve multiple locations in a day with little scrutiny. This short-lived ease of mobility is now challenged by complaints from existing tax-paying restaurant owners who wanted to maintain their property value and thriving business by keeping food trucks at a distance. Viewed as competition, restaurant owners are not just concerned with the close proximity of a food truck, but also whether a truck serves similar types of food or comparable meal portion (Wessel, 2012).

As food trucks are managed generally by local governments, it frequently shows up as tough because there are a number of laws overseeing food trucks. Local governments usually require food-truck operators to obtain some combination of licenses and permits before the municipality will allow them to operate. These requirements are different and can have a dramatic impact on a city's food trucks (Linnekin et al., 2014). These researchers also claimed that food truck parking regulations are the widest variety of rules faced by mobile vendors. Some cities put restrictions on places that trucks can travel or park. In other places, food trucks are not allowed to park or sell in public parking spaces. Consequently, these trucks may operate only on private property.

Thus, the fundamental idea is that the food trucks suffer from a spatial information friction because their mobility makes their location uncertain to consumers. Congestion, parking troubles or mechanical failure can cause a food truck to fail to show up at a previously announced location on schedule. However, wireless internet technology reduces this friction as it allows the food truck to broadcast its location from the road in real-time. Thus, this will reduce the consumer's uncertainty about a food truck's location, thereby increasing the demand for food trucks (Anenburg & Kang, 2014).

Methodology

In this research, qualitative methodology was used, giving focus on phenomenological research design. The phenomenon is studied through the experience and description obtained from the participants of this research. The target was Malaysian food truck owners who use social media to market their businesses. The selected respondents must meet certain criteria before being accepted as respondent. They must be in the population of food or beverage business owners and have active social media account for their businesses. We wanted to understand their experiences in using social media, the way they are currently using it and any changes to the business once they used social media. Hence, the sample for this study was chosen from food truck owners around TAPAK Urban Street Dining Kuala Lumpur and Klang Valley area.

By using qualitative method approach, there were two methods used to collect data needed for this research, which were semi-structured interviews and audio-visual materials. These semi-structured interviews focused on the owners' experience in using social media towards their businesses and identify the strategies used by them to fully utilize social media as a marketing tool for their businesses. Each interview session took approximately 30 to 45 minutes and took place in the participants' area of business, since they were more comfortable in their own areas. Participants' were asked with a few key questions as well as probing questions to dig deeper on their knowledge about social media and how they used it.

As for audio-visual materials, this method helped the researcher to find new information that the participants' may have overlooked and clarify some truth towards what they were claiming during the interview session. This method can be used by collecting visual data through their social media such as screenshots, home page, likes, shares, comments, replies, retweets and other related applications. Morse (1994) stated that phenomenological study needs at least six informants to participate in the study. For the purpose of this research, six informants were identified through snowballing sampling method, whilst fitting the criteria such as running a food/beverage truck business and own an active business social media account. The informants were approached and interviewed.

Results and Discussion

In an active social media account, there are three marketing strategies that have been discovered. Figure 1 shows that these strategies are live update, wall maintenance and the usage of tagging. Food truck owners usually used these strategies as it proved to help boost the business performance and draw the customers to their truck. This finding showed similar result with research done by Hassan et. al (2012), which they focused on general business owners while this study focused on food truck owners.



Figure 1: Similar strategies found in previous study

According to Hassan et. al (2012), wall maintenance means the owners created a catchy wall notes with pictures of their products on a regular occasion. Usage of tagging (hashtags) have been proved to be a reliable strategy since almost all informants use certain hashtags such as #foodtruckkl, #tapakurbanstreet and many more just to attract more audience to visit their social media accounts and possibly become one of their potential customers. As for live update, the owners showed the audience how active their business are by constantly updating their locations on daily basis, new promotions and any interesting activity.

This study also discovered four new strategies that food truck owners use to increase their performance in the social media world which are developing mobile application, video production, scripted copywriting and paid advertisements in the social media (refer to Figure 2).



Figure 2: New strategies found in this study

Besides being asked about the strategies used, food truck owners elaborate in detail about these strategies. They used scripted copywriting in every posting on their social media which includes the general information, location, operation hours, awards and popular hashtags. They also did a teaser and parody video to attract more viewers to their social media account and try to keep up with the current trend. The following excerpt are the feedbacks from the food truck owners:

Informant 1: We really focuses on what we are selling only, such as pictures of us cooking and the products. We use live update to show people what we are doing. Social media really helps in broadcasting our location and menu to the public.

Informant 2: I put some hashtags related to my food truck [business]. The best one is when I was invited for a cooking show and the free marketing there boosted my social media account.

Informant 3: As you can see, all of our posts are scripted. All the information is there such as location, operation hours, awards and everything. For hashtags, we created klfoodtruck, organizedfoodcrime and lafamiglia food truck. Another one is a teaser video that we produced once or twice a year, from a huge investment. We are also the only food truck in Malaysia that has our own mobile application and when you downloaded it, we can make you remember us by sending notifications to your smartphones.

Based on the results from the interview, the culture of social media associated with social media in Malaysia is just beginning to bloom. That is why majority of the food truck owners use the easier platforms available such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. They have been using social media because of the convenience and they are easy to manage. In addition, Hanna, Rohm and Crittenden (2011) mentioned that these platforms are simply not enough to be treated as a stand-alone system in any type of business. That is why, these food truck owners explained that they used social media as a medium to communicate and broadcast their location to the customers. The multipurpose of social media serves a list of benefits to their business.

Furthermore, this norm supported by Mangold and Faulds (2009) where they described in detail that the role of social media fits the idea of communicating with customers through social media platform is relevant and consistent with usage of integrated marketing tool. In the same article, they discovered that the owners take control of the content, timings and frequency of information being broadcasted to the public using social media platforms. This is similar to what the food truck owners are describing when being asked about why they are using social media for the business.

One particular strategy which is live update are similar to a previous study by Armstrong, Kotler, Harker and Brennan (2015) where they stated that social media users are able to inform their customers about the company's development, activity and lifestyle. When it comes to the timings of postings on social media, most of the respondents have scheduled their postings. Some businesses like to schedule their Tweets daily to be more effective in terms of time management and time allocated to create content in social media (Armstrong, Kotler, Harker & Brennan, 2015). They also found the following result which is parallel with the findings of this study:

“All of the businesses interviewed here had tried to implement a strategy which for all the businesses included making regular posts on social media and provision of knowledge and information that would be attractive to clients and was available free of charge.” (Armstrong, Kotler, Harker & Brennan, 2015).

Conclusion

From the results obtained, there were three similar strategies identified that are in line with previous study of Hassan et. al (2012) which are live update, wall maintenance and usage of tagging but the study only focuses on general owners not food truck owners. In addition, four new strategies have been revealed by the food truck owners which are video production, usage of mobile application, paid advertisements and scripted copywriting. Despite the level of knowledge, the food truck owners currently possess on social media, it did not stop them from keep using social media the way they know and try to gain as much audience as possible. It is hoped that these useful findings will be beneficial to the current and future food truck owners in crafting their marketing strategy and fully utilize social media as an effective marketing tool. The results also will fill the gap in the body of academic and perhaps will help future researchers to further study this blooming business.

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