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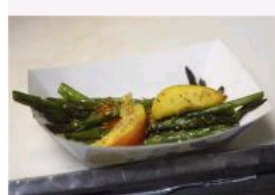


Eyeing diners, restaurants take to Twitter

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By Lisa Baertlein

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - Kogi, a duo of Korean BBQ-inspired taco trucks in Los Angeles, has "Tweeted" its way to international stardom and is inspiring restaurateurs seeking new ways to tempt diners during a deep recession.

Twitter, a free social networking site, is a vital ingredient in Kogi's success. As Kogi's example shows, the service that started as a way for people to follow the 140-character "tweets" of friends and celebrities is quickly becoming a powerful new way for businesses to talk directly with customers.

Because Kogi's trucks visit locations all around Los Angeles, brand director Mike Prasad wanted to create a single place where fans could gather.

"We had to create a home for them. Twitter was a natural fit," said Prasad.

The plan worked. Since launching in November, Kogi has attracted more than 15,000 followers on Twitter(<http://twitter.com/kogibbq>).

IGNORE AT YOUR PERIL

"There is nothing faster for communicating than Twitter," said Aaron Allen, chief executive of restaurant consulting firm Quantified Marketing Group. "You have to be a complete moron to ignore it."

The Twitter conversation "cloud" can give businesses an early read on consumer sentiment, said Shiv Singh, global social media head at advertising and marketing firm Razorfish.

"It serves as a bellwether for mainstream blog conversations," said Singh, who added that frequent tweeters tend to have extreme views and to be influential.

And negative tweets, like bad news, can travel fast.

Domino's Pizza Inc, the latest victim of bad Web publicity, recently launched a Twitter account at twitter.com/dpzinfo as part of its response to a widely viewed employee prank video that showed, among other things, an employee putting cheese up his nose before adding it to a sandwich. Domino's also fired the employees involved.

While Twitter is free and easy to use, experts say success does not come without putting in some sweat equity.

"It does take time and effort and care and feeding," said Chris Brogan, president of New Marketing Labs, a new media marketing company. "If you go silent it shows. It's like not answering the phone."

TWEET ME

Starbucks Corp has more than 140,000 followers on Twitter.


"It's a way for us to answer questions and connect," said Brad Nelson, who oversees the activity on Twitter.

McDonald's Corp and Burger King do not yet have corporate Twitter accounts. Representatives for the companies said explorations are ongoing. Meanwhile, Burger King -- which is among the restaurant industry's most technology-savvy operators -- said the company keeps in touch with the operator of fan page twitter.com/theBKlounge.

Michael Breed, senior marketing manager at Brinker International Inc's Maggiano's Little Italy restaurant, has attracted more than 3,000 followers since mid-February with help from small giveaways.

In Los Angeles, restaurants are looking for ways to stand out from the growing pack.

Quinn Hatfield, of Hatfield's restaurant in Beverly Hills, tweets the ins and outs of creating dishes, punctuated with the occasional mouth-watering picture.



In another part of town, Tender Greens' co-owner Erik Oberholtzer uses Twitter to keep tabs on hardcore fans and to take online marketing to the next level.

Rush Street's Nick Kaufman likes to reward people who tweet while they are dining at the Culver City eatery with things like free drinks.

"It's kind of like I'm the man behind the curtain," said Kaufman, who handles the restaurant's online marketing. "People realize if they follow us they may get something out of it."

(Reporting by Lisa Baertlein, editing by Matthew Lewis)