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The Impact of the Restaurant Critic

Abstract

Restaurant critiques have an effect on the sales volume of restaurants following the publication of the critique in the target markets' media. The author discusses data from restaurant operations in the greater Cleveland, Ohio, metropolitan area which have had their operations publicly critiqued, and also addresses the credibility of critics.

Keywords

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The impact of the restaurant critic

by Rob L. Heiman

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“Let our guests speak good words about us, and we’ll succeed.”¹ These are the words that endorse the concept of word-of-mouth advertising and the significant effects it has upon the consumer acceptance of a full-service restaurant operation. The options that a consumer has in regard to his “social” dining experience today have become so plentiful that buyer loyalty has diminished. The multitude of choices available to the consumer will cause the decision to be made after some “advertising” information has been examined. Word-of-mouth advertising is powerful and has to be addressed by all restaurant marketers.

Restaurants themselves hear from only 4 percent of dissatisfied guests, whereas 96 percent of those unhappy guests go away from the restaurant experience without saying a word to the restaurant proprietor. In addition, 91 percent of those people never return.² Potential customers do listen to other individuals who have already experienced the dining operation and can add testimony as to their interpretation of standards of quality food, service, cleanliness, ambiance, and other tangible and intangible factors.

The newspaper reading public generally assumes that the “restaurant critic” who published his or her observations of a recent personal visit to a local restaurant is, in fact, an expert on evaluation, assessment, and criticism of the factors that the public seeks information on when spending disposable restaurant dollars. After all, does not this critic, one skilled in judging the merits of literary or artistic works³ who has probably visited more eating establishments than 95 percent of the population, know “quality” when he or she experiences it?

Restaurant reviews do influence patrons

A restaurant review, regardless of where it appears or who wrote it, is likely to have at least some influence on restaurant patrons.⁴ Exactly what degree of influence the critic has financially upon the restaurant itself is a question that is to be addressed. Is the critique simply read by the restaurant proprietor him/herself, and dismissed as either truth, fabrication, or incompetent information, basically ignored by consumers? A bad review can cost the restaurant a three-month decline in sales.⁵ Does a good review inversely affect the volume of sales? Will a good review cause the restaurant tables to be full every night and for the days immediately following the published review, and will that volume be sustained for weeks or months to come?

It has been stated as well that 89.9 percent of the restaurants critiqued said that they were influenced by the published critique, but the degree of that influence has not been cited.⁶ A review in a major magazine can mean a 20 to 25 percent increase in business that night, and more business in the next two weeks.⁷ The most effective form of publicity is the restaurant review. This is to be interpreted as either positive or negative publicity, dependent, of course, upon the tone of the critique itself.⁸

With respect to the review process itself, that activity continues to be one of perpetual discussion and scrutiny as to the credibility and reliability of the written review and the reviewer himself or herself. While these restaurant critics may write reviews for various reasons, one thing is certain: They can be injurious to a restaurant's reputation. What's more, if the written review is of little quality and credibility, these writers seriously damage the credibility of legitimate restaurant reviewers as a whole.⁹

Written word does have impact

However, whether the individuals are qualified, competent, and ultimately correct or incorrect in their assessments, it certainly appears that the written word has impact and influence upon consumers choosing an establishment in which to dine. A bad restaurant review could "speed up the process" of putting an already bad restaurant out of business. The good ones do not have too much to worry about from any restaurant critic.¹⁰ A critic can fill a restaurant once, but cannot make it a success. Public opinion often does not agree with the opinion of the critic.¹¹

The written critique should and does cause management of the restaurant to implement changes based on observations now known to the public. Every criticism is examined carefully and can be very disturbing to management and ownership. However, these written evaluations of operations can be used as motivational tools for strate-

gic and operational planning for the restaurants. Management can be given the opportunity to sit with the staff, discuss the critique, assess the information, and implement the necessary changes to improve overall operations.¹²

Study involves restaurants in Cleveland

This empirical study sought to answer three major questions posed to participants which included the full-service restaurant industry of greater Cleveland, Ohio.

- Do you feel that the published review was a fair, just, and impartial criticism of your operation?
- Did the results of the published review cause your operation to make any specific changes? If so, what were those changes?
- For the four months following the published review, what is the percentage of change in revenue that can be most accurately attributed to the customer reaction to the published review?

Due to the nature of the restaurant industry with its very dynamic management personnel, critiques from the past two years only were sought for this study. Published critiques from the Cleveland Plain Dealer (circulation 225,555) and the Sun Newspaper (circulation 100,000) were obtained from the newspaper publishing offices themselves. Of the individual restaurants in the greater Cleveland area, 91 were obtained as usable for the general population of this study.

A questionnaire was mailed to all 91 operations. Within three weeks, 17 questionnaires were returned. A second mailing resulted in a total of 26 returned questionnaires. Phone calls were then made to obtain a final total of 37 restaurants contributing to the data of the study, a 40.6 percent response rate.

In addition to responding to the specific questions of the study, non-solicited comments and criticism of the entire process of restaurant critiquing itself was offered by participants. Some comments follow:

- Only open for 20 days prior to review. We had no way of measuring impact.
- Great review, but we were out of cannolis.
- We will change whatever is reasonable, but we will not change our style.
- I find that Americans read and believe what was written regarding any restaurant.

- We still had “opening” volume; therefore, it is difficult to measure effect of the review.
- Critics don’t affect our crowds.
- A very confusing review.
- The critique in the paper was horrible. The critic himself does not even eat Greek food.
- Our worst review, but business is still steady.
- Most reviews get carried away with some very small, petty, foolish things.
- Opened for a long time, therefore reviews don’t affect us.
- We look at the writer’s personality before assessing the worth of the review.
- Talked to the critic after the review. I still did not think it was fair.

The questionnaire used throughout this study sought the following information: name of operation, address/phone number of operation, date of published critique, specific newspaper of critique, assessment of the review process itself, and monthly changes in sales volume that could most accurately be attributed to the reaction of the public to the review. Budgeted (or normal) sales figures for the four months after the review date were compared to the actual sales figures for the four months following the published critique to ascertain the latter.

Most feel reviews are fair

Respondents were asked if they felt that the published review was fair, just, and impartial. Given the often “subjective” nature of the review process, this response was favorable, with 23 responding affirmatively. All four of the operations responding negatively received a negative review. Perhaps this indicates a certain level of defense mechanism since the operators basically stated that they did not believe that their operations could use improvement in the areas suggested by the review.

Out of the 23 operations that responded “yes” to this question, four received a negative review, and indicated a specific area cited in the review on which management attention will focus to improve operations.

This overall response does generally speak favorably as to the credibility of the reviewers and the process itself in this geographic region. However, those providing negative comments were strong and owners felt very dissatisfied with the overall process of restaurant critiques. It would be difficult to generalize these results to other geographic regions.

Most respondents (20) stated that the reviews did not cause them to make any operational changes. Of those that did make changes, responses were as follows:

- ensure we no longer run out of product; better purchasing
- reviewed the article with our staff and focus on all items with-in critique
- improved attention to our service
- added more staff
- serve our hot food hot; address temperature of our foods served
- improved the quality of our desserts
- clearer printed dinner menu
- printed on our wine menu that there is a "corkage" fee
- hired more help to deal with larger crowds as a result of this review
- use the freshest product possible
- added more employees
- change whatever is reasonable

Operators were asked what would have been their normal projected month to month change in revenue without ever having been reviewed and what was the actual change following the review in monthly revenue for four months (See Table 1).

Table 1
Differences in Actual vs. Projected Percent of Change
in Monthly Revenue Following Critique

	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3	Month 4
A. Range	0-50 %	0-30 %	0-20 %	0-20 %
B. Mode	5 % (7 each)	2 % (10 each)	0 % (16 each)	0 % (23 each)
C. Median	10 %	4 %	0 %	0 %
D. Mean*	11.1 %	7.0 %	2.7 %	1.2 %
(*Actual average percentage change in sales)				
E. Standard Deviation	23.0 %	9.6 %	4.4 %	3.8 %

Note: The numbers do not distinguish between positive or negative changes in revenue, but merely reflect the change pattern.

Data clearly indicate a positive correlation between a published review and its effect on the revenue of the restaurant operation. The effect is short-term as the sales levels begin to return to norms after several months of operations. This could be due in part to the "reader response" syndrome, those who wish to try the published restaurant as well as those few negative reviews that indicate an immediate drop in sales. Consumer loyalty returns within several months which may be in part to the changes made by the operation.

The 11.1 percent change in revenue for the first month following the review is a significant result. Although this dramatic change decreases, those numbers could have a financially devastating (or favorable) impact upon a restaurant. If a restaurant does an average monthly revenue in the range of \$100,000, the impact of this critique would amount to \$11,100 additional revenue for that month.

The restaurant critic does cause changes in modes of operation of the restaurant that are designed to improve the qualities of its business. These changes are those directly suggested or implied by the professional restaurant critic. Therefore, an amount of respect by the restaurateur for the critic is evident. The restaurant critic him/herself, however, continues to be under careful scrutiny and viewed with some skepticism by restaurant operators.

The restaurant industry should continue to be shopped, critiqued, analyzed, and figuratively "dissected" by the public. It can only enhance business opportunities for those restaurants practicing good marketing and operational skills, and ultimately deliver a better product/service mix to the restaurant public.

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