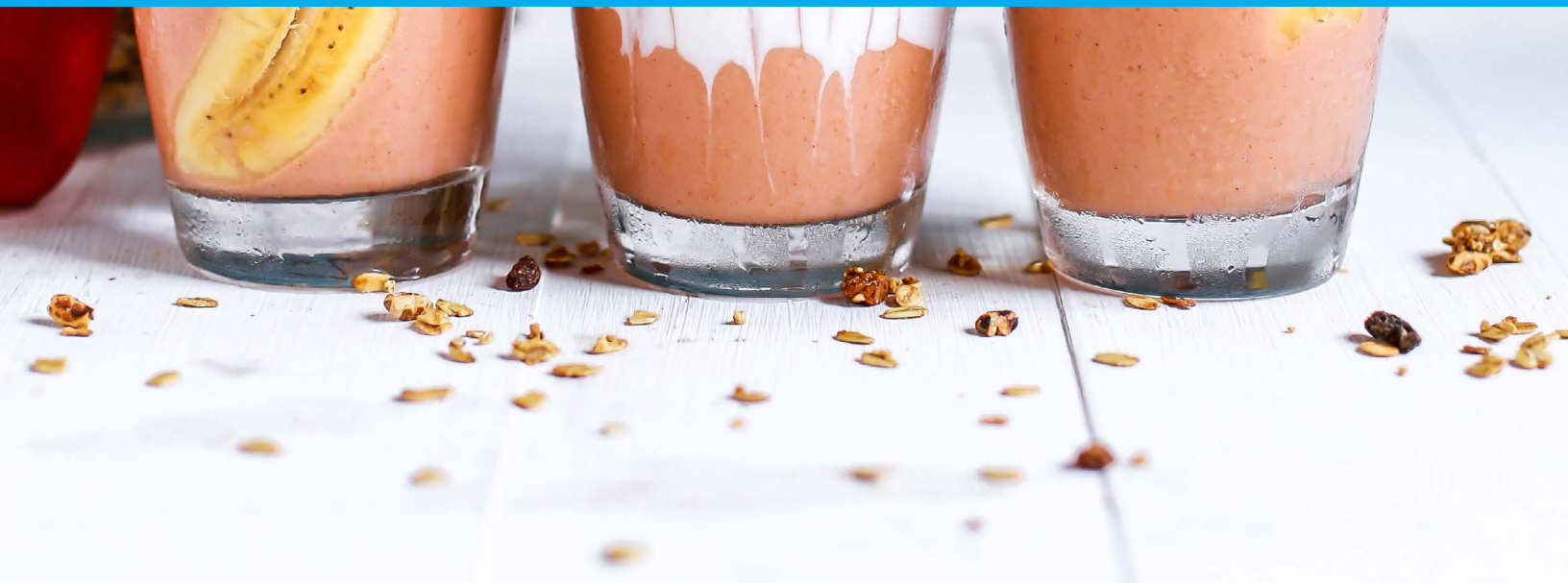




# Gather

## How Social Influencers Impact the Restaurant Industry

Why more restaurants are leveraging Instagram influencers in their marketing strategies



# It's no secret that Instagram has changed the marketing game.

One of the biggest ways is with the rise of "influencers," or people with accounts that have a sizeable number of followers who leverage their online clout by partnering with brands, then posting sponsored content or ads featuring those companies or their products. Some with large enough followings turn this into a full-time career. Lately, restaurants have also started partnering with influencers, helping to raise their awareness with this often-millennial audience.



While Instagram launched eight years ago, the practice of restaurants working with [influencers](#) didn't become popular until a couple of years ago. The concept is simple: restaurants reach out to individuals on Instagram who have a certain amount of followers and ask them if they would be interested in posting about their offerings. Some restaurants offer free food to influencers who post about their dishes, while others will pay for sponsored posts. It's a symbiotic relationship that both parties benefit from. So, why wasn't this idea thought up sooner?

Below, we share some statistics, and get the chance to chat with both Instagram influencers who have made an impact on the restaurant industry and restaurants that have decided to partner with these social media stars to ramp up their marketing efforts.

## By the Numbers

According to a Hubspot survey, **71% of consumers are likely to buy** products or services based on social media referrals. ([Deputy](#))

In May 2015, 84% of marketing and communications professionals worldwide **expected to launch at least one campaign** involving an influencer in the next 12 months. ([eMarketer](#))

An "elite" influencer is someone who posts all of their own photos and typically has an Instagram account that boasts **100,000 or more followers**. ([Thrillist](#))

A 2015 study by Forrester found that engagement with brands on Instagram is **10 times higher than Facebook**, 54 times higher than Pinterest, and 84 times higher than Twitter. ([Brandwatch](#)).

Influencers with more than 100,000 followers can earn close to **\$800 per sponsored Instagram post**. ([AdWeek](#))

77% of people value **user-generated Instagram photos** over commercial photos when making a purchasing decision. ([Eventbrite](#))

According to research done by Zizzi, 18-35 year olds **spend 5 whole days a year** browsing pictures of food on Instagram, and 30% of them would avoid a restaurant if they didn't have a strong Instagram presence. ([Independent](#))

Restaurant influencers can rake in as much as **\$70K a year in free food**. ([Medium](#))

# Q&A

## What Restaurants Are Saying

*Gather talked with Cindy Eddleman, director of sales for [Bread & Butter Concepts](#), a Kansas City, Missouri restaurant group, to get her take on using influencers as a marketing tool. We also chatted with two professionals in charge of social media marketing at [Ocean Prime](#), an award-winning restaurant group with locations across the country. Gretchen Moore is the marketing manager of Ocean Prime, and Allie Schotanus is the director of digital marketing at Priority Marketing (who manages Ocean Prime's national social media channels). We chatted about how social media marketing has evolved, how using influencers has driven in traffic to their restaurant,*

### How did you decide to add social influencers to your marketing strategy?

**Cindy Eddleman:** People are tired of hearing from companies all the time. They want to hear from people they think are cool, people they aspire to be like.

**Allie Schotanus:** You have to be adaptable and take risks in order to stand out in today's market. Social influencers are a fantastic way to generate new content that keeps our brand fresh and relevant.

**Gretchen Moore:** We believe there's value in how our guests interpret what others say about their experiences at our restaurants. Influencers have evolved into a version of modern-day [food] critics, and our guests trust what they say.

### What results have you seen when you've partnered with influencers?

**CE:** We often see a bump in followers and check-ins — including pictures of our restaurants — after we've had an influencer come in.

**AS:** When we utilize social influencers for a special event or promotion, we've seen a 120% increase in overall impressions during the week and a 30% increase in exposed reach (those outside our current following) for whichever platform is being used.



### Has working with influencers had any effect on your private events business?

**GM:** Particularly as it relates to social events like birthday parties, engagement celebrations, rehearsal dinners, and bridal showers — we do see a correlation. With so many social media resources for event planning, décor, and venue suggestions, it's natural for our guests to rely on the influencers they follow for inspiration for private events.





**CE:** Influencers themselves have chosen to have large and small gatherings at our restaurants after coming in on “assignment,” and we’ve seen a bump in large parties after influencers come in and post about their experiences.

### **What do you think makes influencers an effective marketing tool for a business?**

**AS:** We understand [influencers] drive impressions and reach, and can grow a brand’s following. But we feel there is an invaluable gain from this third-party authentic recommendation that has yet to be fully understood.

**CE:** People are tired of getting advertising messages thrown at them from businesses. But they really don’t mind it as much when it comes from influencers — especially because the good ones know their audience

well, and only partner with brands that will appeal to their followers.

### **Do you see better results working with influencers vs. other marketing channels?**

**AS:** Influencer marketing is a modern approach to earned media, and there is an element of capturing trust and allowing customers to see your brand in a more authentic, experience-based way that you can’t get with tactics such as email marketing.

**CE:** For us, they both do well. I think that’s because we target different demographics with each — younger diners are more likely to follow Instagram influencers while older customers are more likely to open their emails — which is why it’s important to not limit marketing efforts to just one channel.

# The Making of an Influencer

*Gather also chatted with **Jeremy Jacobowitz**, president of [@brunchboys](#), an Instagram account dedicated to all things brunch with over 400K followers, and **Christine Yi**, the mastermind behind the famed [@cy\\_eats](#) account (closing in at 200K followers), about their journey to becoming influencers themselves.*

## The beginning

For Jeremy, it was about being in the right place at the right time. “It sort of just came to me. I had this Instagram account before there was such a thing as Instagram marketing, and as my account grew, the industry grew,” he explains. Christine had a similar experience. “I started using Instagram as a personal account, but always had the same handle because I had my blog, CY Eats, for years before that,” she says. “Four years ago, a friend gave me some good advice — he said that I took nice photos, but that I was all over the place, and I needed to stick to my brand CY Eats. I took his advice, posting only food, and [my following] grew quickly. I went from 1,000 followers to 10K in about nine months. And then **10K to 100K in less than a year**. I didn’t plan to get into it, I have no photography background. It happened because I love food. It’s the one constant in my life!” she adds.



## Their favorite part about being an Instagram influencer

For both influencers, their fans play a big role in why they do what they do. “I really like being able to share my passions for everything in life with all my followers,” says Jeremy. “Besides being able to eat all the time, I love my followers!” adds Christine. She realized her fans were the real deal when they started sharing their own stories with her. “[They] are really awesome, very involved, and super supportive. I have started sharing more about my personal life as my account has grown, and everyone has embraced all of it with such kindness. Siblings, couples, families — they all follow me together and communicate with each other and with me via my Instagram account.

**I love how the food that I’m sharing can bring people together.”**

## How they work with restaurants

With an Instagram account that boasts nearly half a million followers, Jeremy lets restaurants come to him when it comes to marketing gigs. “Both restaurants and brands email me to come in,” says Jeremy. “In terms of a partnership, a restaurant is much more organic where I’m just setting up a photoshoot, eating and enjoying the food, and posting about it. With a brand, it’s truly a sponsored post and they’re paying me to create content, so there’s a lot more back and forth in terms of what exactly I’m going to post,” he explains.

The same goes for Christine. “Restaurants, or the PR companies that they work with, usually reach out to me. I rarely contact restaurants, mostly because I receive so many invitations, and it’s hard to keep up,” she says. “Every so often, especially when I’m traveling, I will reach out to a restaurant that I’m interested in



trying, and sometimes it's successful. **My intention is to share my enjoyment of food** and the experience on my Instagram feed, not to take advantage of a restaurant."

## Their impact

So, what kind of impact are these influencers making on the restaurant industry? "Restaurants will tell me about how they saw an uptick in followers and an uptick in brunch reservations... pretty much how they **saw an uptick in everything [after my Instagram post]**," says Jeremy. Christine adds that it's always good and positive feedback. "I love when someone goes into a restaurant and tells them they want to eat whatever it is that I posted," she says. "Last month, I posted a picture of a burger, and a guy who follows me on Instagram went into the restaurant the next day asking for that burger, which is served in limited quantities daily. They had reached

their max for the day, but after the guy showed my post to the owner, they went out of their way to make that burger for him, which he said was as good as I described it to be. That makes me happy!" she adds.

## How they determine whether or not to work with a brand

Working with brands that they believe in are important to both influencers. "I want the brand to make sense on a lot of levels. I want it to be something that I'm interested in and care about. And I want to make sure it's something that I think my followers care about," explains Jeremy. "I only work with brands that I believe in and that I would use or frequent in my normal life," adds Christine. **"The integrity of my brand is very important to me**, because at the end of the day, that's all I have."



## Their thoughts on the concept of influencer marketing

Does influencer marketing work? Jeremy thinks so. "It's really the next level of marketing. It shouldn't feel like a commercial, it should always feel organic and in your voice. **That's when the best type of marketing happens.** And I think that's why it's become so powerful so quickly," he explains.

Christine agrees, but only when it's done properly. "I think influencer marketing can be incredibly successful, and since this is what I do, of course, I am a proponent of it," she says. "But, it makes me sad that there are so many influencers out there that are only interested in the money, or brands that only vet influencers on follower count and not whether the influencer's audience is a good fit for the brand. So many accounts buy followers and likes, and are in engagement groups, whereas I've never bought a follower or like in my life. I work very hard to take beautiful photos, post food that I like, share experiences that I enjoy, and work with brands that I believe in and can grow organically."

## Their advice to other influencers

Originality is something both Jeremy and Christine would have to agree on. "I always say you have to find your voice. You have to find your voice in your content, photos, videos, captions, everything. I think that's when you truly become valuable," he says. "**Be true to yourself and love what you do,**" adds Christine. "Take good photos in natural light (not direct sunlight) and in focus — it's amazing that I need to say that, but so many people post dark, blurry pics and wonder what's wrong."



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