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Social media will put the consumer in

charge of the hospitality industry

Jan 5, 2015, 2:15pm EST

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Plenty of people read user-generated reviews on websites like Yelp and OpenTable before stepping out of the door for a night out with friends or family at a restaurant. And, not surprisingly, that little habit is changing the food industry.

Social media has had an impact on the restaurant industry for a while now, but it looks to have an even bigger impact this year, eventually becoming "truly integrated into the restaurant and hospitality decision-making process," according to a new report by The Next Idea, a hospitality and restaurant consulting firm.

"Monitoring reviews is no longer an option; it's a necessity," [Robert Ancill](#), chairman and CEO, said in the report. "Embracing reviews allows a restaurant or hotel to react quickly, identify and solve issues and find opportunities."

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Ninety-two percent of consumers read user-generated reviews while 89 percent said their purchasing decisions are influenced by those reviews, according to the firm's 2015 restaurant trend forecast.

The social media "phenomenon" puts the consumer in charge of corporate brand reputation since consumers can say whatever they want about a product or experience.

Access to information and healthy food

It's no secret that the American consumer is becoming more and more smartphone-savvy. In fact, 84 percent of respondents said mobile devices are a central part of their everyday lives, according to a study by Salesforce Marketing Cloud, an analytics software firm. Respondents also said they spend an average of 3.3 hours a day on their smartphone.

The consumer's attachment to mobile devices is giving them more access to nutritional information with a touch of a button, and it's affecting people's decision-making. And local restaurateurs understand that.

"You're giving people good, relevant local information, which enhances social media — when there's a local connection," said [Dave Magrogan](#), the restaurateur behind Kildare's Irish Pub and Doc Magrogan's Oyster House. "We can talk about local farmers providing local food, and it impacts the neighborhood. What's helped Harvest [in Harrisburg, Pa.] is sharing information — relevant information. It's relevant to [the consumer's] lifestyle and where they're living, and they notice it."

As more research becomes available regarding healthy eating, children become more aware that "fast food equals bad food," the report said.

[McDonald's](#) has been on a decline in the past year, possibly due to the viral nature of a discovery of some allegedly [expired meat](#) in its Chinese supply plants. The brand is now cooking up a marketing campaign now to counteract the image.

"As a population, we're becoming more in tune with health consciousness and how we eat," said [Rob Wasserman](#), owner of Rouge and 500 degrees. "Restaurants are taking more responsibility upon themselves to clean up their act and how they're feeding their customers [by providing] healthier options."

Francis Hilario covers hospitality, restaurants and takes on general assignments and breaking news.

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