

Food companies add new ingredient: Social networking

March 23 2009, By Matt McKinney

It's not just a dream. Your supermarket really is talking to you. And its says it's time for vitamins.

"Rough night last night? [Hangover remedies](#) abound at the co-op! Kombucha, B vitamins and some soup from the deli and you'll be fine," goes the latest [Twitter](#) update from the Mississippi Market in St. Paul, Minn, where managers Darci Gauthier and Liz McMann keep their fingers at the ready to broadcast via the Internet anything and everything they think their customers might want to know.

Their newfound love of Twitter, a networking service that's part blog and part community message board, comes amid a wave of new experiments in online advertising among food companies.

In how-to videos and video contests, [social networking](#), blogs and tweets, everyone from General Mills to the corner store has ventured deep into new territory in recent months. Target, which sells groceries at its SuperTarget stores, now has 195,000 fans on its [Facebook](#) page. The lunch specials at several local co-ops are updated daily on Twitter. And Betty Crocker will show you how to make a space shuttle birthday cake via short videos at [bettycrocker.com](#).

Some of the experiments have been awkward, but taken together the new ventures are something of an explosion of [social media](#), a term loosely defined as using cheap online tools like Twitter and Facebook to share words, pictures and video.

"We're seeing more and more companies embrace it," said Jason Rysavy of Catalyst Studios, an interactive agency based in Minneapolis. "You can't just ignore it."

It's the medium that's new, not necessarily the message. The video lessons at bettycrocker.com would have made good episodes of the "Betty Crocker Cooking School of the Air," the radio show begun in the 1920s that ran for nearly 30 years.

"The point of these was to create solutions for moms wanting to look for things like princess birthday cakes and pirate cakes," said Jenny Max, who helped create the videos for General Mills. "After watching a two- to three-minute video, it's not as hard as you think."

A handful of other videos show would-be cooks how to make soups, chocolate-dipped strawberries and something called "mini meatloaf."

It's not as though the Internet is short on how-to cooking videos. Sites like instructables.com, metacafe.com and summerkitchen.tv show how to channel your inner celebrity chef, but General Mills kept getting questions on its website asking how to make cakes, said Pam Becker, a General Mills spokeswoman.

The way the company used the Internet to answer those questions is what social media are all about, said Doug Pollei, a social media expert in the Twin Cities.

"Customer service is the new marketing," said Pollei, one of the local organizers of the Social Media Club of Minnesota, a group that meets regularly to talk about the Internet. "It's easier for companies to listen to their customers via Facebook and Twitter, and it's easier for consumers to influence their favorite companies through those same channels."

"You're going to see a lot more activity on this."

Another example started up last month when Organic Valley, the LaFarge, Wis., dairy cooperative, unveiled its own social networking site. The cooperative hopes customers meet up there -- organicrising.com -- to talk about sustainable food.

"We've got hundreds of people who have posted videos, poems, songs," said Sarah Bratnober, marketing director at Organic Valley.

The site has comments like the one from "frequencyoflove," who says her 9-year-old daughter has begun a campaign to start a community garden, with plans to write the mayor of their city. "She and some of her friends are putting together a group and (they) have named it ... 'Girls Gone GREEN' how cute is that!!"

"It allows the consumers, our citizen partners, to inform each other. As opposed to us always saying, 'This is what a healthy future means,' let them tell each other what a healthy future means," Bratnober said.

"If people have trouble they're more likely to turn to their friend than to some authority voice or some corporate voice," she said. "That's really been the stimulus behind a lot of social media success."

Giving customers what they want has been one of the recurring themes with the new online efforts of Minnesota's food economy. It's easier when they tell you, but some companies have ventured out with experiments that guess what customers may want.

Take Hormel Foods Corp., which rolled out a virtual kitchen at hormel.com last fall.

It includes original songs recorded in New York with musicians hired

through Hormel's ad agency, Marsteller Interactive. But do people actually download the music to play on their patio for a barbecue?

"We're getting a lot more requests for music from our commercials," said Scott Weisenbeck, a manager for Hormel.

"The thing with Web sites and brands and the world we live in right now, it's really about letting the customers help us and tell us what they need and want," he said. "What we're talking about is building a better one-on-one relationship with the consumer."

The company has more things coming in the digital world, said Weisenbeck, but he wasn't ready to describe them. For now, he's happy with Hormel research that shows people spend about 10 minutes on average looking around the virtual kitchen.

"The people who do it right will build a relationship with the consumer that will last longer than any single digital tactic that we can do," he said.

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Citation: Food companies add new ingredient: Social networking (2009, March 23) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-03-food-companies-ingredient-social-networking.html>

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