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Influencer marketing: It's all about the buzz

Whether it's through social media or word of mouth, building FOMO is key to a brand's growth.



At MEG 2025, from left, panelists Dan Bejmuk, Alice Crowder, Andre Vener, and Keith Lee discussed how influencers can help restaurants thrive.

These days, it's not enough for restaurants to serve great food and service. They also have to figure out how to market themselves differently from the competition. That can sometimes happen by building brand partnerships with social media influencers who promote their restaurants to wider audiences through reviews, endorsements, and even sponsored posts.

At MEG 2025, the Association's conference for marketing professionals in the restaurant industry, Dreambox CEO & Co-founder Dan Bejmuk, food critic Keith Lee, and restaurateurs Andre Vener of the fast-casual Dog Haus biergarten brand and Alice Crowder of C-store fried chicken concept Krispy Krunchy Foods, discussed how influencer marketing creates "buzz" so restaurants can thrive.

The panelists shared 5 tips to ensure success:

1. Find the right fit with an influencer and allow him or her the creative freedom to authentically represent the brand.
2. Build strong, community-level connections, and allow diverse voices to represent the brand.
3. Empower local franchisees and unit-level employees to voice their opinions over social media, since they are the ones closest to the communities they serve.
4. Leverage mascots, events, and social media activations to generate excitement and engagement.
5. Develop strategic partnerships with larger brands to raise visibility and credibility, while remembering that the fit must be authentic, too.

Bejmuk told the story of NBA player Jimmy Butler, who debuted his successful Bigface coffee company back in 2020. He noted that the Golden State Warriors forward is one of several professional athletes who've introduced brands into the marketplace to great fanfare. To keep the heat on, the former Miami Heat star brewed up a limited-time collaboration with the Salty Donut chain, pairing a specialty cinnamon coffee drink and their churro croughnut pastry, and donating a portion of the proceeds to Project Backboard to renovate public basketball courts.

"You can see professional athletes moving from the sports world to bring their influence into other areas," he said.

Besides partnering with Salty Donut, he pointed out that Butler also collaborated with Artpresso Designs to create specialty espresso machines for the retail market.

Fighting for market share

Vener talked about how Dog Haus has successfully partnered with Jake Paul, a professional fighter, who's also a YouTube influencer. Paul not only amped up the brand's popularity, but also became one of its franchisees. He's opening 25 new stores in Texas, Florida, and Puerto Rico, as part of a deal he signed with the company last year. In addition, he also promotes the brand over social media and has helped create special menu items, including wings tossed in a special sauce called El Gallo del Dorado—the Fighting Rooster of Dorado, a nod to his fighting name in the ring.

"The most important thing for any influencer is that the relationship with the brand has to be right," he said. "JP reached out to us—he tagged us on Instagram and said he wanted in. We thought that was cool, so we met with him in person and found that the brand fit with his personality. He's 28, and is a nice, kind guy. He's also a marketing genius. You know, everything he does on TV and YouTube that you see is kind of shocking, but he's doing it for the entertainment value. In real life he's completely different, and he wants to be part of the brand."

From C-stores to Fenway Park

Krispy Crunchy's Crowder says influencer marketing at her concept is completely different than it is for a lot of other brands. Because the chain mainly trades at C-Stores and in markets, it relies on nontraditional influencers and word of mouth even though it is large—about 3,400 locations nationwide.

"We're the fried chicken stand in your local convenience store or bodega," she said. "When people see me in my shirt with the logo on the front, they say they know who we are and love our product. Those are the people we follow on social media, the ones who love us. We reach out to them. They represent our community, enjoy our food, and know about the 'hidden' spots where they can find us. We embrace that."

The response has been so good, the brand is branching out of C-stores and setting up shop at other locations, like stadiums and arenas. In fact, it's now the official fried chicken of the Boston Red Sox Major League Baseball team.

Authenticity is the message

Social media personality Lee told the crowd his passion for food started when he was an MMA fighter. The Detroit native said he was always watching his diet during his fighting days, but today makes his living conducting restaurant reviews in his car. His food-related content on TikTok has garnered more than 17 million followers. He told the group his authenticity and honesty are big reasons for his success.

Lee noted that people today pay more attention to what influencers say than they have in the past, so the ones who are the most authentic will have the biggest impact. For him, personally, seeing people connect with restaurants and the food is what he loves most.