

BURGERS VS BLOGGERS

Social Media and the Fast Food Industry

Social networking platforms have come out of the closet. Once upon a time they were for adults with too much time on their hands or kids doing whatever it is that kids do online. This is no longer true. These days they have gone mainstream. And mainstream means consumers. Major corporations are starting to wake up to the fact that their customers are using social networks not just socially, but in ways that can have a direct impact on the reputation of their brands. Yet social networks are not necessarily a bad thing for companies. Treated well, they can also serve to help get the message across.

Burger King and Pizza Hut both had their 5 minutes in the online sun in the summer of 2008. The two companies were more visible in social media compared to other fast food chains. Is this a reason to be happy? Well, it depends...

Social media enables two-way communication; customers are empowered with tools which can either make or break the reputation of a brand. This whitepaper discusses how to participate in online conversation with your customers to engage them and win their loyalty.

How the world has changed for fast food restaurants

It's a brave new world. What used to be a burger-eating, fries-munching public, has turned into a health-oriented, food-conscious group of consumers counting carbs and worrying about the origin of their meat (unless they belong to the growing group of vegetarians). With diabetes and obesity at an all time high, people are looking for more wholesome products in their fast food menus.

After years of criticism for the harmful effects of a fast food diet and to better serve their calorie-conscious consumers, fast food restaurants have had to go through a partial metamorphosis. Instead of burgers made from cheap fat-laden meat, most fast food chains have included a healthier option on their menu. Strategies for advertising campaigns have also evolved over the past 10 years.

McDonalds, as the global pioneer in the fast food industry (see Chart 1), has been in the line of fire for over a decade. Once a byword for successful strategy, now its recipe for

success is being questioned. No other fast food chain before or since has had to work so hard to keep its customers.

While McDonalds continues to market towards children and families, it has taken many efforts to try to alter its image. Besides changing menus to include salads and low fat items, McDonalds is taking part in environmental ventures and educating its customers. The company has opened a website that depicts, among other things, the origin of the McDonalds beef patty all the way from the farm until it gets slid between the two halves of a bun and served to a customer. Yet the war continues, as many people remain skeptical about the good intentions of McDonalds and the healthiness of their food.

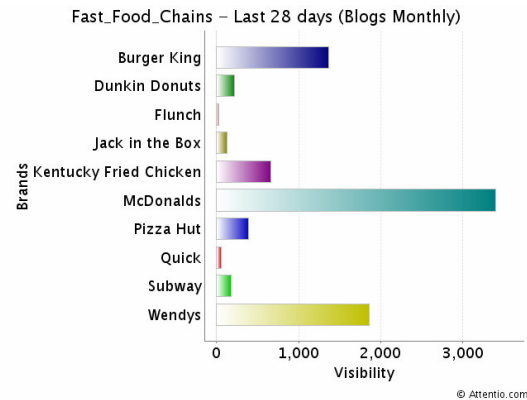


Chart .1: Attentio Brand Dashboard, blogs from October 3rd 2008 to November 3rd 2008

Fast food generates buzz in social media

And why wouldn't it? Everyone likes fast food and those who don't, usually have strong opinions on the subject.

Discussions in European forums and blogs on the subject of fast food cover areas as diverse as rising prices, new items on the menu or favourite meals at specific fast food chains. Forum participants also discuss the differences between restaurants in the same chain, comparing and rating them. On forums centering on health and well-being, fast food is discussed in terms of which items on the menu are suitable for people with different medical conditions such as IBD, coeliac disease, lactose intolerance and other food allergies.

McDonalds – “I’m loving it”

Towards the end of the summer of 2008, the buzz on Belgian forums is about McDonalds. An American online dieting site called Diet.com has uploaded a video that has been picked up by a Belgian forum participant. The 4 year old McDonalds Happy Meal¹ video shows some old but frighteningly well preserved fries and a burger from McDonalds. The scary burger generated over 300 posts in less than two weeks.

“ People who care about 'green issues' dont go to 'Chavdonalds' - unless driven by desperate necessity for the loo or a hot drink when all else is closed! ... Macdonalds dont care about anything Green - they only care about their profits and their 'image' - ' la la la la....theyre SHOVIN' it! ” (UK)

McDonalds in the news

In the news, the highest buzz is reached in September 2008 where the main topic is the British city of Liverpool’s proposed ban on the Happy Meal as a means of combatting childhood obesity. Unless McDonalds promises to make its food healthier for children, the ban will take place and it is likely that other cities will follow in Liverpool’s footsteps. At the same time, the Swedish and Finnish press are reporting that the safe decibel limit is being exceeded by some of the toys included in the Happy Meal. The European Union has ordered McDonalds to withdraw the toys from the Happy Meals.

Towards the end of September 2008, the buzz for McDonalds is decreasing (see Chart 2) but it is still the hottest topic in Dutch, Belgian and British social media, and the main topic is the story of an American man having eaten 23 000 Big Macs² during the past 32 years with no apparent ill effects.

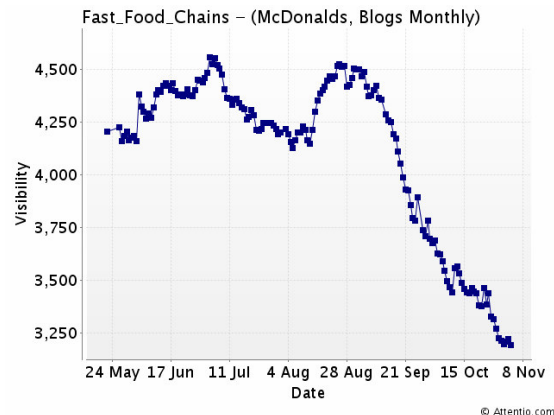


Chart . 2: Attentio Brand Dashboard, blogs from May 23rd 2008 to November 3rd 2008.

“ Since when has a McChicken Sandwich risen to £4. It used to be something like £3.60, I know the price has gone up on most things but my Mc Chicken Sanwhich is one step to far _At least it'll get me off the junk food ” (UK).

Burger king – “Have it your way”

Burger King has, after many failed attempts to increase sales, decided to focus on developing a hip and urban image. To complement this it will move its target market segment away from the family to a less conventional group .

Burger King is concentrating on the “superfan”, the 18-to 35-year old male who make up only 18% of Burger King’s customers, yet account for about a half of their visits. The central figure of Burger King’s marketing strategy is the absurd “King” himself, who appears in the most unexpected situations, always with the same artificial smile plastered on his face.

An incident where an American Burger King employee bathed in the sink after his shift gets Europeans buzzing in mid-August. The now notorious Timothy Tackett did get fired after the story had leaked, yet the video still got viewed in [YouTube](#)³ alone close to 500,000 times in 3 weeks. The UK and the Netherlands, countries where Burger King operates, create buzz about the incident, which is seen as both highly disgusting and highly entertaining.

¹<http://www.9lives.be/forum/showthread.php?t=588369>

² <http://www.aldenteblog.com/2008/09/you-think-you-l.html>

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1iyN7Y-jJQ>

“Hilarious shit. I would never go to that burger king again!!”
(UK)

In September, a Dutch blogger⁴ reports about Burger King's latest commercial move, a weekly online animation series starring the "King". The series is from the makers of the hit series [Family Guy](#)⁵ and the first "episode" was viewed 800 000 times within 6 hours.

Another one of Burger King's new controversial ad campaigns developed by the German-based ad agency Start, was welcomed in Europe with very little fuss, while American social media users were buzzing about the campaign for weeks. The new VegCity⁶ campaign illustrates an onion being stripped searched by a pickle ("strictly controlled ingredients"), tomatoes being mass slaughtered on the streets (for fresh ketchup) and many other colorful comic strips. In Europe, the campaign has seen very little attention, but the US went as far as to dedicate a blog to "[What is Burger King thinking?](#)"⁷

Although at the moment Burger King doesn't operate in Belgium, Belgians are familiar with and enthusiastic about the restaurant (after all, Holland is just next door).

Subway – “eat fresh”

Subway Sandwich, another American chain that has won the hearts of Europeans, generates a relatively low buzz throughout the summer of 2008. In the UK, Subway's buzz includes conversations about its high prices, blog entries where Subway is mentioned as a pit stop "to get something to eat" and complaints about the market overflowing with restaurants/sandwich bars offering only sandwiches.

An English forum participant asks "[What is your perfect Subway?](#)"⁸ and starts a thread of over 90 posts. The British also wonder if Subway should actually be considered as fast food since it appears to be relatively healthy. Then again, not even Subway is safe from criticism. The sandwiches are accused of having excess salt levels, and some skeptics doubt how fresh they really are.

⁴ <http://youngmarketing.web-log.nl/youngmarketing/2008/09/burger-king-1aa.html>

⁵ <http://www.familyguy.com/>

⁶ <http://www.vegcity.de/>

⁷ <http://idea-sandbox.com/blog/2008/07/what-is-burger-king-thinking/>

⁸ <http://www.neowin.net/forum/index.php?showtopic=623839>

In Belgium, some forum participants wonder whether Subway restaurants exist outside Brussels; there is clearly demand among the "broodje" eating Belgians.

“Pretentious fast food disguised as health food”
(UK).

Forums and Facebook are full of fast food fans

The Belgian national market leader in the fast food industry is Quick, whose concept does not differ dramatically from that of McDonalds. Another thread that explains the peak in Belgian forum buzz is the informal poll with the topic [McDonalds or Quick](#)⁹, set up by one of the forum participants at the end of July 2008. According to the poll, roughly 62% of forum participants prefer the American competitor to the domestic one (37%).

Pizza Hut's buzz rockets towards the middle of October (see Chart 3), when the chain announces a new service: the ability to order a pizza delivery via Facebook, the popular social networking site.

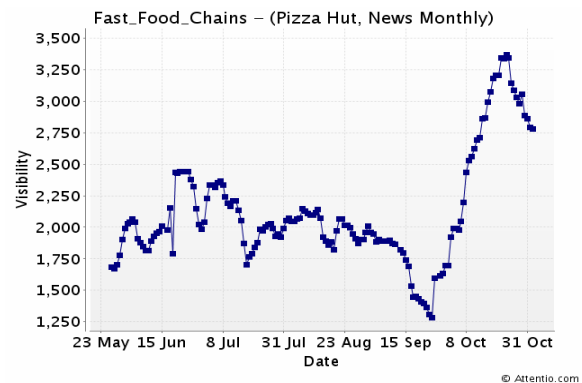


Chart 3: Attentio Brand Dashboard, online news from May 23rd 2008 to November 3rd 2008.

Health vs. junk food

People eat fast food because it is convenient. They know it's not good for you, but a treat now and then can't hurt. In social media conversations, fast food is often mentioned in connection with satisfying a craving, having a rotten week and wanting to make oneself feel

⁹ <http://forum.vt4.be/showthread.php?t=3604>

better or just grabbing something fast on the go.

When it comes to the health aspects of the fast food industry, conversations in social media show the diversity of interested parties – there are the health freaks, the environmentalists, the junk food enthusiasts, the occasional indulgers in fast food and the people who don't know any better (and lack the ability to cook for themselves). Some of these people will always be protesters and skeptics, but some of them can be won over.

“ I would argue here that this is not so much the healthcare issue. People with good diets live longer than those with bad ones. Can't blame the healthcare system because someone eats McDonalds all day long. ” (UK)

Adding healthier choices to the menu, also changes the clientele, but there is still room for improvement. Shaking off the image of a “junk” food chain is a hard thing to do.

Social media users also raise the point that fast food companies cannot be solely blamed for childhood diabetes or obesity. The key is in moderation, and ultimately, responsibility lies with parents.

Conclusions

Burger King learned their lesson the hard way. The potential of word of mouth is great; positive or negative messages have a greater than ever ability to spread – though social media platforms.

Good news still travels fast though. Pizza Hut engaged online to be closer to their customers. This was immediately spotted and created a lot of conversations. Many people appreciated the initiative and it is likely that this positive feeling translated into increased sales for Pizza Hut.

Even non-digital brands have their digital life. It is easier to manage brand reputation or solve crisis situations if customers' perception is known through monitoring and measurement. A crucial requirement for company strategy is to know how to participate in active communication with customers in order to help build a positive brand image.

About Attentio

Attentio is a fast growing market intelligence company based in Brussels, founded in 2004. We are pioneers in Europe in the world of Social Media monitoring, measurement and analysis.

Attentio provides the Brand Dashboard, a web application that enables real-time monitoring and measurement of social and mainstream media. We cover all relevant sources for the brands we track, including but not limited to: blogs, forums, news, and video logs.

We are working with some of the biggest brands including Microsoft, Johnson & Johnson, Samsung, Toyota and with many major European PR and digital agencies. For more information or to schedule a demonstration of the tools, please contact Attentio Team.

Learn how online market intelligence can benefit your business:

- Measure your PR effectiveness
- Improve marketing return on investment (ROI)
- Protect your brand reputation
- Impact customer generated buzz and word-of-mouth
- Aid execution of new product launches
- Detect early trends and gain competitive advantage

Attentio SA
Rue aux Fleurs 32, Level 2
B-1000 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: 0032 221 98 666
Fax: 0032 221 75 083
mail: attentiocontact@attentio.com
blog: <http://www.attentio.com/blog>
twitter: attentio
web: www.attentio.com