

CASE STUDY

STUDENTS' SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT POSITIVELY IMPACTS MEAL PLAN AND FOOD PURCHASES

2 Campuses Share Strategies

In April 2017, the **University of California, Irvine's** student dining program discovered an interesting correlation between its social media activities and sales. As the number of followers increased on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, so did campus meal plan sales. And as social media interaction increased among students, so did sales at its campus retail dining locations.

From April 2016 to April 2017, social media activity grew by a whopping 106 percent at UCI. During that same period, meal plan sales grew by 21 percent, a significant increase considering that nationally **meal plan sales on higher education campuses** have not performed as well. Further, before-tax revenue grew by 20 percent.

If this sounds like a fluke, consider that **Stephen F. Austin State University** experienced the same phenomenon. For example, one of SFA's most successful recent food campaigns was promoted on dining services' social media platforms. The result was a 3 percent increase in food sales during the week of the campaign.

These two schools are the first in what is likely to become a long list of campuses boosting their meal plan and food sales by boosting their students' social media engagement with their dining programs.



The trend is just now in the beginning phases as higher education food programs begin taking their social media platforms seriously, and start encouraging greater interaction by students.

Aramark DiningStyles Student Survey's Social Media Findings

The social media-dining program correlation experienced by both universities also correlates with results found in the Aramark DiningStyles Fall 2016 student survey. Among the many insights, the survey measured students' social media use and dining purchasing behavior. These two insights from the 2016 survey of 131,518 students support the universities' results:

- Students who are engaged with campus dining social media believe they spend an average of \$27.66 a week on campus. This is \$6.67 more than students who are not engaged—a 32 percent increase. The effect on perceived spending appears higher among those who engage on Facebook. (Note: Platform engagement is not mutually exclusive; for example, a respondent may engage with dining on Facebook and Instagram.)
- Students who engaged with the dining services over social media are more apt (47 percent extremely likely) to recommend the dining services than those who are not engaged (34 percent). The likelihood of recommending the dining service among both groups of students improved from 2015 to 2016.

Additionally, the Aramark DiningStyles Fall 2015 student survey shows social media as the second-most preferred channel for communication, growing 1% over last year. In 2016, social media was preferred by 32% of customers, compared to 38% for email. Among the students, Facebook has the highest rate of student engagement.

Research outside of Aramark also supports the idea that millennials and Gen Zs are more inclined to participate with things with which they are socially engaged. For example, one of the findings of a study on millennials' and Gen Zs' attitude toward social media by Mintel, [Marketing to the iGeneration](#), found they "view social media as a way to influence and be inspired by the world around them."






Impact of Social Media on Food Sales at UCI

According to Tyson Monagle, marketing manager for Aramark's dining services at UCI, "The more we post on our three social media platforms, the more we notice a growth in our meal plan sales overall. There are other factors, such as a new dining hall, and we also have a more robust email program. But there's no denying the impact of our social media program."

Regarding an immediate impact on food sales, Monagle said: "We've noticed when we publish certain posts, food sales are typically higher and we gain more traffic in our residential dining venues. What's more, when they engage with social media posts by, for example, tagging their friends, they seem to spend more money. We definitely see a correlation."

Here are highlights from UCI's social media and dining sales growth.

SOCIAL MEDIA FOLLOWING

	APRIL 2016	APRIL 2017	GROWTH %
 INSTAGRAM	1361	2798	↑ 106%
 FACEBOOK	3593	4061	↑ 13%
 TWITTER	868	1224	↑ 41%

VOLUNTARY MEAL PLAN SALES APRIL 2016 TO APRIL 2017

21%
INCREASE

PLANS SOLD

20%
INCREASE

REVENUE
(before tax)






UCI had two particularly successful social media experiences. One success came when a new Starbucks opened on campus. "Students were commenting a lot and tagging their friends," Monagle said. "There was a lot of engagement." In another social success, UCI used the Coachella music festival as an opportunity to launch a small social media campaign called Foodchella. "A lot of students attend Foodchella, so we decided to do a themed event based on the food of the festival. Our posts received a lot of retweets, likes and comments, such as 'This is why I go to UCI.'"

Impact of Social Media on Food Sales at SFA

Here are highlights from SFA's social media and dining sales growth.

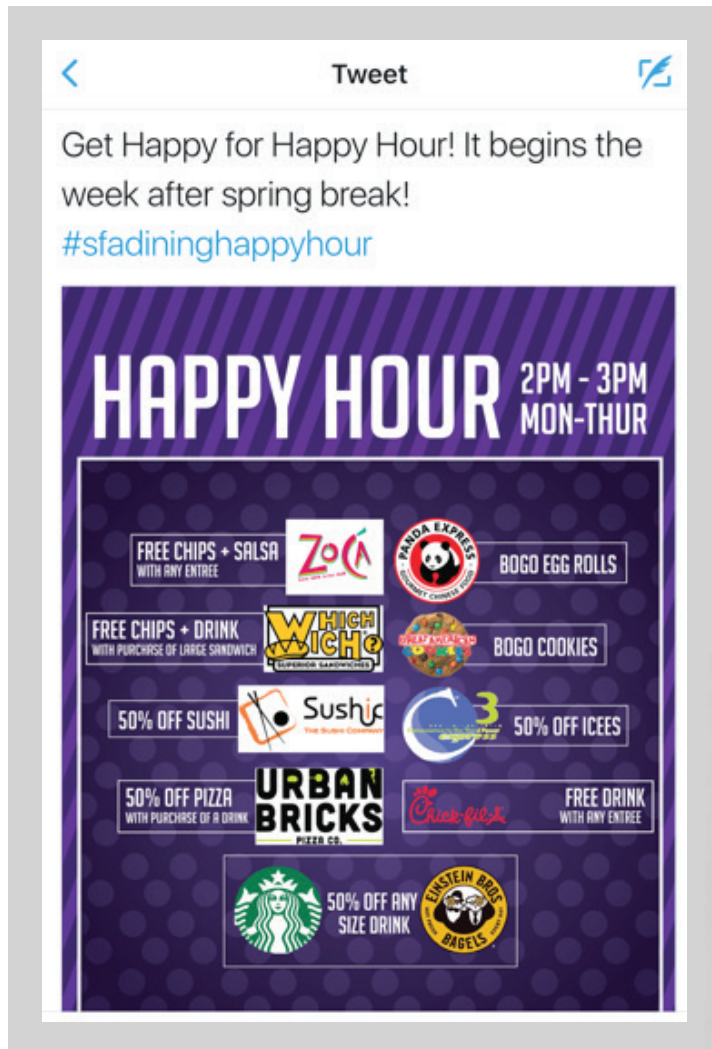
STUDENT SOCIAL MEDIA FOLLOWERS AS A PERCENT OF CAMPUS POPULATION

	FOLLOWING	PORTION OF ENROLLMENT
 INSTAGRAM	1794	↑ 19%
 FACEBOOK	4919	↑ 51%
 TWITTER	1717	↑ 18%

DINING SHARE OF SPEND (DINING STYLES SURVEY)

STUDENT COMMUTER SHARE OF SPEND

FALL 2015	13.93
FALL 2016 AFTER HAPPY HOUR CAMPAIGN	14.29



The chart above shows the results of one of SFA's most successful social media campaigns—promoting a new program called Happy Hour. The promotion, which took place the week following spring break 2017, offered specials at participating on-campus locations from 2 to 3 p.m. “Happy Hour was a huge success and social media really had a big impact on that,” said Candace Bell, marketing manager for Aramark dining services at SFA. “We saw total sales go up by 3 percent at participating venues. It was so popular that when it was over, students were posting comments like, ‘When is Happy Hour coming back?’”



Social Media Best Practice Recommendations

How can your school's dining program get the same great results as UCI and SFA? The institutions' marketing managers share their best practices in engaging students in their social media platforms.



USE FACEBOOK FOR FOOD PROMOTIONS AND SALES

UCI and SFA use Facebook to announce updates, such as meal plan sales, special deals and discount offers. They'll also mix in general, broad informational posts, such as Wellness Wednesday tips at UCI.

An example of using Facebook is this UCI meal plan Black Friday promotion. →





USE TWITTER FOR STUDENTS' QUESTIONS, COMMENTS, SUGGESTIONS

The institutions use Twitter primarily as a customer service feedback platform. Students with dining issues can post questions or concerns and get responses. Monagle said he also uses the platform to announce updates, such as dining specials.

"We encourage students to post their complaints and compliments on Twitter," said Bell. "For example, if the bagels were too hard one morning or if they really liked the chicken fried steak. That's where we want to drive that feedback. If students ask for something specific, such as more vegan meal options, we'll add them to the menu, then post images of our new vegan dishes."

Bell added: "We'll also reach out to students who reach out to us by, for example, treating them to a drink at Starbucks if they're feeling overwhelmed with finals. As a result, it's important to always be responsive to the students when they post and comment on Twitter."

For example, at SFA, a student wrote on Twitter: "I wish we had these at our school," with a link to an image of to-go fruit cups. Shortly after that, the school added them to the dining program. The student followed up with this appreciative tweet. →





USE INSTAGRAM FOR OFFERS, EVENTS, GIVEAWAYS

The schools use Instagram as a visual-oriented medium, in particular, sharing photos relevant to the day of an event, such as the opening of new food venues or food-related events. For example, UCI posted scenes from a Farm to Fork event held in one of its dining venues, and photos from a new Starbucks that opened on campus.

“If a student is following us and really wants to be in the know about our events, Instagram is their best option,” said Bell. “That’s where they’ll find real-time information, such as what’s being served in the dining venues. We also like to post images that reflect national food days, such as Donut Day. It’s also where we see the most engagement of cool photos or fun videos. We aim to be exciting on Instagram.”

A great example is SFA’s “Fuel Up for Finals” promotion, with a delicious-looking coffee drink held up by a barista in the on-campus Starbucks. →



HOLD SOCIAL MEDIA SIGN-UP PROMOTIONS

Both universities run campaigns to encourage new students to follow their social media platforms at orientation, as well as other school events throughout the year. A popular promotion is a prize wheel. Students spin the wheel to win T-shirts, water bottles or other prizes. They receive the prize as soon as they sign up on one of the social media platforms.

“Students line up miles deep to spin the wheel,” said Bell. “The orientation fairs are our biggest social media acquisition events. We’ll also do promotions at the end of the semester and during customer appreciation week.”



♥ 17 people like your photo

sfadining Check out Fuel up for Final BOGO deals at the C-Store, Einsteins and Starbucks! #fuelupforfinals



dvegaomega

Is there a time? Or all day thing??

36m



sfadining

All day all week

2m



LOOK FOR CAMPUS-SPECIFIC ANGLES

“Some of our most successful posts are when we’re UCI-focused, tying the information to ‘our campus’ versus just general information,” said UCI’s Monagle. “There’s a lot of campus pride at our school and we like to tap into that with the students.”

UCI focused on a campus history lesson, which reached 2,884 people and garnered 14 reactions. →



UCI Hospitality & Dining

December 30, 2016 · 🌐

Who was at UCI? The Jao Family Sculptures! Fun fact: these statues were donated to UCI in 2005 and were relocated from Little Saigon in Westminster! #history #uci



POST ON ALL SOCIAL MEDIA DAILY

“It’s pretty much our strategy to post on each of the handles at least once a day,” said Monagle.

To ensure you always have images to post, create a content “library” of photos, including menu items from campus dining venues and retail locations. You can also include images of dining staff members. That way you will never be stuck without high quality content to push out on social media. If, for example, your campus is hosting a special event on Friday, the team can use images from the content library to hype the event beforehand, then post images live from the event.

Here’s an example of a day-of campus dining event posted on UCI’s twitter account during a Sustainable Foods Fair. →



UCI Dining

@UCIDining

TODAY! Sustainable Foods Fair at Gateway Plaza! Learn about #UCI's #sustainable food systems, enjoy delicious food samples & win prizes! 🌱💚🐛



RETWEETS
2

LIKES
8



7:48 AM - 20 Apr 2017 from Irvine, CA



2



8



From the early results at UCI and SFA, it's clear social media offers the potential to become a positive force to promote on-campus dining programs on today's campuses.

Aramark offers the insights, expertise and proven systems to help higher education institutions tap into the power of social media to drive food and meal plan sales.

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