

Does Your Branded Franchise Need Its Own Social Media Strategy?

By Taylor Hulyk

Feb. 15, 2012

Taylor Hulyk is the social media director at [re:group](#), a marketing agency in downtown Ann Arbor, Mich. You can follow her on Twitter [@taylorhulyk](#).

While social media can perplex a single business unit, imagine the challenges and multidimensional complications that can arise when a franchisor decides to incorporate social media into his or her integrated communications plan. Social media does not dictate an entire marketing program, but it must be approached with the same level of attention and definition as the rest of its marketing counterparts.

When considering social media within the bounds of franchising, the questions of how one designs, develops, executes and measures the program multiply tenfold. The franchisor, unlike other business owners, has to be concerned with the performance of several franchisees as the continuous extension of his or her brand.

It all comes down to structure. Should franchisors manage brand social media from a corporate perspective, or should they empower franchisees to do so on a local level?

Whether to pursue a centralized or decentralized approach to social media really depends on the individual franchise. Franchisors, answering the following questions may help you decide which approach works best for your system.

1. Does your business warrant an individual social media page for each location?

For instance, are there components of your business that vary significantly location to location? All franchisees believe their markets are different, and, in fact, they often are. They may be urban or suburban. They may have customers with different demographics or socio-economic status. But are they so different that you accommodate that difference by allowing variation in your products, pricing, coupon offers, marketing, promotions, décor, etc.? If the answer is yes, entrusting franchisees with locally oriented social media may actually be more beneficial, not only for the customer, but for your workload too.

EXAMPLE: Buffalo Wild Wings does a great job delegating [Facebook](#) page management to individual locations. While content seems to vary by franchisee, an active presence, a hefty fan base and relatively regular level of interaction does not. Below you can see Buffalo Wild Wings's Lynchburg, VA page regularly shares updates about specials, sporting events and in-store events.

2. Who are the typical consumers of your product?

Are your product's consumers likely to be on social media? Where are they already consuming information, and can your appearance on social networks enhance the content they are already receiving from the other sources? If the answer is no, then sticking with a centralized strategy will better serve your social media audience, versus attempting to target customers in certain regions who just aren't online yet.

EXAMPLE: Qdoba has a product that naturally translates into social conversation. Instead of creating social media profiles for each location, Qdoba settled on profiles per region. The SoCal [Twitter](#) page below is managed by Nate and Justin, who post things relevant to the southern California audience.

3. How is your system structured and your marketing managed?

Do you have exclusive territories, and do franchisees market collectively in co-ops? Are most of the marketing decisions made and implemented centrally? Or are franchisees empowered to run their own marketing initiatives? Is your business comfortable with distributing control of your brand? If not, then a decentralized approach may not be right for you.

EXAMPLE: McDonald's manages a corporate Facebook page while allocating a tab for local content. If you type in a zip code, content will appear that's catered toward to the specific region. This allows for centralized corporate oversight of local content management.

4. What is the nature of your business?

Are you in a regulated industry? Does your business include handling of proprietary information, either your own or that of your customers? Does public communication constantly need to be approved by legal before being shared? Is there potential risk of real damage to your company or your customer by inadvertent sharing of confidential information? Are you in a position where you can quickly do damage control if something bad happens? This may be true with certain companies in the health, law, insurance or governmental fields. If this is the case, consider whether you are able to put adequate controls in place to permit real-time (or frequent) social media interaction at a franchisee level.

EXAMPLE: While 7-Eleven is not in a regulated industry, it does have a major volume of individual retail locations, and therefore follows a centralized Facebook strategy. This approach may make sense when the liability is too high to entrust thousands of locations to post content that reflects your brand name. 7-Eleven franchises and licenses over [40,000 stores](#) worldwide. While there are brand pages for different countries such as Thailand, individual store pages are few and far between.

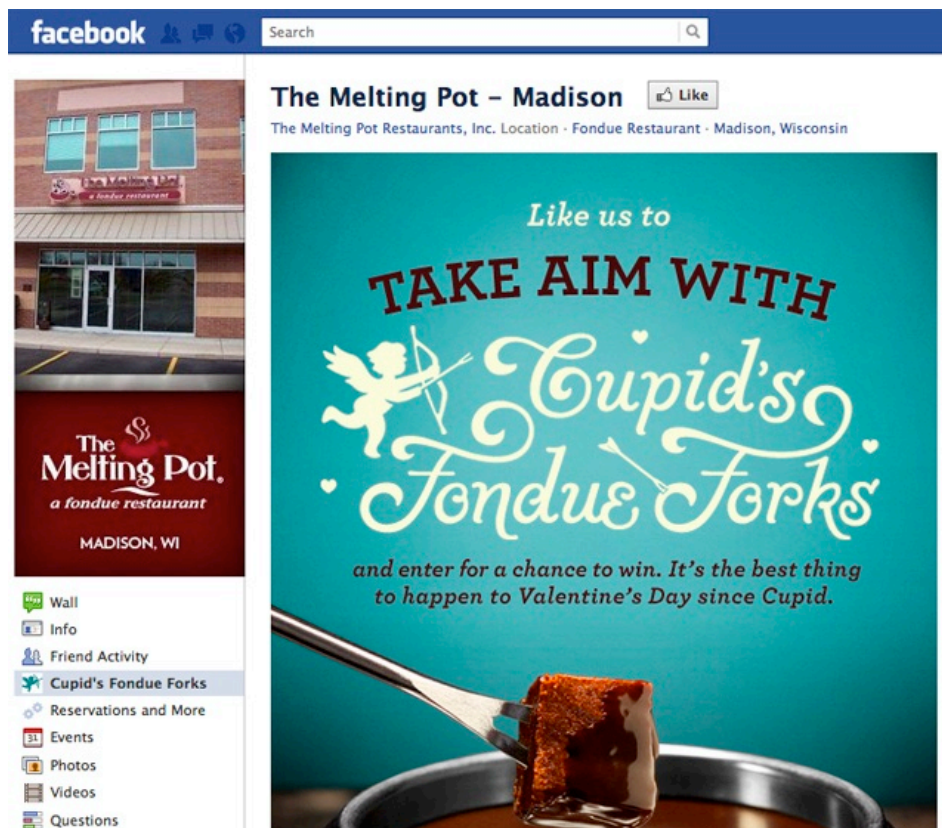
5. Does your business benefit from a close relationship between franchise owner and customer?

If you are in a service business, chances are it is really important for the customer to get to know the franchisee as a trusted resource. Social media can facilitate that personal connection. It allows franchisees to humanize the brand — their interests, their community involvement and their special expertise. Creating a social media program that allows franchisee customization and personalization of communications can be really important part of their building strong customer relationships.

EXAMPLE: Smashburger, from location to location, consistently succeeds at conversing with its customers. The example below is from Smashburger New Jersey's Twitter. Notice how many customer interactions are in the tweets pictured.

6. Are you willing to invest in resources?

Are you willing to invest in resources to ensure that your corporate team members and your franchisees are educated in social media monitoring, management, response strategies, content generation, interaction and measurement? Do you have adequate corporate staff to monitor and guide the system social activity? If so, you will need to put together a social media guidebook and education program for franchisees that includes your social media policy, brand standards, social media strategy, brand voice, ad templates, etc. If you are not, then a centralized approach may be better for your organization.



EXAMPLE: The Melting Pot has done a great job keeping brand consistency over multiple Facebook pages. In the Madison, WI example below, each franchisee has been provided a Facebook tab template for the corporate Valentine's Day promotion to support their local efforts.

7. Can your franchisees realistically manage their own social media platforms?

It is important to consider the resources that typical franchisees have at a local level. Social media takes time, education and constant platform management. Do your franchisees have the time to manage these things themselves, or will they need to educate an employee? Is this in their budget? If not, a centralized approach may work better.

EXAMPLE: Dunn Bros's Anoka, MN location manages a Facebook Page that it updates with location-specific content every day. The Page is also monitored on a regular basis. Timely responses are provided to those that engage them.

Answering the above questions should help you decide whether to take a centralized or decentralized approach to your social media program. Remember, every franchise is different. You ultimately know your business the best; only you are best suited to decide the direction of your program.

If you review the above examples again, you can see that companies like McDonald's and Qdoba are pursuing strategies that do not fall wholly into one category or the other. It is possible to have centralized control and offer your franchisees the opportunity to have a local voice. Customize a program that works best for you, and make sure that it is treated as an integral part of your overall communications program.

Note: After reviewing the examples above, if you are veering toward a centralized approach to social media, please recognize that this does not necessarily mean the route will be simpler. Pursuing a centralized structure means you will be challenged with a higher volume of brand activity. Depending on the size of your business, this may require a team of people to manage your online presence. Remember, these people will have a hand in various brand functions, not just simply updating your social networks. They may be resolving customer issues, painting the brand as an expert in your industry, prospecting new clients and collecting customer feedback for product development, among other things.