

## Social Media Displaces Mom for Food Facts

Almost half of American consumers learn about food via social networking sites, such as Twitter and Facebook, according to a new study. While eating or drinking at home, nearly one-third of Americans use social networking sites. Among millennials (18–32 years old), this figure jumps to 47%.

MSLGROUP Americas and The Hartman Group conducted a joint study, *Clicks & Cravings: The Impact of Social Technology on Food Culture*, to learn more about the changing consumer behavior. (To obtain a copy of the complete study, contact [blaine@hartman-group.com](mailto:blaine@hartman-group.com).) On a fundamental level, the study found that social and digital media is displacing mom as the go-to culinary source of knowledge for many people.

How Americans learn to cook, select recipes, plan meals, purchase food, and share culinary secrets has dramatically changed in the past few years. The new online culinary culture has profound implications for how food and beverage marketers use social and digital media to build meaningful and profitable relationships with consumers.

Consumers used to rely on mom and family traditions for meal planning, but they now search online for what to cook, without ever tasting or smelling the food. Modern consumers “crowd source” the opinions of many before deciding what to buy. As a result, digital food selection is becoming less of a sensory experience and more of a

visual and rational process.

Social media changes food culture by influencing how consumers think about, talk about, and experience food. With the click of our finger, social media alters the entire lifecycle of a meal from planning, to buying, to cooking, to eating.

As consumers use social media to discover and share information about food, they quickly become more active participants in food culture. They look to bloggers and other opinions online to expand their culinary horizons and make purchase decisions.

*Social media changes food culture by influencing how consumers think about, talk about, and experience food.*

Today’s consumers prefer to learn about products based on the experiences of “people like me,” rather than directly from brands. Social media allows them to do this with ease.

For consumers to take notice, companies must use social media to communicate in ways that are *authentic* and *personable*. The good news is that when used correctly, social media is an excellent tool for companies to build personal and lasting relationships with their customers.

Traditional media resources are still relevant, but declining. This media transformation has taken years to evolve and it remains in flux. While 31% say they are inspired by food shows they watch on TV, 25% are inspired by recipe websites or

phone apps, and 17% by restaurant review websites or phone apps. Pointing to the future, millennials now regard online media resources as their most valued sources of food inspiration—over both print (such as magazines or cookbooks) and food TV shows.

Consumers look to public communities for deals and recipes. Some online food behaviors are less personal and therefore brands have more direct access to their food choices. For example, 47% say they’ve searched for online/digital coupons/specials, while 42% say they’ve consulted

online recipes before shopping.

Brands can also be encouraged that consumers are open to better and more highly specialized tools for shopping and meal planning. Moms and primary cooks want easy-to-use apps that make shopping, meal planning, and saving money easier for them.

Social media influence starts with a person; brand influence goes only so far. People look to stylish *people*, not stylish brands for food and lifestyle advice. Today’s consumers want to hear from people who eat and cook food more than they want to hear from the entities who sell food. They follow people on Twitter, become friends on Facebook, and read blogs of people with authentic voices, sincere posts, and meaningful content.

Marketers will do well to recognize the limits of their *direct* influence in social media. They will succeed best by operating synergistically as part of the social culture of food and beverage online. In other words, consumers are willing to engage with food brands and companies in this space, *but only if the interaction promises to enrich their lives in some tangible way*, such as useful information, money-saving deals, or entertainment.

While an exceptional product and a great deal will attract consumers to you, this is only the *starting point* of a truly meaningful social media relationship.

To leverage the opportunities offered by this evolving platform, food & beverage brands must:

- Craft a distinct online personality
- Enlist the support of other authentic social media voices
- Be generous and humorous
- Reflect their customers’ values
- Reveal their true personalities

With even small changes in approach, companies can use social media as a tool to create more personable relationships with consumers. That said, major gains may require a fundamental rethink about how consumers are willing to interact with brands online over the long term. **FT**

Steve Bryant ([steve.bryant@mslgroup.com](mailto:steve.bryant@mslgroup.com)) is Food and Beverage Practice Director of MSLGROUP Americas. Laurie Demeritt ([laurie@hartman-group.com](mailto:laurie@hartman-group.com)) is President and COO of The Hartman Group.