Heuristic Evaluation

Analyzing Caffe Anello’s Social Media Marketing

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## Introduction

With more than 70 percent of Americans using social media it is not surprise that all types of businesses are turning to the platforms to market themselves to perspective customers. Images of food – ranging from expertly staged dishes to selfies with donuts – are prolific online. Search the hashtag #foodporn on Instagram alone and it will return more than 214 million results. While many consumers are posting images of food, restaurants are increasingly turning to social media to attract customers. A 2013 Ipsos market research survey, conducted for Groupon and the National Restaurant Association, found that 80 percent of small and medium-sized restaurants surveyed were using social media for marketing. But which platforms restaurants choose to use, the content they share and how they interact with their followers varies greatly (DiPietro et al., 2012).

This paper provides a heuristic social media evaluation of Caffe Anello, a family-owned, farm-to-table Italian restaurant in Westwood, NJ. The restaurant is owned by Alissa Vitale and her husband John, a chef who, while not classically trained has been featured on The Food Network and at James Beard Foundation events. Caffe Anello opened in 2013 as a fine dining restaurant to accompany the family’s existing Sogno Coffee House, which was established a year earlier. Both businesses were located in the heart of Westwood’s downtown until they moved into a shared space a few blocks outside the main corridor in November 2018. While the two businesses share a physical space, they have separate social media accounts. Caffe Anello and Sogno both have a social media presence on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter.

During the course of the fall 2019 semester, I followed the Caffe Anello and Sogno social media accounts. While Sogno is a very different business than Caffe Anello – it is a coffee shop that also serves crepes for breakfast and lunch and is known for its outrageous desserts – I thought its accounts would provide important context as the owners post to both the Sogno and Anello accounts. In addition, I followed social media accounts for The Hill, a comparably priced restaurant in nearby Closter, NJ, founded by Michelin-star chef Ben Pollinger. The Hill draws many of the same customers as Caffe Anello, and is also on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter.

Both Westwood and Closter are predominately middle class communities located in Bergen County, the most populous county in New Jersey and one of the wealthiest counties in the country, according to U.S. Census data. While the two communities have several restaurants in their business districts, Caffe Anello and The Hill are among only a handful of higher-priced fine dining establishments. Most entrees at the two restaurants range from about $20 to $50. Caffe Anello is a BYOB, while The Hill has a liquor license. Couples can expect to spend at least $100 for dinner at either establishment.

## Methodology and Hypothesis

Each week throughout the fall I reviewed the posts shared on all of the Caffe Anello, Sogno and The Hill social media accounts. I also monitored the social media accounts (Facebook and Instagram) for Common Lot, a popular restaurant in Millburn that boasts a “unique food experience” that uses seasonal ingredients in “unexpected ways.” While Common Lot is located in Essex County, the menu is similarly priced to Caffe Anello and The Hill and all three restaurants are likely to draw foodies in the New Jersey and New York City metro area in search of a fine dining experience. Common Lot has a significantly larger social media following and posts more frequently than Caffe Anello and The Hill.

Each week I noted how frequently the restaurants posted, which platforms they posted on and the content of the posts, which ranged from pictures of dishes, drinks or desserts, to announcements about events and staff bios. As part of this analysis I also looked at how followers were interacting with the posts, including likes, shares and comments. While all three restaurants have a presence on Yelp, none of them seem to interact with reviewers as they have not responded to any posts. (All three restaurants have claimed their pages.)

Based on my experience as a regular customer at both Sogno and Caffe Anello, I hypothesized that an audit would show that the Caffe Anello accounts are underutilized and would benefit from more posts featuring menu items. This proved to be true following the heuristic evaluation. This paper includes a number of recommendations for better marketing Caffe Anello to the restaurant’s social media followers.

## Findings

Of the four restaurants I tracked, Sogno had the largest following with 5,614 Instagram followers, 3,109 Facebook likes and 1,134 followers on Twitter. This was followed by Common Lot with 3,754 Instagram followers and 2,069 Facebook likes. It’s worth noting that Common Lot and Sogno had the highest number of overall posts as well. Caffe Anello has 1,834 followers on Instagram, 119 on Twitter and 1,748 Facebook likes. The Hill had the smallest following with 1,630 Instagram followers and 77 on Twitter, as well as 659 Facebook likes. Sogno’s desserts have been featured numerous times by local news sites, including multiple mentions on BoozyBurbs, a popular local restaurant news site, which may contribute to the high number of followers.

I began tracking social media weekly on September 16, 2019 and concluded on December 8, 2019. The results are summarized below by month. Generally, it appears that all of the restaurants use Instagram to post to other social media platforms, however they don’t post the same content uniformly across all of the platforms. Common Lot posts most frequently on Instagram (almost daily during some months) and shares select posts on Facebook. Meanwhile, the other restaurants post more frequently on Facebook than they tend to on the other platforms. However, it is clear that they use Instagram to cross post on Twitter, which is problematic because photos appear as an Instagram link rather than an image. This is not an issue when cross posting to Facebook, which owns Instagram. One benefit to posting photos on Twitter is that they are more attention grabbing than posts without images. If the goal is to share an image of a tasty dessert, for example, it is better to post directly to Twitter, rather than posting via Instagram, so that the image appears in followers’ feeds and not as a hyperlink that is easier to overlook. A high level summary of the results follows.

### September

Caffe Anello had only one social media post from September 16 through September 30. The sole Facebook post encouraged followers to vote for Caffe Anello and Sogno in a local magazine’s “best of” competition. During the same period, Sogno had six Facebook posts, four tweets and five posts on Instagram. Sogno also encouraged followers to vote in the “best of” competition, but other posts shared images of desserts, coffee drinks and information about how to win tickets to a local food event featuring both Sogno and Caffe Anello.

The Hill had seven Facebook posts, five tweets and six Instagram posts during the same period. The Hill used Facebook to promote weekly live music events at the restaurant. Other posts included images of food and drinks the restaurant offers.

Common Lot had the most posts, with eight on Facebook and 14 on Instagram. The majority of the posts are of food dishes, though some of photos were of the restaurant itself and one promoted an event.

### October

Caffe Anello had fives posts on Facebook and Twitter and six on Instagram during the month of October. There were posts about the “best of” competition; the Fair Kitchens movement, which the restaurant participates in; an upcoming event; and one about National Pasta Day.

Sogno had significantly more posts – 26 on Facebook, 20 on Twitter and 22 on Instagram. One post promoted new breakfast menu options, there were post promoting an upcoming Caffe Anello event (which is not featured on the Anello accounts) and the vast majority are of images of desserts the restaurant specializes in.

The Hill had more posts than Caffe Anello, but fewer than Sogno, with six on Facebook, 12 on Twitter and eight on Instagram. Several of the tweets were re-tweets. Again The Hill posted about upcoming music events, but also of dishes the restaurant serves.

Common Lot had 20 Facebook posts and 31 on Instagram. The majority of posts were of dishes the restaurant serves, but there was also a post explaining the origin of Common Lot’s logo and toward the end of the month the restaurant began a Meet the Team series, which featured images of different team members and information about them.

### November

Caffe Anello’s social media posts began to drop off after October. There were only four Facebook posts in November and two Instagram posts. There were posts about the second round of voting in the “best of” competition on Facebook, they shared a Sogno post about a Dinner at Nonna’s event (which is held on the Anello side of the restaurant) on both Facebook and Instagram, they wished everyone a Happy Thanksgiving on both Facebook and Instagram and shared an article on Facebook about an upcoming event it was hosting.

Sogno continued to post significantly more, with 21 Facebook posts, 15 tweets and 16 Instagram posts. Most were of desserts, but there were also posts about Dinner at Nonna’s, voting in the “best of” competition and a post about Veterans Day.

During the same period, The Hill had 12 Facebook posts – mostly about events – eight tweets and seven Instagram posts. In addition to posting about voting in the “best of” competition, the posts also featured images of food and drinks, including a series of photos in one Instagram posts that showed how an uncommon mushroom from northern Italy was being prepared and served as part of a gnocchi dish.

Common Lot had less posts in November than October, with 11 on Facebook and 28 on Instagram. The restaurant was closed briefly in celebration of a staff member’s wedding that month (which it noted on social media). Common Lot continued to share staff profiles, images of food and also promoted that the space could be rented for holiday parties.

### December

Caffe Anello had only one post on Instagram from December 1 through 8 (which was also shared on the Sogno account) wishing the owner’s grandmother a happy 96th birthday.

During the first eight days of the month Sogno had seven Facebook posts, two tweets and two Instagram posts. Sogno share dessert photos on Instagram and Facebook. The Instagram posts were shared to Twitter. On Facebook, Sogno also promoted its annual event for local children, a reading of The Polar Express.

The Hill had seven Facebook posts and three posts on Twitter and Instagram. The Instagram posts, which were shared on Twitter, included one of soup on a chilly night, promotion of a New Year’s Eve event and an image of the chef holding squash. Facebook included additional musical events planned during the month.

Common Lot had four Facebook posts and nine on Instagram. The series on staff continued and in addition to posts about food, there was a post about the availability of gift cards.

## Conclusions

Social media, and particularly Instagram, has become an integral low-cost marketing tool for various types of businesses, but especially for restaurants. All it takes is for one image to go viral and a restaurant can end up with a line down the street of people wanting to snap pictures of their own orders (Yurieff, 2018). Researchers note that it is difficult to measure whether social media use can boost a restaurant’s bottom line, but preliminary findings suggest there is a positive correlation (Kim et al., 2015). One primary benefit that none of the restaurants I followed appeared to take advantage of is being able to directly dispute complaints. While Caffe Anello, Sogno, The Hill and Common Lot all have claimed their Yelp pages, none have responded to customers who left reviews – either negative or positive.

Kim et al. suggest that restaurants should capitalize on the ability to share their side of the story and become leaders on social media. “Taking the lead on this strategic move should be prioritized by restaurant executives and managers sooner than later so that those active restaurant firms on social media will be able to enjoy positive recognition by consumers and financial markets for their leadership in the industry,” the researchers conclude.

Of the restaurants observed for this heuristic evaluation, Common Lot and Sogno appear to understand the importance of regularly posting content on social media, particularly Instagram. But their approaches vary dramatically. Common Lot posts professional quality images of its dishes, with careful attention paid to plating, perspective and lighting. Even the images of chefs working in the open kitchen format restaurant have beautiful lighting. However, it is worth noting that while the images garner a lot of likes, they don’t draw a tremendous amount of comments.

Looking at Sogno’s social media posts, it’s evident the photos are taken more organically. It appears as if the staff is snapping a picture of a crepe or dessert headed to a waiting customer, rather than during a professional photography shoot. Sometimes the plating isn’t as clean as it could be. But despite this, when Sogno posts pictures of outrageous desserts, like brownies, topped with Oreos, pumpkin cheesecake, chocolate sauce, a toasted marshmallow and mini chocolate bar – dubbed Campfire Pumpkin S’moreo Cheesecake Brownie Bars – they not only get a lot of likes, but also draw a dozen comments with followers tagging friends. The tags are significant because they help people who may not follow the restaurant become aware of, and potentially follow, the account, which could translate into new customers. The Hill and Caffe Anello appear to be missing out by not sharing enough content. As expected in my original hypothesis, less posts means fewer interactions with followers. Caffe Anello serves pasta made fresh daily from scratch, with homemade sauce and mozzarella cheese, but followers would never know this from looking at its social media accounts, which rarely showcase food.

While Sogno excels on Instagram, and shares a decent amount of content on Facebook, Anello’s accounts often lack fresh content. A few times during the evaluation period Sogno announced events happening at Anello that were not mentioned on the Anello accounts, or were posted as an afterthought the day of the event. One issue with Caffe Anello may be that the person managing the social media accounts (one of the owners) also manages the Sogno accounts. Sogno is open for breakfast and lunch, while Caffe Anello is only open at night for dinner and the person responsible for social media content tends to work more frequently during Sogno’s business hours.

One benefit to Common Lot’s professionally staged photography is that the restaurant likely takes many of its images in advance and maintains them in a library that the social media manager can choose from when deciding what to post. It isn’t evident when following Common Lot sporadically, but when conducting a heuristic evaluation, it becomes clear that the restaurant repeats images it has shared in the past. Caffe Anello could benefit from a similar approach.

## Campaign Recommendations

Below are a three suggestions for social media campaigns that Caffe Anello could employ to improve its engagement with followers.

1. Develop content specifically tailored to Instagram that regularly promotes the restaurants familial atmosphere and farm-to-table dishes.
	1. Caffe Anello should take advantage of its base of followers by regularly posting on Instagram. The social media manager should develop a schedule of posts at least two weeks in advance and stick to it to ensure there are no longer week-long periods without any new content. If sticking to the planned posts is too difficult without the ability to schedule content, consider purchasing ads, which can be scheduled on Instagram, and also boost content views at a minimal cost.
	2. The restaurant is known for its friendly staff, who often welcome customers as if they’re guests in their own homes. Online reviews rave about how friendly the family that runs the restaurant is. It’s not uncommon to find three generations there on a given night. Featuring the family behind the restaurant and the well-liked staff, as Common Lot does, could potentially draw more perspective customers in who are looking for an enjoyable dining experience.
		1. In addition to featuring images with short bios, Caffe Anello could record short videos of staff in action that could be shared on social media to showcase the restaurant’s warm and inviting atmosphere.
	3. It’s clear from Sogno’s social media accounts that pictures of food draw attention. Caffe Anello should showcase its menu offerings, from salads topped with truffle pearls, to appetizers, entrees and even the desserts. The menu changes seasonally and Instagram would be a great way to showcase new items that will be offered as the seasons change.
		1. Develop a hashtag and encourage customers to use it when posting. There are a number of images of Anello dishes that people have posted online alongside reviews. If the restaurant had a hashtag it could see what customers are posting and share those images in Instagram stories.
		2. Caffe Anello – as well as Sogno and The Hill – should stop using Instagram to share content on Twitter. As noted earlier, images shared from Instgram to Twitter appear as hyperlinks, which defeats the purpose of posting an image to grab viewers’ attention.
		3. Caffe Anello may also want to reconsider its use of Twitter. The number of followers may not be worth the resources needed to properly maintain that account.
2. Create a distinct brand on Facebook and take advantage of the social media platform’s scheduling tools to ensure the page is regularly updated.
	1. Caffe Anello is traditionally closed on Sundays and Mondays, but during 2019 the owners decided to try out an early Sunday evening dinner with a set menu, branded “Dinner at Nonna’s.” While the dinner foods are created by the Anello side of the restaurant, the event was branded under the Sogno name, even though Sogno only offers breakfast and lunch foods. The event should be branded under Anello’s name, since it features the Italian restaurant’s staple menu items, including meatballs and eggplant parmigiana. The owners should post the events to Anello’s Facebook events page and also share them to Sogno’s page, since that account has a larger following.
	2. Similar to the Instagram campaign, Caffe Anello should develop a schedule of posts to ensure there are regular updates to the restaurant’s Facebook account. While Instagram does not allow for scheduled posts, Facebook allows page owners to create draft and scheduled content. By scheduling content one or two weeks in advance, the restaurant can ensure there will be new posts on the page, even if the social media manager isn’t working every night.
		1. Encourage customers to use the hashtag on Facebook and share their content through Facebook stories or on the business page.
	3. In addition to posting about events that the restaurant is participating in or hosting, Caffe Anello should showcase its food on Facebook. This could be done through images, like those being shared on Instagram, or through videos.
		1. Chef John Vitale has participated in cooking demonstration events in the region that have been well attended. He became more well-known after appearing on the Food Network’s Beat Bobby Flay. Vitale should consider filming short demonstration videos that could be shared online to further increase the restaurant’s Facebook following.
3. Actively engage with customers on Yelp and ensure the restaurant’s profile page is regularly updated.
	1. While the majority of reviews on Yelp are favorable, and many are five star, there are some reviews that raise issues with particular dishes or restaurant practices. One issue raised in a review is that wait staff does not provide the price of specials when they tell customers about them. The reviewer said the food warrants five stars, but only gave the restaurant three stars because they were shocked to learn the price of the special when the bill arrived. The person may have been willing to change their rating, had someone from the restaurant engaged with them by responding to the comment and apologizing for the oversight. There are other reviews that would also benefit from responses.
		1. The National Restaurant Association encourages restaurants to respond to glowing reviews as well, suggesting that if customer praises a dish the chef could over the backstory of the dish.
	2. While the restaurant moved and did update its location on Yelp, the description on the about page dates back to when the restaurant first opened and talks about the restaurant as if it has not yet opened. In addition to operating for several years, the restaurant also added a second chef, who has replaced the owner (who has other ventures) as the primary chef. The new head chef is not mentioned. In addition, the link to the menu results in an error page on the restaurant’s website.

Overall, Caffe Anello’s use of social media is lackluster. It appears to fall second to its sister restaurant, Sogno Coffee House, which has a much larger following and more regular posts across Facebook and Instagram. More careful planning and preparation – including taking photographs ahead of time, rather than when food is being prepared – could help immediately improve lack of content. There is an old adage that says people eat with their eyes before they eat with their stomachs and Caffe Anello is failing to cash in on this because it rarely posts food images.

The restaurant is in a unique situation because it is actually two establishments under one roof. Together Sogno Coffee House and Caffe Anello offer breakfast, lunch and dinner. Sogno is a year older than Caffe Anello and has built a significantly larger social media following, in part due to its posts of whimsical desserts. The owners should take advantage of this captive audience by cross promoting Caffe Anello through shared posts.

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