Food Industry Special Report: 
Social Media in the Time of Coronavirus

There’s no question that the coronavirus outbreak is changing our relationship with food. With eating in restaurants no longer an option, layoffs and supply chain issues making it less of a given that customers can access or afford the food they want, and with people cooking more at home than they have in possibly several generations; how audiences are thinking about food is drastically different than it was just a couple of months ago.

While we all accept that as a given, what’s less apparent is how that dramatic change impacts the food industry on a brand level, and how CPG brands should adjust their social media conversation. What does brand loyalty look like when there is a run at the local supermarket and consumers have less options about what they can bring home? Are contests more or less relevant on social media during the current situation? With people forced to cook more for themselves and their families, which types of CPG brands are recipe posts relevant to? Additionally, with people at home more, should brands shift what time of day they post on social media?

Understanding what audiences want food brands to post about is critical for a social media strategy and the knowledge of what worked in the past, isn’t necessarily helpful in the current climate. That’s where the Food Industry Special Report: Social Media In The Time Of Coronavirus comes in. Analyzing the performance of every food category, ListenFirst tracked what types of posts in which contexts are best performing on social media, highlighting the most valuable and actionable nuggets of information.

This isn’t a status quo anyone asked for, but in this challenging moment there are objective answers to what the social media audience is looking for from food brands. This report shares the new social media best practices. In this time of great uncertainty, social media strategy doesn’t have to be one of those question marks.

About ListenFirst
ListenFirst is the social analytics solution trusted by the world’s leading brands. We unite billions of consumer signals from every social platform to give brands a complete picture of their performance and the analytics to drive successful strategies. For additional information, visit www.listenfirstmedia.com.

Our clients include:

[Logos for Old Navy, Amazon, Walgreens, AT&T, Fox, AMC, Viacom, NBCUniversal]
Conversation Around Coronavirus

Conversation around the Coronavirus or Covid-19 is declining after a peak in March when the WHO declared Covid-19 a pandemic and states in the U.S. and countries around the world started shutting down. Conversation is still high but is starting to slow down as people have come to terms with life in quarantine. While conversation in March was focused on “washing your hands” and the lack of toilet paper and hand sanitizer, in April the conversation shifted towards attending to the crisis at hand and populations at-risk.

Volume of Twitter and Reddit conversations mentioning “Coronavirus” or “Covid-19”
Sentiment Around Coronavirus

Analysis has shown that over time, people have become less fearful about the coronavirus, but as some regions have been able to “flatten the curve,” fear has not necessarily lessened. Since mid-March, fear has been steady at 13%, negative sentiment has also been steady at 33%, while anger has begun to inch up. In general, negative feelings including emotions of anger, sadness and fear are still dominating conversation. As food brands engage their audiences on social media, understanding people’s emotions are important in sending the right message.

### Sentiment Classification & Emotional Sentiment of Conversation

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What’s Next?

A messaging strategy around re-opening and managing people’s anxiety should be top of mind of brand marketers as they think about what comes next. While people are eager for life in lockdown to end, many are still expressing anxiety. Mentions of anxiety and panic attacks rose 41% between March 1 - April 8 compared to the average in January and February. This represents a 54% rise in mentions of anxiety and panic attacks compared to the same period in 2019. Today, some discussion about panic attacks is not in the context of right now, but later when businesses are open again, society gets back to normal, and people come out of quarantine.
How Engagement Has Changed for Food Brands

Social Engagement has ebbed and flowed for the food industry, spiking during the first full week of lockdown as panic buying started happening. While brands have picked up posting across social channels after an initial dip in March, engagement levels are back where they were pre-Covid-19. While April is down compared to the same time last year, engagement with food brands is up 2% overall compared to 2019.
Food Brands are Back to Posting As Usual

Compared to other industries, the food industry largely shies away from posting directly about Covid-19 with only 8% of content since March mentioning either Coronavirus, Covid-19, quarantine, or staying at home. Overall, posts on social media from the food industry is down -12% compared to 2019. And, while posts are back to usual compared to 2020, they are still below 2019 levels. Despite less posts, the food industry is up 2% on engagement for 2020.
Share of Voice of Food Categories

Retail generates more social engagement than CPG so it’s no surprise to see the grocery category owning the largest share of voice on social media. The candy category follows grocery in generating the second highest volume of likes, shares and comments on social media, driving spikes with Superbowl investments in the beginning of the year. The nuts, fruits & spreads and bread & baking categories come in third, with the nuts, fruits & spreads category seeing a 45% lift in the volume of engagement since 2019.
Grocery Has Taken Over from Frozen Desserts to Lead in 2020

Grocery has always been one of the leaders in social media engagement within the food industry and this year has overtaken frozen desserts as the front runner in social media. This is no surprise given that grocery stores are “essential” during Covid-19 and have become de facto hubs for communities around the nation. In general, most categories have seen a rise in engagement from 2019 as CPG foods have taken on a larger significance in people’s daily lives. Only the frozen desserts category has seen a notable decrease in social engagement year over year.

Average Response per Post 2020 vs 2019

Food Conglomerates
Meat Products & Alternatives
Pet Products
Milk & Dairy
Sauces/Condiments/Spices/Oils
Snacks
Pasta/Flour/Rice/Grains
Frozen Meals
Soup/Chili/Canned Goods
Grocery
Cereal/Breakfast/Bars/Nutrition
Food Delivery & Meal Kits
Nuts, Fruits & Spreads
Bread & Baking
Sauces/Condiments/Spices/Oils
Milk & Dairy
Pet Products
Meat Products & Alternatives
Food Conglomerates

0 200 400 600 800 1000 1200 1400 1600

2019 2020

Volume of reactions, comments, shares, retweets, likes divided by new posts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram | Jan 6 – Apr 19, 2020 compared to Jan 7 – Apr 21, 2019 | 750 brands
Canned Goods Is the Fastest Growing Category Since March

As people are confined to their homes due to Covid-19, there is big disruption happening in the food industry, particularly in food services. However, there are bright spots. Canned foods is seeing a rise in social media engagement, led by Bush’s Beans, Green Giant, and Red Gold Tomatoes. Retail is seeing robust sales with particularly heavy social engagement being generated by brands like Whole Foods and Trader Joe’s. And, Pet Food is seeing a big growth led by Meow Mix and Hill’s Pet Nutrition.
Facebook Saw the Biggest Spike at the Start of Coronavirus

While Instagram has been the leading platform for generating social media engagement for the food industry, during the time of Covid-19, Facebook has gained in significance. Social engagement on food industry posts on Facebook jumped by 41% the week of Mar 23 compared to the week of Feb 24 as brands posted about how they were helping support essential workers, grocery stores posted about store openings, and food brands found a way to share important information to their loyal customers. While posts on Facebook have since declined in the volume of engagement, the platform is still generating more activity than the start of the year.

[Chart showing content responses 2020 with Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter trends from January to April 2020, with spikes in engagement at the beginning of the year and a decline after peak]

Volume of reactions, comments, shares, retweets, likes, on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram | Jan 6 – Apr 19, 2020 | 750 brands

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Posting Across Platforms Has Stayed Consistent

Despite a drop in posting the week of March 16 when the majority of the nation went on lockdown, posting across social media platforms has remained consistent. On Instagram, posts have increased since mid-March and hit its highest weekly level the week of April 6. That same week in April saw spikes in posts across Facebook and Twitter too.
Best Time to Post: Facebook

Looking at the top 1,000 Facebook posts for the Food Industry the week of April 6, 74% of the posts were uploaded between 6am-6pm PST. This is a strategy that is working for the food industry with the highest response rates also occurring during those times. By far, the best content response rate for food industry posts is between 6-9am PST, just as people are preparing for their day. Note, the evening, particularly 6-9pm PST is also opportunity to generate greater engagement on posts.
Best Time to Post: Instagram

When analyzing the top 1,000 Food Industry posts on Instagram the week of April 6, while 89% of the posts were uploaded during the 6am-6pm PST timeframe. However, the real goldmine is between 3am-6am PST. There are significantly less Instagram posts published by food brands during this timeframe where the content response rate is more than double.
Bring Your Community Together

Highlighting your community through user-generated content is more effective than ever. Not only does it bring people closer to your brand, the content also serves as an inspiration for others as they try to get creative with food recipes at home. During the Covid-19 period, people are looking for ways to connect with one another. Loyal customers are also more loyal than ever. Take advantage of this period to offer your fans a sense of togetherness connected by a similar thread, your brand.
Offer Practical Advice

Can you freeze milk? How long past an expiration date is food still good for? As people are confined to their homes and cooking and eating at home more than ever, offering practical tips and tricks are essential to keep your community engagement. Whether its tips to keep products fresh and long lasting, ways to spruce up lunch, kitchen tricks, or freezer-friendly recipes, helping your community by sharing knowledge is going a long way.

Fridge looking full? Check out some of our tips for storing dairy products for maximum shelf-life:

5 Tips for Storing Dairy Products

- Extend the shelf life of milk by freezing it. Milk expands when frozen, so be sure to leave room in the container, which will keep it from bursting. Also do not forget to write the date on your container. After you have frozen your milk, it can be thawed in the refrigerator overnight or by being placed in a sealed plastic bag and submerged in cold water. Frozen milk will last for about 3 months.

- Do not store milk and dairy products in the door of the refrigerator, as it has the most temperature fluctuations, allowing for quicker expiration.

- Cheese can keep for six to nine months when frozen in an airtight container. Hard cheeses like Cheddar, Swiss, and Monterey Jack are best for freezing (keep in mind shredded cheese as well!) Always mark the date on the container. Frozen cheese should be thawed in the refrigerator for 24 hours, and are best used in cooked dishes.

- Dairy products which are sold in cartons like sour cream, cottage cheese, yogurt, and ice cream can be stored upside down to prevent mold and ice crystals from forming.

- Preserve butter longer by placing it in the freezer in a dated and sealed plastic freezer bag. Salted butter will keep for up to 12 months, and unsalted butter will keep for about 6 months. Thaw frozen butter by warming in the microwave for ten second increments until softened. Frozen butter can also be thawed by being placed in the refrigerator for 24 hours.
Recipes Posts Relevant For A Whole Lot More Brands

Usually the advantage of snacks is they’re delicious calories which don’t take any preparation to eat between meals. However because of the extra free time people have at home, snack brands are having success with recipes for turning basic cookies into more elaborate desserts. For instance OREO had 71,426 responses around a recipe for mug cake and 41,942 responses for a recipe for OREO cheesecake bars, while Chips Ahoy! received 1,804 responses around a donut recipe. Meanwhile, Perdue Chicken took a different tack, pointing at when ingredients are limited, it can be used a topping for a pita pizza. During quarantine, recipe posts are relevant for pretty much any type of food.
Brands Focusing More On Stay At Home Recipes Around Holidays

CPG Food posting about holidays is certainly nothing new but about Easter and St. Patrick’s Day this year brands emphasized the made at home angle more. For instance around St. Patrick’s Day, Kerrygold USA posted a beef & parsnip recipe that generated 369 responses noting it’s the ideal comfort food for celebrating at home, while Lifeway Foods generated 249 responses around a Shamrock Toast recipe that can be made at home. Meanwhile for Easter, Eggland’s Best Eggs had 248 responses around its post about how to dye eggs at home with no mess and Bob’s Red Mill, noting that Easter would look a little different this year, recommended a M&M Skillet Cookie recipe that generated 245 responses. Even if it’s holiday themed posts you’d be sharing anyway, framing it within the stuck at home angle will make it more relevant to the current moment.
Supporting Essential Workers & Food Banks

Around the pandemic outbreak, food brands are seeing high engagement around social media posts discussing donating their products to either food banks or directly to frontline workers. For instance, Beyond Burger received 19,632 responses on Instagram around the brand giving away one million burgers in a month and Utz Snacks posted on Facebook about donating a truckload of its snacks to medical professionals, which generated 4,070 responses. As much as the social audience likes getting free stuff, they also like seeing people in need getting free food.
Point Out Where Your Brand Fits In With People’s Altered Lifestyle

From Snickers pointing out that it’s a perfect snack on a solo hike, to Frank’s RedHot hot sauce hinting that you might want to buy large quantities because of more time at home, food brands are using social media to explain where they fit into consumers’ new reality. Other examples include Kerrygold pitching grilled cheese toast as a lunch option that both kids and parents will like, while Pillsbury knows you miss going out to brunch and shared an air fryer bacon egg biscuit recipe.
Throwback Posts Still Work On Social Media

While food might have an expiration date, a compiling campaign can still be usable years later. That’s what food brands should keep in mind as creating new collateral to share on social media becomes a little more complicated in self-isolation. Duke’s Mayonnaise got 328 responses around resharing a pre-internet ad while Cadbury shared a series of nostalgia themed posts, including a Star Wars: The Phantom Menace tie-in that generated 248 responses. Meanwhile Perdue Farms and Stubb’s BBQ Sauce utilized the #TBT hashtag to highlight either old ads or company trivia.
Now Is The Time To Share Games That Kill Time

As most of the social media audience is working or otherwise stuck at home, many more people are looking for distractions to stave off boredom than is normal. That makes it an opportune time for food brands to share fun games or other entertaining time killing activities on social media. For example, Chips Ahoy! shared a virtual jigsaw puzzle that when properly assembled had a cookie related CTA, while TERRA Chips suggested organizing its chips by color to avoid going stir crazy. Meanwhile Snickers created a game that revolved around pausing a video to figure out your WWE wrestling name, while Black Forest Snacks shared a picture that you can print out to color.
Immunity and Healthy Eating Messaging Matters More

Likes, comments and shares was up 374% for Limoneira, 178% for Delmonte, and 122% for Healthy Planet while people are under shelter-at-home orders; looking at March 16 - April 19 compared to February 10 - March 15, 2020. These brands and others highlighted how their products could boost immunity and provide nutrients, indicating the audience is far more receptive to 'protecting your health' messaging during the pandemic.

As the coronavirus situation intensifies, you might be wondering: how can I keep myself & my family healthy? While there are no supplements that can protect you entirely, what you can do is to work to ensure your immune system is functioning optimally - through your diet!

Eggs are among the foods experts are recommending for strengthening immunity, principally for their content of vitamin D. ⭐

EB eggs have SIX times more Vitamin D when compared to ordinary eggs. Why is this important? ⭐

Vitamin D helps to regulate the production of a protein that works to selectively kill infectious agents in the body. It also alters the number & activity of white blood cells - T 2 killer lymphocytes. These bad boys also help to reduce the spread of bad bacteria & viruses! ⭐

Other nutrients that are a key part of Eggland’s Best eggs are reported to enhance immunity: vitamins B2, B5, B12, E, folate, selenium, lutein and omega-3’s. ⭐

EB is sending good vibes & positivity during this stressful time. We also hope that every member of the EB family is working to stay safe, healthy, and is following the guidelines! ⭐

Be sure to tag us in your dishes using EB eggs, we could all use a little bit of inspo! 😊

#eb #vitaminD #boost #immunesystem #cooking #eatinghealthy #badbacteria #corona #healthyfamily #eggs #covid19 #stayhome #healthy #lymphocytes #flattenthecurve
Giveaways Are Driving Shares

While shoppers are always looking for a good deal, this is especially true now. During this challenging and uncertain time around job security, giveaways and donations are driving consumers to interact with food brands. Giveaway posts were the most responded-to posts for brands including Garden of Eatin’ Chips, Hostess, Marie’s Dressing, and Ethel M Chocolates during the shelter-at-home period from March 16 - April 19, 2020.
Not Pandemic Related Content Is Still Going Viral

On March 25, Twitter user Sage Boggs went on an epic, unsolicited 9 Tweet overview of the history of Triscuit, which went viral, especially after Triscuit confirmed everything he said was true. That confirming Tweet Triscuit posted generated 76,343 responses and was the biggest contributor to content responses around Triscuit increasing a stunning 6,830% during March 16 - April 19 compared to February 10 - March 15, 2020. The success of Triscuit during the pandemic highlights the importance of still looking for conversations that have nothing to do with social distancing during the pandemic.

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QUESTIONS?
Contact Us. We’re here to help.
contact@listenfirstmedia.com

WANT TO LEARN MORE?
Let us show you how we can solve your social challenges and make your life easier.
requestdemo@listenfirstmedia.com

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