THE FOOD TRUCK PHENOMENON:
A SUCCESSFUL BLEND OF PR AND SOCIAL MEDIA

by

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Dedication

This thesis would not have been possible without the unwavering support of my family and dear friends. Thank you for all your love, patience and words of encouragement throughout this journey. Mom, Dad, and Omar, you have always taught me to follow my dreams and believe in myself. I hope I have made you proud. My accomplishments are yours.
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Abstract

This paper examines the convergence of food public relations and social media. More specifically, it chronicles how mobile food trucks have emerged as a new industry that has taken full advantage of social media and is establishing best practices that may be adopted by other industries. The purpose of this study is not only to investigate the rise of the food truck phenomenon as it parallels the rise of social media, but also to explore how “gourmet” food trucks have helped improve the reputation of the food truck industry as a whole. Another aim is to study how the use of social media has contributed to company branding, with the ultimate outcome of developing recommendations on how to effectively use social media. The key issues discussed in this paper include the origins of mobile eateries, the factors that have led to the rise of food trucks in the digital age, the new audiences food trucks are attracting and how the current wave of “gourmet” food trucks have helped improve the reputation of this entire dining genre. Results reveal that social media fueled the food truck phenomenon as the trendy new “in” thing to do, not only for consumers, but also for restaurateurs. The principal conclusion is that the promotion of a product or brand through social media is not just a fad, but rather the new standard of public relations.
Preface

Research Methodology

In terms of research methodology, qualitative primary research consisted of a series of interviews with public relations professionals, marketing experts and food truck owners to form a basis for understanding the subject. Interviewees included Dennis Rook, Chair of the University of Southern California Department of Marketing and Professor of Clinical Marketing, Will Ostedt, Vice President of the Pollack PR Marketing Group, Steve Domingue, owner of Ragin Cajun Café On Wheels, Christina Willows, owner of the La Rue de Paris food truck and Dave Danhi, President, Chef and Creator of The Grilled Cheese Truck. Interviewees provided insight into trends and forecasted where the industry is headed. Additionally, 50 intercept interviews were conducted with customers waiting in line at two different food trucks: Kogi BBQ and The Grilled Cheese Truck. The purpose of the intercept interviews was to provide qualitative anecdotal research on perceptions about food trucks and their use of social media, as well as quantitative data on how many customers were using Twitter, Facebook or other online resources to track the trucks’ whereabouts. Secondary research included news articles, blogs, Twitter and Facebook pages, websites, studies and books.

Food Public Relations

“Food is the common denominator among every culture, every person. Everybody has to have food,” according to Dave Danhi, President, Chef and Creator of The Grilled Cheese Truck. Much like food is one of the basic necessities of life, it is also a
specialized necessity in the field of public relations. In a field where products, services, ideas and people must be shown in a light that is most appetizing, this sentiment is especially true for the niche of food public relations. This type of public relations encompasses building awareness and excitement about food products, restaurants, chefs, beverages, spirits, retailers and related associations. In addition, because the food industry is very consumer-focused, this practice includes building and maintaining a reputation for service and quality among “foodies,” gourmets and the general public alike.

Part of the responsibilities assumed by PR professionals in the food practice include forging connections with various “food influencers, including chefs, dietitians, food luminaries, media spokespeople and nutrition researchers to identify interests and expertise” (“Food & Nutrition”). These influencers are vital to building credibility for clients. Media relations is also very important in this category, in terms of securing coverage, reviews, editorial spreads and other forms of public visibility. Outreach to trade publications, food, wine, lifestyle and entertainment editors and bloggers, as well as celebrity endorsers is especially essential to creating a successful media campaign.

The top five food and beverage public relations firms of 2009, as ranked by O’Dwyer’s PR firms database, include Edelman (New York), APCO Worldwide (Washington, D.C.), Hunter PR (New York), FoodMinds (Illinois) and Regan Communications Group (Boston) (“Top Food & Beverage Public Relations Firms”). According to the U.S. Department of Labor, employment of public relations specialists is expected to increase by more than 66,000 jobs, or 24 percent, between 2008 and 2018.
(Handley). With more jobs in the field, specialists must try even harder to differentiate their clients from others. This is true for the food and beverage genre as well.

To stay competitive in this field, PR professionals must understand and adapt to the continuously evolving nature of the food and beverage industry. In terms of trends shaping the field, health and nutrition are huge factors in promoting food clients rather than just taste. In today’s health-obsessed society, low-fat, nutritious and organic products attract attention from consumers and the media. Other trends include environmentally-friendly “green” products, locally grown foods and advancements in packaging (Young). The biggest trend impacting food and beverage public relations, however, is the exponential rise of social media. Social media outlets like Facebook, Twitter and Foursquare have led to innovations in promotion of clients through digital channels. With the advent of social media, public relations professionals are reaching new audiences through unique and exciting channels of communication.
Introduction

In today’s society, people expect on-the-go, instant products and services. A world of communications innovations such as iPhones, Kindles, Blackberries and iPads has fed the public’s appetite for instantaneous communication. Fast food, instant communication with the click of a mouse or the tap on a cell phone and an increasingly niche media experience have primed the stage for a society that can stay connected in more ways and with more frequency than ever before. To illustrate just how many avenues of communication people today have to choose from, there are 56 million mobile device users in the U.S., 4 billion web pages on the Internet, 295 television networks, 24,384 magazines and 13,464 radio stations (“Make it MATTER”). This ability to stay in touch and informed via multiple channels 24/7 has primed society to expect life “on demand” and tailored specifically to their wants, needs and interests. A proliferation of media and technology has led to an “era of mass personalization,” in which consumers expect to engage directly with their favorite companies, labels and brands (Edelman). It has contributed to a culture of consumer demand for content whenever and wherever they want it, whether it is through DVR or On Demand features on their televisions, online or via their mobile devices (“Make it MATTER”). Consumers have more power than ever in terms of what they demand from a brand. This is especially pertinent when it comes to interacting with brands via social media. There are 200 million users of social media, a communications innovation that is both fascinating and powerful (“Make it MATTER”).

This paper will examine how social media has revolutionized the food truck industry by transforming it from the nadir of dining to the trendy way to experience
unusual, inexpensive and delicious foods from around the world. In addition to granting a mass audience access to a new dining palate, food trucks have emerged as the intersection of technology, digital communication and mobility, representing the cutting edge use of social media as a key public relations tool.
Chapter One: The Birth of Food Trucks

Mobile eateries are not an entirely new sensation. In fact, they have been around for more than a century, dating back to the Western “chuck wagons” created in 1866 (Skowronski). Texas cattleman Charles Goodnight is credited with the creation of the chuck wagon, a mobile kitchen equipped with a cook’s worktable and drawers to hold food and utensils (“Invention of the Chuck Wagon”). Chuck wagons stretched from Texas to California to feed cowboys as they made their way west to settle on a new American frontier (Burr). In the days of trail drives, which required cattle ranchers to live on the open land for months at a time, “chuck” was slang for heart-warming comfort food like salted meats, potatoes, beans, sourdough biscuits and peach cobbler (Hallowell). This precursor to the modern-day food truck revolutionized the cattle industry and set the tone for other food distribution innovations to come.

The chuck wagon morphed into other forms of mobile eateries. For example, the first recorded diner was actually a horse-drawn freight wagon in Providence, Rhode Island (“The First Diners”). Food wagon owner Walter Scott would park his mobile eatery in front of the Providence Journal offices and sell hard-boiled eggs and sandwiches to its workers (Skowronski). The success of selling cheap and quick food to factory workers was imitated by many others as the “lunch mobile” spread in popularity throughout the northeast (“The First Diners”). “In the early twentieth century, the owners stopped driving the carts and parked them on empty spaces along the street, so they could put in bigger kitchens” (“The First Diners”).
Fast-forward to the 1970s in Los Angeles, when food trucks were first woven into the cultural landscape of this diverse city. These industrial lunch trucks often made several short stops to serve factory and construction-site workers on fixed daily routes (Hermosillo 7). The original lunch trucks, also known as “loncheras” or taco trucks, had deep Latino roots: “Lonche is a Spanglish word deriving from ‘lunch’ and commonly used by Mexicans and Latinos in Los Angeles to refer to any homemade meal packed for consumption away from home” (Hermosillo 11). To illustrate the origin of loncheras:

Raul Martinez is believed to have opened the first taco truck—converting an ice cream truck—outside of an East Los Angeles bar in 1974. He went from $70 in sales that first night to controlling a small empire of 10 King Taco restaurants and trucks around Southern California. (Burr)

A stable economy, growing Latino population and warm climate led to the rise of the taco truck in Los Angeles (Katz 1). Loncheras are stationary food trucks, meaning that rather than changing up the schedule of their location, they stake out a “single spot where they do business the entire workday on a daily basis for years on end” (Hermosillo 7). These taco trucks typically serve ready-to-eat Mexican food and are operated by Latino families in their own neighborhoods. They tend to serve “low- and moderate-income areas lacking in adequate food options” (Hermosillo 6). In fact, they were a blue-collar staple of construction sites because they offered fast and filling meals at an inexpensive price (Burr). Considering their convenience, efficiency and accessibility, by 1982, the Los Angeles Times declared mobile eateries a “Southern California phenomenon” (Katz 1).
Chapter Two: The Advent of the “Roach Coach”

Perhaps due to their association with a working-class clientele, loncheras have faced a reputational uphill battle. Nicknamed “roach coaches,” “gut bombs” or “maggot wagons,” food trucks have been associated, often wrongly, with indigestion, food poisoning and questionable quality. This stigma stems from the perception that mobile kitchens are not as sanitary as traditional restaurants and, thus, are considered dirty. The above nicknames point to the idea that cramped mobile environments can attract cockroaches and other insects, which contributes to the view that customers who frequent food trucks run the risk of getting sick. One investigative reporter summed up the roach coach stigma: “They are unlicensed, uninspected, serve food of unknown origin in conditions less than sanitary” (Sanzgiri). People ate at loncheras because it was cheap, quick and convenient during a lunch break. With the perception that food trucks enjoyed little government regulation, the prevailing notion was that food trucks were “rogue” vehicles operating above the law. In reality, to operate a lonchera legally in Los Angeles, vendors must be approved by the county Department of Public Health’s Food Inspection Bureau, meaning they are “subject to the same level of oversight by health authorities as are their brick-and-mortar counterparts and the rest of the California foodservice industry” (Hermosillo 7).

It is true that many government ordinances were not really enforced unless someone complained, which could result in sanctions and fines. Beyond regulatory issues, taco trucks were blamed as a source for unwelcome immigration, traffic congestion and crime (Katz 2). Despite the bad rap they received, loncheras serving
authentic Mexican food helped pave the road for a new class of upper-scale, tech-savvy food trucks (Burr).
Chapter Three: Boost in Reputation

A new generation of food trucks has cropped up in recent years, giving the industry a reputational makeover. Rather than suffering from the roach coach stigma, the updated, more upscale mobile eateries have been dubbed the “Twittering trucks” for their use of social media to announce their location on a daily basis. Rather than the stationary, set routine of loncheras, these modern food trucks have varied routes, which change from week to week and day to day. Customers of the Twittering trucks agree that the new food trucks have changed the way they originally thought about food trucks: “Before I was like, ‘I would never try a food truck.’ But now I wouldn’t think twice as long as it’s good,” said customer Cindy Liu, 32, of Koreatown, in an intercept interview on Nov. 13, 2010 while she stood in line at The Grilled Cheese Truck, a mobile eatery specializing in its namesake.

Aside from their innovative use of social media as a key public relations strategy, there are a host of other reasons why new-school food trucks have become media darlings. For one, the food trucks themselves have a better aesthetic than their taco truck counterparts. Rather than unmarked wagons or trucks with faded lettering, the new food trucks come wrapped with professional and colorful company branding, complete with logos, a specific theme and a flare that is as unique as the niche each truck fills. The idea is that the branded trucks appear more clean and inviting to potential customers, especially to new customers who do not know the quality of the food on board yet. “I think something like the Grilled Cheese Truck looks really nice from the outside so I would assume it’s nice and sanitary on the inside too,” said Michelle Bristol, 26, of West
Los Angeles in an intercept interview as she waited in line at The Grilled Cheese Truck on Nov. 13, 2010.

In addition to the physical trucks having distinct personalities, the uniqueness of food the trucks offer has made “gourmet” food trucks a popular dining choice. A fusion of taste is the best way to describe the innovative food creations new-school food trucks are known for. Unconventional or unexpected pairings of food have become the staple of the food truck universe. For example, the pairing of Korean barbecue with Mexican food – like Kogi BBQ’s short-rib tacos or kimchi quesadillas – is a combination that customers crave not only because it is delicious, but also because it is unlike anything they have ever tried before. To illustrate further, the Coolhaus ice cream truck offers all-natural, homemade ice cream sandwiches with unique flavors such as red wine ice cream with chocolate cookie or chocolate cookie and mint chip ice cream with real mint. Combinations of food in this manner created an excitement over the new food trucks, because they became a hub for taste innovation, offering customers meals that are out of the realm of the traditional dining experience. “The newer food trucks have interesting items that are unique and something you don’t see in restaurants very often,” said Melissa Lopez, 30, of San Dimas as she waited in line at The Grilled Cheese truck on Nov. 13, 2010.

“Although the goal of these trucks is to be quick, convenient and cheap, they are decidedly anti-fast food,” an attribute that has also helped boost the reputation of the industry as a whole (Stein 1). For one, the new generation food trucks offer high-quality meals at low-level street prices, says Dennis Rook, Chair of the USC Department of
Marketing and Professor of Clinical Marketing. “It’s really a distribution innovation,” said Rook. Rather than going to a sit-down restaurant (which is a process in itself often requiring making reservations, finding parking, being seated, waiting for food, giving servers a tip, etc.), food trucks offer a comparable meal with less of the hassle and cost. Additionally, the new food trucks offer a wide variety of experiences for the palate. Rather than just serve Mexican food like tacos and burritos, the new food trucks allow customers to try gourmet meals on the go, including frog legs from San Francisco French restaurant Chez Spencer, “Banh Mi” Vietnamese sandwiches from the Nom Nom truck in Los Angeles and Indian food from the Dosa truck in Los Angeles (McCarthy). American consumers love exotic foods but at the same time fear and mistrust them because they are out of the ordinary (Sasser 1). Keeping that in mind, this way of dining is appealing to many consumers because they can access food that may be foreign to them in a very informal, unintimidating setting. “There’s more branding, there’s more cuisine cleverness. That’s reassuring on some level and motivating,” said Rook.

Another significant way food trucks have distanced themselves from fast food joints and loncheras is with the meal creators. Many of the gourmet food trucks have been conceptualized by accomplished chefs who perhaps did not have the capital to start up restaurants of their own, or by restaurateurs who are using the trucks to promote their restaurants by bringing their food to the streets. For example, chefs Mary Sue Milliken and Susan Feniger of the upscale Border Grill Mexican Restaurant in Santa Monica operate a roving food truck that visits Los Angeles neighborhoods and private events. This connection to chefs adds credibility to both the food and the concept of food trucks.
as a whole. “If you look out there and see the [food trucks] that are known and are busy consistently, that is one of the common things about it,” said Danhi, who credits his past as a chef as a factor in The Grilled Cheese Truck’s success.

All of the above factors have led to a change in audience of food truck followers. According to Will Ostedt, Vice President, The Pollack PR Marketing Group, “The obvious difference between the traditional roach coaches is that they appealed to a different demographic. The new trucks are appealing to a white collar demographic.” Rather than targeting blue collar workers at construction sites, the new Twittering trucks often attract working professionals outside of their office buildings during lunch breaks. The food trucks offer a break from the monotony of ordering lunch from the regular stationary restaurants surrounding their offices and are usually quick and convenient for busy white collar professionals who want a quick bite on the go. For example, dozens of trucks line up on Wilshire Boulevard along the Miracle Mile, which is home to a number of office buildings housing hip and young employees at E! Networks, the Los Angeles Business Journal, BWR Public Relations, Daily Variety and other media and entertainment entities. Co-workers often treat a trip to the food trucks as a social activity, visiting the trucks in groups as a way to get out of the office and take a break. Perhaps one person will entice his or her co-workers to try the trucks if they have never eaten at them before. In this sense, the food trucks have become more appealing to a more mainstream audience, both through word of mouth and through social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook, which help get the word out about the trucks to a mass audience.
Thus, this thesis explores the hypothesis that the rise of social media and new ways of instantly connecting to others electronically has aided significantly in food trucks being able to transform their reputation as “roach coaches” into gourmet meals-on-wheels.
Chapter Four: A Perfect Recipe for a Phenomenon

A number of technological, social and economic factors have led to the explosion of the food truck phenomenon we know and love today. Among these, constant advancements in technology have fanned the flames of the Digital Revolution in the Information Age, a period which began to emerge at the end of the 20th century and is characterized by “widespread electronic access to information through the use of computer technology” (“Information Age”). This period represents an unprecedented consumption of and reliance on information, one that has transformed society’s social and economic behavior, just as the Industrial Revolution did before it (“Glossary of Terms”). Today’s Information Age dates back to the invention of Samuel Morse’s telegraph in 1837 and even to Johannes Gutenberg’s printing press in 1450 (“Information Age: People, Information & Technology”). Since then, the telephone, radio, television, computer and mobile phone have each dramatically changed the way people interact, communicate and view the world. The computer especially has spurred global communication and networking. Although the world’s first electronic digital computer was built by John Vincent Atanasoff and Clifford Berry at Iowa State University from 1937 to 1942, smaller personal computers and laptops did not start becoming popular until the early 1980s (Oldehoeft).

In 1990, Tim Berners-Lee’s creation of the World Wide Web changed the way people connected both at home and in the workplace (“Brief Timeline of the Internet”). Since the advent of e-mail and the Internet, the ability to share and store information, as well as to stay connected to people across the globe, has been unprecedented: “The
World-Wide Web (W3) was developed to be a pool of human knowledge, and human culture, which would allow collaborators in remote sites to share their ideas and all aspects of a common project” (Wardrip-Fruin and Montfort). By 1993, the Web had grown by 341,000 percent in just one year (“Brief Timeline of the Internet”). Fast-forward to March 2007, when 1.1 billion people were using the Internet, which grew to 1,966,514,816 people by June 2010, or 28.7 percent of the world’s population (“Internet Usage Statistics”).

Another innovation that altered the technological landscape and paved the way for today’s food truck innovation is the mobile phone. The first analogue mobile phone call on a portable handheld cellular phone was made on April 3, 1973 by Motorola researcher and executive Martin Cooper, who is considered the father of the mobile phone (Shiels). The personal telephone was designed to be “something that would represent an individual so you could assign a number not to a place, not to a desk, not to a home but to a person,” according to Cooper (Shiels). Commercial service first started in 1983 with bulky phones that weighed 16 ounces and cost $3,500 (Shiels). Cellular phones allowed consumers to be reached by telephone while on the go, anywhere they traveled to. In other words, they represented freedom. “It's about being unleashed from the telephone cord and having the ability to be virtually anywhere when you want to be” (Shiels). At the time, cellular phones were made to be installed in cars, and thus the car phone was born. In the early 1990s, cell phones evolved again with the arrival of digital mobile phone networks, which “enabled quicker network signaling, lowering the amount of dropped calls and increasing call quality” (“History of Cell Phones”). Second-generation phones were much
smaller than their predecessors of the decade before, and were much more portable, making use of computer chip technology ("History of Cell Phones"). During this time, Short Message Service (SMS) text messaging also became available, again revolutionizing the way people communicated. The ease and brevity of reaching out to someone through text message was especially popular among the youth. According to the Pew Research Center’s 2010 Mobile Access Survey, 72 percent of people send or receive text messages, compared to 65 percent in 2009 (A. Smith). Text messaging allowed instant communication and feedback at the user’s leisure, often as a substitute for phone calls received at inopportune times. Text messaging can actually allow people to feel more connected, since it is socially acceptable to do throughout the day, whereas phone calls do not really operate in the same sense. Advertisers and companies even use text messages now to reach subscribers and customers.

Cellular mutated once again with smartphones, cellular telephones with built-in applications and Internet access. In addition to text messaging and digital voice service, smartphones provide e-mail access, wireless Web browsing, still and video cameras, MP3 music players, video viewing and a number of other mobile applications all rolled into one device ("Smartphone"). With smartphones, consumers basically have a mobile computer in the palm of their hands. IBM released the first smartphone – the Simon – in 1993, which was followed by the Nokia Communicator line, the Palm Treo in 2002 and the first Blackberry in 2002 (Reed). And then came Apple’s first iPhone in 2007, which “integrated a touchscreen display with the best Web-browsing experience to yet be offered on a mobile device. Three years later, the iPhone is still the device to which all
other smartphones are compared” (Reed). The iPhone truly popularized the smartphone, making it more of a hip cultural icon than a choice for a mobile device. Its biggest competitors now are the Droid, the Blackberry and Sprint’s EVO. According to Gartner, the world’s leading information technology research and advisory company, total smartphone sales doubled in 2010 and now smartphones represent 19.3 percent of total mobile phone sales (Pettey and Tudor). The significance of the smartphone on society is unquantifiable. People can now stay connected to the outside world in more ways than were previously imaginable. Information is literally at a person’s fingertips, wherever and whenever he or she wants. As it relates to food trucks, the smartphone is the device that allows followers to stay abreast of their favorite food trucks’ every moves. For a company that is run on-the-go, this is not only practical, but also necessary.

By the early- to mid-2000s, social media was becoming a significant part of the communications landscape. With Friendster and MySpace as precursors, Facebook became the giant of social media and social networking after it was founded in 2004 by Harvard dropout Mark Zuckerberg. Users created personal profiles by posting their interests, photos, biographies, favorite movies and music for friends across the world to view, allowing more access to friends’ lives than even before. Recently, businesses, including Fortune 500 companies, have been utilizing Facebook as a public relations tool, both to get messages out to a mass audience and to foster brand interaction and two-way communication with key stakeholders. This networking innovation was followed by the 2005 launch of YouTube, a video-sharing website fueled mostly by user-generated content. YouTube, which boasts the tagline of “Broadcast Yourself,” is often used as a
distribution platform for original content, including branded video clips and anecdotal interviews, which can be effective as public relations tactics.

Social media evolved once again in March 2006 with the founding of Twitter, a micro-blogging service that has become the source of news and rumors. It is a real-time information network that connects people to the latest information about what they are interested in via “Tweets,” or messages sent on Twitter. Twitter’s public streams allow people to follow the daily activities, insights and news from businesses, friends, media outlets and celebrities. Tweets are limited to 140 characters each, so messages are brief and easy to scan, which is perfect for society’s increasingly short attention span. This limit is based on the number of characters that can be sent in an SMS text message before the message is cut off (Strickland). As for its intersection with public relations, Twitter is an excellent way to: keep in contact with bloggers and reporters, monitor what consumers are saying about your brand and company, engage a company head or CEO directly with consumers, announce special promotions, disseminate company news or interesting articles or give live updates (Volpe). Giving live updates is an especially practical and important function of Twitter for food trucks, which use the social media outlet to constantly update followers on the whereabouts of the trucks. Twitter allows food trucks to “broadcast their changing location, advertise deals, and keep up a customer base. It fits: were there a culinary embodiment of short-and-sweet Twitter, it would be the food truck, mobile and ultra-niche” (McCarthy). For food truck customers, Twitter is not only practical, but the number of followers a truck has indicates how good the food is. “How else are you going to find out where they are? You know if they get followings, you
should try them,” said Justin Crowley, 30, of Pasadena as he waited in line at The Grilled Cheese Truck on Nov. 13. Since its inception, Twitter’s rise in popularity has been astronomical. As of September 14, 2010, Twitter had 175 million registered users with 95 million Tweets written per day (“A Few Twitter Facts”). The company is currently exploring ways to monetize its services with the use of “promoted Tweets” – highlighted Tweets paid for by advertisers to target users– and other advertising avenues. Through the popularity of Twitter, food trucks were able to build an active fan base:

Both Twitter and the food truck craze are, in a sense, testaments to the mobility and spontaneity enabled by the Digital Age. And ultimately, they also may have their best niche as marketing vehicles (no pun intended) [sic] rather than standalone businesses. (McCarthy)

As for societal factors, fast food restaurants were a true precursor to today’s food truck revolution. Fast food restaurants grew out of Southern California drive-in restaurants in the early 1940s when the car was becoming king (T. Wilson 1). Drive-in restaurants had early forms of the drive-up window and allowed people to dine in the comfort of their own vehicles, although the food wasn’t necessarily served up quickly (T. Wilson 1). Founded in 1921 in Wichita, Kansas, White Castle is considered America’s first fast food hamburger chain, as well as the first to sell one billion hamburgers, and the first to sell hamburgers made out of frozen beef (Emmerson 1). Hamburgers were not particularly popular at the time, due to the perception that hamburger meat was low-quality (T. Wilson 4). White Castle’s founders changed this perception by focusing on cleanliness and allowing customers to see their food being prepared, helping raise the reputation of hamburger meat (T. Wilson 4). In 1940, brothers Richard and Maurice
McDonald opened McDonald’s Bar-B-Que drive-in restaurant in San Bernardino, California (“Travel Through Time With Us!”). In order to improve the restaurant by making food faster and selling it for cheaper, McDonald’s closed the place down to redesign its food-preparation area to be reminiscent of an assembly line (T. Wilson 1). The redesigned McDonald’s reopened in 1948 as a self-serve dine-in restaurant with an assembly-style Speedee Service System (“Travel Through Time With Us!”). Rather than using a skilled cook, the Speedee system made use of “lots of unskilled workers, each of whom did one small, specific step in the food-preparation process” (T. Wilson 1). A number of fast food chains that modeled McDonald’s’ mass-production, including Burger King and Taco Bell in the 1950s and Wendy's in 1969 (T. Wilson 4). Even chains that existed before the Speedee system, including Carl's Jr., KFC and Jack in the Box, changed their production techniques after its debut (T. Wilson 4). The brothers began to sell franchises in 1953, allowing the menu and food to be uniform throughout the change. McDonald’s has since grown to more than 32,000 franchises in 117 countries (“The Latest from McDonald’s). Now fast food chains specializing in all types of food can be found in most developed countries all around the world. The fast food market was expected to surpass the $170 billion mark in 2010 (Maheshwari).

The psychological effect of fast food on society was a profound one. Women entered the workforce in record numbers during the early ‘70s, a time when the hourly wage was falling (Schlosser). By 1975, one-third of American mothers with young children were working outside the home; today almost two-thirds of such mothers are employed (Schlosser). According to sociologists Cameron Lynne Macdonald and Carmen
Sirianni, “the entry of so many women into the workforce has greatly increased demand for the types of services that housewives traditionally perform: cooking, cleaning, and child care” (Schlosser). Being able to order food “on demand” was derived from a society that simply did not have time to waste on food preparation or waiting for a meal. Fast food was rooted in the need for efficiency; people could eat a meal quickly in the comfort of their car, if preferred, allowing them to move on to more pressing matters (McGuffin). To boil it down, many people view eating fast food as a cheap, quick and time-saving meal on the go. “Fast food is one of many technologies that allow us to save time…But the ironic thing is that by constantly reminding us of time efficiency, these technologies can lead us to feel much more impatience,” according to Sanford DeVoe, researcher at the Rotman School of Management. A series of experiments conducted by Rotman researchers found that exposure to fast food and pertinent fast food symbols (McDonald’s’ golden arches or Jack-in-the-Box’s iconic Jack, for example) made people impatient and partial to time-saving products (McGuffin). Such exposure also perpetuates a fast food culture of haste and a desire for instant gratification. In a nation where fast food can be seen everywhere, from shopping malls to sports stadiums, airports to elementary schools, it is no wonder that American are of a “must-have-it-now” mentality. In this same vein, food trucks satisfy this need for food on demand.

Another significant societal change is society’s increased access to ideas, cultures and knowledge, contributing to a more open-minded and informed society. This, in turn, translates to people becoming more intellectually engaged. Along with technological advancement comes a myriad of choices these days: Choices of what websites to visit,
which television shows to watch, which mobile phone services to use and so on. Along these lines, niche food trucks provide “something for everyone,” which is particularly suited to today’s society of samplers. “It is really the segmentation of choices, and upgrading of food that has led to the rise of food trucks,” said Ostedt. Although consumers may be more open to new experiences due to their expanding knowledge base, they still desire to try something new without it being intimidating. According to Ostedt, food trucks offer “a chance to sample gourmet food without going out for an expensive dinner. It is like a meal without the commitment, and nobody likes commitment these days. We live in a sampling society and food trucks play into that.” Rook echoed that statement: “It’s an easy way to try something different without a big commitment of time or money.”

Another societal byproduct of the times is consumers’ increased expectation for engagement with brands and companies. According to Maya Angelou, “It takes a human voice to infuse [words] with deeper meaning,” which points to the importance of personal interaction (“Quote by Maya Angelou”). Consumers are more likely to be receptive to brand messages if they form a personal tie to a brand. In fact, “nearly two-thirds, (62%) of consumers say that direct and personal communication with a company’s online brand representative is preferable to ads or promotional materials from the company, according to research conducted by OTX Research on behalf of DEI Worldwide” (“Consumers Want Personal, Online Interaction with Brands”). A renewed interest in word-of-mouth has contributed to this brand interactive climate. “As products continue to be produced on an ever-more-massive scale, people yearn for personalization. As our environment
becomes more digital and complex, people appreciate personal warmth and engagement” (Conare). Connecting to consumers on an emotional level breeds loyalty, as does creating memories that customers associate with a brand (Conare). Companies can also stimulate personal interaction with brands among consumers by building a unique or participatory brand experience, which contributes to the “virtuous circle of trust that leads to shopper loyalty and profit” (Conare). Food trucks especially lend themselves to creating these types of experiences for customers, according to Christina Willows, co-owner of the French-inspired La Rue de Paris food truck. “When you walk up to a food truck, you want to have a little show; you want to have an experience,” said Willows, describing how La Rue De Paris’s crepes and paninis are especially nostalgic for her more well-travelled customers. “Having a personality in the truck makes a big difference.” The idea is to endear consumers to a brand through personalization: “Positive, personal interaction builds ‘brand love’ and inspires consumers to take action – whether it’s purchasing a product or embracing a cause” (“Ignition Inc”).

Along with personal interaction, brands these days are often held to higher standards. Consumers have come to expect more of companies, scrutinizing their every move, from the actions of a company’s CEO to the altering of a company logo. And if consumers do not like the company’s actions, they are not loath to make their opinions heard, especially via social media, including Facebook and Twitter. The lesson is to never falter from the brand’s main message; being consistent builds confidence (Gass). Twitter and Facebook have become excellent barometers of the pulse of consumer opinion. Not only do they allow instant feedback for a company, both positive and negative, they also
foster the direct and personal engagement that consumers crave from the brands they “like” on Facebook or “follow” on Twitter. Social media allows companies to maintain a dialogue with their customers. “I think that’s a great way to stay connected with their customers,” said Mario Franco, 24, of Santa Monica, during an intercept interview on Nov. 13, 2010. This aids the brands in anticipating consumers’ needs, rather than merely reacting to them (Knapp). Done right, the use of social media tools have helped companies communicate with key audiences, rather than communicate at them.

The economy was also a significant catalyst for the recent food truck boom. In December 2008, the National Bureau of Economic Research officially announced that it had entered a recession beginning a year before, due to rising unemployment rates, the subprime mortgage crisis and the toppling of major financial establishments like AIG (Grynbaum). The 2008 recession helped complete the perfect storm for the rise of food trucks. “The economy was bad, people don’t go out to eat. That’s the first thing that they will cut out of their budget,” said Danhi. The first thing people gravitate to when the economy goes south is comfort food, like grilled cheese, Danhi said. “It’s called comfort food for a reason; it brings you back to home,” he said. At the peak of the economic downturn, some hungry chefs trying to make it in the industry began to recognize that it would be more cost effective and less of an investment to run a mobile food truck business than a traditional restaurant:

All these really amazing chefs were having a hard time raising $2 million for a restaurant, much less money for a cup of coffee. There were all these really talented guys out there who didn’t have a home,’ and they realized, ‘For $2 million, I can build a brick and mortar business, or for about $25,000, I can be in business for myself, and I can be in business for
myself next weekend. It just seemed like a no-brainer. Out of adversity in economic situations, people become very creative when their backs are against the wall about how to create a new economy for themselves, and all of the sudden, this whole new genre that was just parked outside a business complex became this thing that was really cutting edge and very interesting. (G. Smith)

People’s wallets were hurting and food trucks provided a cheap substitute for a gourmet meal at a sit-down restaurant. The upscale food trucks filled the void for a good meal, appealing especially to downtown urban areas and college campuses where working professionals and students congregate, looking for something quick and convenient during lunch time. For a society that is increasingly busy and on-the-go, food trucks especially key into the increased demand for convenience. “It’s easy to just go in and order, instead of sitting down and paying for good service and everything,” said Christine Nguien, 23, of El Monte as she waited in line at The Grilled Cheese Truck on Nov. 13, 2010. “The person who’s going to a truck, isn’t thinking about going to sit down at a sit-down restaurant, 90 percent of the time,” said Danhi. Just as consumers’ wallets were hurting, chefs’ pockets were not deep enough to afford traditional advertising or public relations services. Twitter, a free service, became the ideal tool to promote their food trucks at no charge to them. “It’s creativity and cost analysis,” said Rook. This demonstrates the peak of convergence between food public relations and technology.
Chapter Five: Kogi, The Pioneer

Enter Kogi BBQ. A Korean-Mexican fusion of flavors housed in a mobile eatery, Kogi Korean BBQ has been deemed responsible for launching the food truck phenomenon two years ago (Rogers, “Los Angeles considers more food truck regulation”). With a menu of Spicy Pork Tacos, Kimchi Quesadillas and Short Rib Sliders, Kogi’s innovative cuisine and distribution method launched a host of copycats. It even inspired the Baja Fresh chain to add short-rib tacos to its menu (Stein). Kogi Korean BBQ was the brainchild of co-founders Mark Manguera and Caroline Shin-Manguera. Mark, who is Filipino but married into a Korean family, got the idea for the truck after having a drunken realization about the combination of Mexican and Korean flavors (Gelt). They then enlisted friend and chef Roy Choi, a law-school dropout who skipped his bar exam to instead enroll in the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York (Stein). Choi had worked in restaurants in New York and Palm Desert, and even worked in the kitchen of “Iron Chef” Rokusaburo Michiba in Japan (Gelt). He was also “chef de cuisine at Los Angeles' Beverly Hilton and got fired as chef at Rocksugar, the Cheesecake Factory's attempt at Asian street food, before he found his calling in a kitchen on wheels” (Stein).

Since parking his first food truck in November 2008, Choi has been named Food and Wine magazine’s “Best New Chef” (the first for a food truck chef) in 2010 and his team was honored with a Bon Appétit award in 2009 (Soudry). Choi also took in $2 million in sales the first year he parked a food truck in Los Angeles (Stein). Kogi, the self-proclaimed “traveling Los Angeles landmark,” set the precedent for the Twittering
food truck business model by serving upscale street food on a shoestring budget, with checks averaging $13 per person. Choi, known as “Papi Chulo” to his Kogi team, said he sees his cuisine as graffiti on Los Angeles’ culinary landscape: “It's not Korean food…It's a Korean American kid translating the food from his country into the present-day life of L.A. It's everything I see: the Latinos working in the Korean market, the bus that I ride” (Gelt). Although Kogi now boasts five operating food trucks that serve different parts of Los Angeles and has expanded to two physical establishments (Chego in Los Angeles and Kogi BBQ in the Alibi Room in Culver City), the food truck was not always so popular. In fact, at its inception, Kogi was not able to attract customers for weeks, despite handing out free samples and visiting busy West Hollywood locales (Schindler).
Chapter Six: Kogi’s Communications

To drum up a fan base, Kogi began with grassroots promotions, including parking outside Hollywood club Green Door and passing out free samples to bouncers and club-goers, which had people coming back for seconds (Schindler). The company then decided to e-mail food bloggers in hopes of securing coverage, which, indeed, began to pour in (Schindler). Manguera drafted his sister-in-law Alice Shin to ramp up public relations efforts via the truck’s Twitter handle (@kogibbq), as well as the truck’s blog on its website kogibbq.com. Shin used informal language that spoke to the Instant Message generation to create a lot of buzz about the food truck. Newsweek even dubbed the Kogi BBQ truck “America’s first viral restaurant” (Romano). “When Kogi started and decided to use Twitter, it was a brilliant thing to do and really all the trucks owe them a little bit of a thank you,” said Danhi. As of the end of January 2011, Kogi had 80,494 followers on Twitter and Tweeted 8,280 times. In general, the Tweets give the real-time location of the truck and updates on “sold-out” meals, as well as truck closing times. Unlike some other food trucks, Kogi does not “Retweet,” or repost, customer Tweets and very rarely answers customer questions or comments posted on Twitter. Instead, the conversation focuses mainly on “we will be here for a limited time, come and get it,” call-to-action messages. Kogi’s Twitter feed is updated frequently and delivers practical information to customers throughout the day. Tweets are organized and labeled by color (Roja, Azul, Verde, Rosita and Naranja) to correspond to the different trucks in operation, which serve different areas. The Twitter page also directs people to the Kogi website for its weekly schedule. The result has been staggering. Hundreds of customers each night wait in long
lines – two-hour lines were not uncommon during the peak of their popularity – for the opportunity to quench their hunger. Kogi’s current operations serve about 3,000 people a day (Stein). According to Caroline Shin-Manguera, digital communication has been a key to Kogi’s success:

If it wasn't for the Internet, we'd be in the hole for who knows how much. The Internet made us. It was our lifeline. We all had other jobs, which we held on to. After our day jobs we went to the truck, worked till two in the morning. And then, we went viral. We were all over the Internet. (Schindler)

Aside from its main form of communication on Twitter, Kogi promotes itself on its website kogibbq.com, through a photo stream on Flickr and on Facebook. The website offers an organized way for customers to seek information, including a schedule of where the truck will be for the week organized by color, a condensed version of its Twitter feed with the truck’s most recent Tweets, a menu with prices, a media section with major press coverage and a highlight of “special” menu items. The site also contains blog postings written by Shin, which are more in-depth updates on what is happening at Kogi, as well as unrelated news. In addition to its Twitter and website, Kogi has a Facebook page, which is less utilized and only recently has been updated more frequently. Status updates announce the trucks’ locations and “chef’s specials,” but they also have more informal conversations, including sharing a “joke of the week” and recommendations. There was a big gap in Kogi’s status updates between March 2010 and the end of December 2010, which is unacceptable in the world of social media. Fans were posting questions and commenting, but were not receiving answers from the company. This is most likely due to the fact that Choi was occupied with opening up Chego Restaurant in
April 2010. Because Facebook is not the primary tool for reaching Kogi’s customers and is also less real-time oriented for users than Twitter, Kogi’s communicators focused on continuous updates of the company’s Twitter feed and blog. As of the end of January 2011, 18,327 people “like” Kogi BBQ on Facebook and fans had added 58 photos, including photos of the truck and the food they ordered.
Chapter Seven: The Grilled Cheese Truck, The Big Cheese

In a sea of Kogi copycats and other food trucks spawned by the Twittering food truck pioneer, The Grilled Cheese Truck stands out as a Big Cheese. Founded by Chef Danhi in 2009 with business partner Michele Grant, The Grilled Cheese Truck was inspired on a fluke (Kneiszwl). Danhi, who has spent more than 20 years in the restaurant business and is now president of a recruiting agency for hospitality chef and managerial jobs, was persuaded to enter the 7th annual Grilled Cheese Invitational competition in Los Angeles on a whim. After serving as executive chef of the famous Roxbury Supper Club in Hollywood, executive chef at Georgia restaurant in Hollywood, opening chef at Habana Restaurant in Costa Mesa and executive chef of King’s Seafood Company (whose flagship restaurant is the Water Grill), Danhi “retired” from cooking, but said he realized he had never entered a cooking competition (“Dave Danhi”).

The Grilled Cheese Invitational opened up Danhi’s eyes to the popularity of the grilled cheese sandwich, as Danhi recalled being in awe of the thousands of people in line waiting to get into the event. “I never realized what an underground, fanatical following this sandwich had,” he said, describing how a line of 250 began chanting the name of The Grilled Cheese Truck’s now signature item, the Cheesy Mac and Rib. The invitational was the debut of the popular sandwich, which is stuffed with Southern macaroni and cheese, pulled BBQ pork, caramelized onions and sharp cheddar. On that fateful day, Danhi spotted the
Green Truck, a food truck that specializes in organic, handmade healthy food, parked outside the competition.

So I walk out and I’m like, “Geez, that’s a wrong truck to be here,” and that’s when the light bulb kind of went off in my head like “Oh my God a grilled cheese truck.” There’s a following here.

The Grilled Cheese Truck serves up new twists on a classic American comfort food. For $3 to $8 per sandwich, the menu ranges from the truck’s Cheesy Mac Melt with macaroni and cheese to a Caprese Melt with mozzarella, heirloom tomatoes and fresh basil. Customers can also customize their own melts with “savory additions” like avocado or sliced red onion. The truck is also sought out for its signature sides, like tomato soup shots and tater tots. Rather than traditional “fast food,” The Grilled Cheese Truck offers consumers a quick meal made from scratch with fresh ingredients: “Everything on The Grilled Cheese Truck menu is homemade. Prep work, like smoking the ribs for the Cheesy Mac and Rib sandwich, is done at a commissary kitchen” (Kneisz). Danhi said the idea has never been to open a physical Grilled Cheese restaurant. “I’ve opened probably about a dozen restaurants and that is not something you do lightly. It takes over your life and it’s a lot more money [than doing a food truck],” said Danhi, adding that he also did not spare any expenses on the truck in terms of its appearance (a truck wrap with unique company branding) and employees.
Chapter Eight: The Grilled Cheese Truck’s Communications

Unlike Kogi’s start, The Grilled Cheese Truck had a fan base even before it opened its doors. Not wanting to be the second grilled cheese truck out there in the mobile eatery universe, Danhi issued a few simple Tweets to the Twittersphere, although he had never been on Twitter before. “I sent one to Thrillist, Daily Candy and Eater LA, and all I said was, ‘Did you hear? The Grilled Cheese Truck is coming, the Grilled Cheese Truck is coming!’” Danhi said he closed his computer and went to dinner. When he came back, The Grilled Cheese Truck had 70 followers on Twitter. The next night it had 200, and then the next, 600. “I wanted to do a ‘soft’ opening, but had 2,500 followers on Twitter before we even got the keys to the truck,” Danhi says. “We cleared 13,000 followers in five months” (Kneiszwl). Social media helped create enormous buzz for the truck, which Danhi found baffling. “Within three days we were on the front page of MSNBC’s website, which has 4 million hits a day,” he said. “And it just started exploding.”

In addition to the free publicity of social media, Danhi devised another public relations tactic to keep the buzz and momentum going before the official opening of the truck. He created the idea of hosting a “guest melt” at a friend’s Hollywood restaurant. In exchange for using the restaurant’s kitchen, Danhi would cook and give away food from The Grilled Cheese Truck for free, ramping up exposure for both the restaurant and the upcoming debut of the truck. After sending out a Tweet saying that the first 250 people to RSVP to the guest list for the melting would get in and eat for free, Danhi was flooded with responses. It took just 20 minutes to fill up 250 spots, with 700 people on the
waiting list within an hour of the Tweet. Danhi attributes some of this initial buzz to his past as an award-winning chef, which gave the truck credibility. However, he also credits social media, Twitter particularly, with the initial snowball of support. Aside from the reputation for delicious food, the ability to position the truck through social media has been, by far, the key to The Grilled Cheese Truck’s success, according to Danhi. “It’s literally the personality of the truck,” he said. “The truck is almost like a celebrity at this point.” Indeed, customers can be seen posing in front of the truck, cheesing from ear to ear to document their find. For Halloween 2010, three separate people dressed up as The Grilled Cheese Truck and Tweeted photos of their costumes to the truck, which Danhi said was flattering. “It’s become a little bit of a pop culture thing at this point,” he said. The Grilled Cheese Truck is listed as the third most influential Tweeter in all of Los Angeles on wefollow.com, a directory of Twitter users organized by interests “Los Angeles”). “The only entities above us are the LA Times and LA Weekly. Blows my mind,” he said. Social media has helped The Grilled Cheese Truck get the word out, in addition to connecting to traditional media. The truck has appeared on the Food Network several times, on the Cooking Channel, the Travel Channel and on every local news outlet. It was also voted the No. 1 best food truck in Los Angeles in a poll by MobileCravings.com and was rated the top Los Angeles food truck by Citysearch.com (Del Valle). The company has grown so much in popularity that a second truck has recently been added to operations (Kneiszwl).

Like Kogi, The Grilled Cheese Truck’s Twitter handle (@grlldcheesetruck) is the main way the company communicates, as well as its main public relations tool, controlled
by Danhi himself. After a little over a year in operation, the truck has 30,369 followers on Twitter and has Tweeted 4,828 times as of January 2011. The frequently updated Tweets give the truck’s real-time location, updates on “sold-out” sandwiches and closing times. In addition to its “come-and-get-it” messages, The Grilled Cheese Truck uses very informal, conversational language that is more varied and creative than Kogi’s Tweets. The idea is to stay consistent with the promotion of bigger events by sending an initial Tweet about a week ahead of the event to ramp up awareness, as well as a reminder of the event the day before and the day of the event, said Danhi. He recalled one incident in which he did not have a chance to promote an appearance either in advance of an event or the day of the event. “We were dead,” Danhi said, referring to the lack of customers for that locale. “If I was able to promote a day or two ahead of time we would have been busy. Period. It can drastically affect us, unless it’s a captive audience thing.”

The Tweets also serve the purpose of announcing daily specials, when doors are up or down, signifying the truck’s open and close at each locale and notices of long or short lines. At the end of the week, Danhi gives “thank you’s” and participates in “Follow Fridays,” in which Twitter accounts for specific people, other food trucks or companies are highlighted on The Grilled Cheese Truck’s page to alert the truck’s followers to check them out. The company also makes it a point to Retweet customers’ Tweets in order to make them feel connected to the brand. “It gives them a feeling of being special. It gives them a ‘they’re-listening-to-me’ sentiment,” said Danhi. While he can’t reply to all followers who Tweet at or about The Grilled Cheese Truck, Danhi said he tries his best to respond to pertinent questions or interesting comments. “I like when I can get back to
someone personally because it makes me feel like I am touching their life a little bit and they do feel a little bit special,” he said.

He also reads every single mention of The Grilled Cheese Truck in the Twitter feeds as well as searches for more general relevant Tweets on general terms like “cheese truck.” “I read every single one for a reason,” said Danhi. “It is the finger on the pulse of how we’re doing, with the food. If somebody has a bad sandwich they are telling me immediately.” In addition, social media allows Danhi to listen to and key in on what people are craving from the truck. He starts interactive conversations with followers by asking questions like, “What cheese haven’t you seen out there on the truck?” “We had eight people say pepper jack cheese,” Danhi said, describing the brand interaction. “I’m personally not a fan of pepper jack but they want it, so we have to give it to them. This isn’t about you; this is about the people coming to the truck.” Keeping up with social media is like a full-time job, however. The truck gets a minimum of 500 Tweets daily (Kneiszwl). Danhi said he spends at least two or more hours a day on Twitter, often as many as four or five hours on the social media outlet. The long hours staring at a computer screen are worth it, though, because they have added to the novelty of the truck. “The truck is almost like a celebrity at this point,” said Danhi. There have been times where I’ll Retweet somebody and it becomes huge news on their page.”

The Grilled Cheese Truck also has a website (www.theg grilledcheesetruck.com), which features the most recent Tweets from its Twitter feed, a weekly schedule of the truck’s whereabouts, an entry form for catering requests, a photo gallery featuring both food and fans, a menu and clips from the media. The website was recently updated to
include a feature allowing users to click on the address for a scheduled Grilled Cheese Truck appearance and be directed to a map of the location. In addition, the site links to the company’s Facebook page, another social media stream The Grilled Cheese Truck uses to connect and engage with customers. As of the end of January 2011, 20,316 fans “like” the company’s Facebook page. There were also 38 photos added by fans of customers posing in front of the truck, waiting in line or showing off their Grilled Cheese selection. Status updates on the Facebook page announce where the truck will be at any given time of the day. Fans are allowed to post to the profile wall in addition to comment on status updates, which allows for brand interaction and instant feedback from company representatives like Danhi. There is a difference, however, between his use of Twitter and Facebook. Twitter is reserved for very short and to-the-point messages, as evidenced by its 140-character limit. Facebook, on the other hand, allows for more in-depth posts, in theory fostering more discussion among “fans” of the page. Cheese-related news would not be welcome on Twitter, for example, but would lend itself to a Facebook posting, Danhi said. “Twitter is a text message to your buddy, Facebook is a phone call,” he said.
Chapter Nine: Engaging Consumers

Engaging stakeholders, especially through online channels, is becoming more important than ever. While food public relations practitioners have traditionally focused on media relations, public engagement is gaining traction in the public relations world. Savvy food truck operators are learning how to engage consumers and stir excitement in a digital landscape. One way of engaging customers is through online promotions. Some food truck operators use a secret password or challenge that rewards customers with a free topping or discount. La Rue de Paris, for example, Tweets limited-time “passwords” for discounts or freebies at the truck. For example, on February 9, 2011, @laruedeparis Tweeted, “We're in a secret location near LAX all day, Come Try and Find Us! First 10 people to say ‘bien venue’ get a free sugar crepe with an order!” The idea is to endear customers, both new and repeat, through special incentives to visit the truck. “In our society, people are absolutely stimulated by free things,” said Willows. “Promotions let you know how many people are paying attention to your Tweets.” This is especially important for snagging new business, because it gives new customers who may have been on the fence about eating at a food truck motivation to give it a try.

In addition to incentivizing visits to food trucks, the industry benefits from a “catch me if you can” novelty, since they are mobile and pop up in locations that are constantly changing. “Part of the joy and frustration of food trucks is hunting them down. With a hand-held device and a working Twitter account...you can take part in the culinary equivalent of geocaching” (Carman). An element of what attracts customers is being involved with the pursuit of finding the food trucks, especially those that come
highly recommended by peers. “Part of it is the hunt, finding it on Twitter, tracking it down and when you get there, you’re like, is this going to be a huge line?” said Justin Crowley, 30, of Pasadena, as he waited in line at The Grilled Cheese Truck on Nov. 13, 2010. This type of “hide and seek” creates excitement, especially for young people, according to Rook. The element of uncertainty aids in creating buzz about well-branded trucks. "People search for it," said Alice Shin, Kogi BBQ's in-house blogger and Twitterer. “It's kind of like a treasure hunt for them” (McCarthy). The idea that food trucks are not stationary and are constantly on the go keys into the phenomenon of mobility. “It’s not like your McDonald’s down the street because that’s a given, it’s always going to be there,” said Leslie Bravo, 25, of Ontario, Calif., as she waited in line to try The Grilled Cheese Truck for the first time. “You can have it any time you want. There’s no thrill, it’s just there. But here it’s a rarity, so when it’s around you go for it.” She said unlike traditional restaurants, food trucks are elusive, adding to the thrill of the chase.

Additionally, food trucks have the ability to cultivate an insider culture, in which customers feel like they are a part of something special. “Being exclusive -- that’s what people want and that’s what creates the hype,” said Grilled Cheese Truck customer Elton Leu 22, of Monterey Park. It is human nature to want to be in-the-know about up-and-coming trends. Being an “insider” can be a very motivating factor, even causing people to go to great lengths to be a part of that inner circle of knowledge. “People seek them out and they’re willing to wait in line for a ridiculous amount of time to get a taco,” Rook said. “That’s not classically rational behavior, so they’re getting something other than just
food.” Much of the longing to be a part of the “in crowd” can be attributed to the buzz of social media. For example, “Kogi’s publicist helped hype them through masterful Twitter and website work, which turned the truck's mysterious whereabouts into a hipster happening” (McCarthy). Danhi agreed that insider culture can be cultivated via Twitter:

It gives them a chance to feel like they’re speaking to you one-on-one. They can send you a text message, basically, directly to you. And, chances are, they know that you’re at least hearing it, if not reacting to it.

Word of mouth from friends or colleagues and the observation of the ever-growing net of the trucks’ followers on Twitter both contribute to the perception that eating at certain trucks is the new thing to do. “It was the hype of it that made me want to see what it was about,” admitted Nguyen, a Grilled Cheese Truck customer. Another customer, Crowley, said following food trucks requires some effort and knowledge. “You have to be kind of hooked in to know where to find them or know what to even look for,” Crowley said. It is interesting to note that the early adopters of the revamped food trucks were an audience of out-of-the-box thinkers looking for a somewhat less traditional dining experience. “It’s sort of an underground foodie thing for people who really want to find new things and are not so much attracted to the mainstream anymore,” said Bravo. “They want to really see what’s out there, what’s new, and this is a kind of cool way of doing it…” Ironically, the power of social media as a tool to connect people with brands is what helped grow the appetite for food trucks from a hipster niche audience to a more mainstream one. Food truck insiders helped spread the word to friends and subsequently, friends of friends, and even to strangers, aiding the food truck phenomenon in becoming a more mainstream
experience. The domino effect contributed to making food truck dining a trendy experience. According to Shin:

Standing in line to taste the fusion tacos has even become a must-do L.A. experience. L.A. executives stand in line for as long as one hour with late night clubbers and hipsters. A small boom box plays reggae music. At the end of the day, people are happy and it’s worth the wait. (Lodevico)
Chapter Ten: Measuring Success

Although the value of public relations often is difficult to measure in concrete terms, the true value of public awareness and action generated through social media tools is that much more elusive, since it is a fairly new and constantly transforming instrument. However, there are some ways in which food trucks are tracking customers and measuring success. In the evaluation of Twitter use to build a following for food trucks, there are three key elements: keeping an eye on followers, mentions and Retweets. As the trucks’ Twitter feeds attract more followers and inspire more mentions and Retweets from customers, food truck owners can infer that their company’s stock has gone up, so to speak. In addition, food truck operators can use the number of customers served each night or each month to identify increases or decreases in popularity as well as sales. Danhi said he used the number of followers of The Grilled Cheese Truck’s Twitter handle as a barometer of the truck’s success in communications. “That’s my finger on the pulse,” he said. “You can always tell when there’s a television show or something because it spikes…If suddenly we are only getting 30 or 40 followers a day, the buzz has dropped. You can watch the growth pattern on this.” Additionally, Danhi uses Facebook and Twitter analytics to learn more about the truck’s audience of followers on its two channels of social media. For businesses using Facebook, for example, owners can browse a breakdown of people who “like” their fan page by gender and age. As for analyzing the Twitter crowd, Danhi uses free tools like twitteranalyzer.com to gain insight into the demographics of the truck’s Twitter followers, allowing him to measure the truck’s return on investment for Twitter by pinpointing who is talking about the The
Grilled Cheese Truck, what they are saying and deeper insight with the following dashboard of tools:

*Figure 1. Twitteranalyzer.com Dashboard*

The different categories allow Danhi to generate 30-day reports on everything from a daily Tweets volume and a count of Retweeted messages, to a daily popularity rate showing how many times @grlldcheesetruek was mentioned on Twitter and how many followers have been exposed to messages.

*Figure 2. Followers who mention The Grilled Cheese Truck most, January 2011*
Twitter Analyzer also provides data on when followers joined on Twitter, gender of followers, how many new followers are acquired or lost on each day, who Retweets messages the most, occupations of followers and more.

*Figure 3.* Breakdown of occupations for followers of The Grilled Cheese Truck, January 2011

These analytical tools help Danhi improve his Twitter performance and target followers. They also help him identify loyal and active followers, who he then interacts with. “I’ll look at this and make sure that I’m paying attention to people because these are people who obviously are bigger fans and I want to make sure they feel appreciated,” said Danhi.

In terms of keeping track of loyal, repeat customers, some food truck owners are instituting customer appreciation benefits as a way of giving back to frequent diners. The
Grilled Cheese Truck, for example, does not have a current system of rewarding or tracking loyal customers, but is establishing a loyalty card or program that will reward customers who keep coming back. “We get people who sometimes hit the truck twice a day, which is very flattering,” he said. One idea he is toying with is an appreciation card that would allow a customer an opportunity to cut to the front of a long line after making a certain number of purchases at The Grilled Cheese Truck. Another idea is to start an official fan club where customers would receive a branded T-shirt, hat or free sandwich for becoming members. “I want to give them something where they’re getting a little bit extra,” Danhi said.
Chapter Eleven: The Audience

So who exactly are these food truck followers? “If I looked in front of the truck, there’s almost no rhyme or reason, and sometimes it’s the spot we’re at,” explained Danhi, describing the audience based on just pure observation of customers waiting in line. He continued:

If we’re up in front of the Americana in Glendale, we’re getting the families. We’re getting the mom with the kids or the very suburban-type people. If we’re down in Venice, we’re getting more of the younger kids coming out.

Although the appeal of food trucks extends to both young and old, the audience generally skews to a younger crowd.

*Figure 4. Demographics of The Grilled Cheese Truck Facebook fans, December 2010*

One explanation for this is their connection to technology. The coveted 18-34 demographic has grown up in the Digital Age and is increasingly tech-savvy. The younger consumers fall within that age bracket, the more connected they are. They are regular consumers of social media, so the trucks’ usage of Twitter and Facebook appeals directly to this group by going where they hang out in the cyber-escape. Grilled Cheese
Truck customer Mario Franco, 24, of Santa Monica, spoke to this dynamic as he waited in line on November 13, 2010. “The young population is pretty good about finding the new hip thing to do and (the food trucks) pretty much have been successful in targeting the youth,” said Franco. Along these lines, Danhi said the use of Twitter has allowed hip food trucks like his reach out to a new demographic: the tech-savvy “nerd-bots.” Those already dialed into the Twitter scene were really the early adopters of the food truck movement. “Suddenly they’re the cool ones because they’re above the curve, they know it all.” This audience also intersects with another significant population – the hipsters. Hipsters are a subculture of young adults who steer away from mainstream fashion and trends, instead embracing indie (independent) culture, from the clothes they wear, rock music they listen to and movies they watch. The same goes for the food they eat. As hipsters stayed away from the mainstream chain restaurants, elusive upscale food trucks became a “cool” alternative for them. However, as food trucks make their way into popular culture, this group is likely to remove its stamp of approval. Suddenly, “everyone is doing it,” which signals to hipsters that it is time to move on the next trend.

Another subset of the 18-34 audience is the college-aged crowd. This is a significant match for food trucks for a variety of reasons. For one, college students are notorious for their late-night partying habits. Kogi’s early success was attributed to its popularity with the late-night party scene in Los Angeles. Because there are few decent restaurants or eating establishments open past midnight, club-goers who worked up a hunger after partying all hours of the night quenched their cravings with meals from food trucks like Kogi parked outside the clubs. It was a cheap and convenient cure for the
munchies. “You stumble out of a club or a bar and there’s an oasis of grilled cheese,” said Danhi, explaining that when he first came up with the concept of The Grilled Cheese Truck, he thought it would cater exclusively to the college student demographic. In addition to their penchant for late-night dining, college students often are living on their own for the first time and typically do not have much experience cooking for themselves. For some, this equates to dining out frequently. Food trucks became a substitute for fast food. It is cheap (as college students are often living on a limited budget) and sometimes even more nutritious than hamburgers and French fries. For health-conscious diners, the Green Truck, Patty Wagon LA and Hot Peppa Steppa trucks all provide organic options. The convenience factor is another reason that food trucks and college students are a perfect match. On any given day, a number of trucks, including the Slice Truck, Calbi BBQ and the Dim Sum Truck park along Jefferson Street near the University of Southern California. This arrangement not only provides students with a quick way to get a meal, it also expands their dining options beyond what is available on campus. This makes college campuses a prime locale for food trucks.

An additional key audience is the “foodies” – food and drink aficionados who stay abreast of trends in the food and restaurant industry. Foodies are urban professionals who both talk and blog about food:

…the dining scene in their cities, current events, chefs, restaurants, posting and sharing recipes, and the like. The community and its followers seem to be getting larger every day, with a growing number of food blogs, publications, television shows and segments, columns and books than ever before. (Kraft)
Foodies are passionate about all things pleasing to the palate. They are not necessarily professionals, however, so although this may be a very knowledgeable group, it includes amateurs and hobbyists who are interested in all kinds of food, as long as they are of high quality. “Now I think the level of awareness of better food has been raised 20-fold compared to where it was 10 years ago before the Food Network really kicked off,” said Danhi, discussing the nature of food culture today. Because anybody can be a foodie, this category is different from gourmets, who are epicures of refined taste (“FAQs About Food”).

We would argue that today’s gourmet is a broader-perspective fine food enthusiast who pursues the complex and sophisticated flavors in the major world cuisines; and that there is still a dividing line between what is accessible and enjoyable to many people…” (“FAQs About Food”)

As zealous followers of quality eats, foodies are a perfect target audience for food trucks. As consumers who are already motivated by passion, this group is a community that actively seeks out innovations in both taste and dining. They also share the information they discover, in terms of restaurants recently visited and foodie festivals attended (such as the OC Foodie Fest), with other foodies. It appears that word of mouth is big with this audience. Food trucks are also a convenient and economical way for foodies to get their fill of new and exotic categories of food. They offer an attainable way for foodies to experience quality food in a different kind of setting.
Chapter Twelve: Meteoric Rise of Food Trucks

The right cultural and social ingredients blended together to make food trucks the next media darlings. Although truck operators would not reveal their revenues, they did point to other measures of success. For example, what started with a few pioneers has grown into a full-blown phenomenon. “There will be times [when] I go down Wilshire [Boulevard] and I’ll see trucks that I had no idea existed,” said Danhi. “It’s diluted the excitement of the trucks in a way. When I first thought of the idea, there were 10 trucks out there; by the time we got out there, there were 20 something.” There are now about 4,000 food trucks that are licensed to do business in Los Angeles County, with roughly 115 of those considered to be gourmet, offering a myriad of choices for consumers (Bernstein). Los Angeles, which is very culturally diverse but also very of-the-moment in terms of discovering the next “in” thing, has been credited as the birthplace of the food truck movement through its ties to both the lonchera and the birthplace of Kogi BBQ, the pioneer of the mobile food movement. “‘We've had a drive-in food truck industry in L.A. for 40 years,’ says Matt Geller, chief executive of the SoCal Mobile Food Vendors Association. ‘But Kogi was the first time a chef jumped into a truck’” (Glaister). Los Angeles is a fitting sphere of influence for the food truck world, especially since it is a city that “prides itself on being first” (Glaister). Food trucks remain a largely a West Coast phenomenon. “There are food trucks all over the country, of course, but the truly daring ones tend to be clustered in Los Angeles and San Francisco, probably because of the ability to serve street food like this virtually year-round” (VanDerWerff). Strangely enough, the weather does play a role in the popularity of food trucks and the rate at which
they are embraced in a city. People are more willing to stand in line in 70 degree sunny weather than in 30 degree rain and wind. “We don't stand with umbrellas much here in LA, so we have two hands free to eat,” said Steve Turner, gallery owner and food truck regular. In addition to the weather, Los Angeles is also a hotbed for tourism, adding to the food trucks’ popularity, said Willows. “We’re so into pop culture here and trend setting that it makes sense,” she said.

Gourmet food trucks seem to sprout up in major urban cities. Other cities with active food truck cultures include New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Portland, New York, San Francisco, Seattle, Vancouver and Washington, D.C. Some cities have begun to celebrate food trucks as a new addition to their cultural fabric through food truck festivals. Los Angeles hosted its first L.A. Street Food Festival in February 2010, which allowed Angelenos to sample food from more than 35 gourmet food trucks and street carts, including the The Buttermilk Truck, Grilled Cheese Truck, Sweets Truck, Frysmith, Slice Truck, Flying Pig, Fishlips, Komodo and others (Cohen and Newly). The event was so popular (it sold out and people were turned away at the door) that a second installment was held five months later and grew to more than 60 vendors. Long Beach also held a food truck festival of its own in July, which attracted about 5,000 people and raised more than $17,000 for Long Beach City College student scholarships and the Adopt-A-Teacher program serving Long Beach Unified School District teachers (Richardson). Roughly 30 food trucks made an appearance at the repeat event in October. Similar festivals have been held in Boston, New York and Seattle.
As further evidence of the popularity of food trucks, some owners were “preparing for their close ups” on their own reality television show on the Food Network—“The Great Food Truck Race.” The show, which debuted in August 2010, followed seven gourmet food trucks representing some of the best trucks in America as they travelled cross country from Los Angeles to New York trying to make the most money at each stop of the six-city tour (Grady). The goal was for the owners of the restaurant-on-wheels to “test their cooking skills and business savvy to outsell their competitors” (Grady). In each city, the trucks had to first receive clearance from the health department for inspections and permits, and then “spend 72 frantic hours scrambling to secure parking spots, shopping for ingredients, promoting their wares (no Twitter or Facebook allowed), cooking their food and, finally, selling as much of it as possible” (Eells). Los Angeles-based heavy-metal-themed gourmet hamburger truck Grill ‘Em All (an ode to Metallica) walked away with the $50,000 prize after facing unexpected challenges and beating out the competition. Six of the seven trucks were from California, while the seventh hailed from Austin, Texas. One of the Southern California-grown food trucks featured in the competition included the Ragin Cajun Café on Wheels, a Cajun cuisine-inspired mobile eatery designed to look like a gator. “My whole life’s changed,” said owner Stephen Domingue, a transplant from Lafayette, Louisiana who opened his restaurant Ragin Cajun Café in Hermosa Beach 18 years ago. He launched the truck version of the restaurant in April 2010 after auditioning for the show. Although his team was eliminated in the second episode of “The Great Food Truck Race” for not properly promoting the truck, Domingue said the show exposed him to a key element of
attracting customers – social media. “The Twitter and the Facebook gets the word out there,” he said, as he playfully interacted with passersby, enticing them to try out the truck’s signature mixture of gumbo and jambalaya (gumbolaya) during the mid-day lunch hour rush on the Miracle Mile. “I’m telling you, that is the best word of mouth.” The idea for the show grew out of a recurring theme in dozens of pitches the Food Network received over the past two years for food-truck related shows, which also was more popular than any other topic (Eells). The transformation of food trucks from the street to the small screen symbolizes how the mobile movement has carved out its place in popular culture.
Chapter Thirteen: Food Trucks Not Welcome?

Even in the days of loncheras, food trucks have had issues with other local business owners. Ever since their meteoric rise in popularity, complaints about the Twittering trucks have been accumulating. Local restaurants accuse food trucks of undercutting rent-paying businesses, especially restaurants, which tend to be more expensive for customers: “For restaurant owners, the trucks are competition that take away business and hog precious metered parking spaces. Some shop owners are said to have called the police on trucks that languish beyond the allowed hour at a meter” (Linthicum). The Miracle Mile, a two-mile stretch in the Mid-Wilshire region of Los Angeles, has become a hotbed for local police and government intervention. The stretch of Wilshire Boulevard between Fairfax and Western Avenues is home to a host of business offices. A number of fast food joints and restaurants like Chipotle and Mixt Greens also line this district, which is considered one of the city’s most densely populated areas. Due to its proximity to the significant number of working professionals and its location as a high-traffic area, the Miracle Mile became prime real estate for food trucks to do business. On any given day during the lunch-hour rush, a caravan of trucks line Wilshire Boulevard, waiting for hungry professionals to grab a quick bite on their lunch breaks. The trucks often take up metered spots, and the LAPD has cited a number of them for violating parking laws (Behrens). Law enforcement has been known to descend on the area and regularly ticket trucks for even the smallest of infractions, sometimes towing trucks away (Tomicki). According to reports, some employees of Museum Square, which houses chain restaurants like Marie Calendar’s and Baja Fresh,
have been at war with food trucks, resorting to parking employees’ cars in metered spots in the 5700 block of Wilshire as a way to block food trucks from the area (Tomicki). Danhi said he does not bring The Grilled Cheese Truck anywhere near Wilshire anymore. According to Danhi, as much as he doesn’t want to pick a side in the parking wars, he believes that food trucks that don’t follow the rules are in the wrong. “When you’ve got 15 trucks lined bumper to bumper to bumper down Wilshire directly in front of restaurants, that’s just not right,” he said. “That hasn’t helped the industry at all.” He said he and his business partner make sure before they roll to a location to study the locale via Google Earth to make sure there are no restaurants anywhere near the truck. If the truck plans to be a block away from a local business, he will reach out to make sure the owners are okay with it. “We try to live by the letter of the law to the nth degree,” said Danhi. “We’ll promote local businesses sometimes when we’re there.” For example, Danhi will contact nearby businesses by urging Twitter followers to stop by the store while they are in the area seeking out The Grilled Cheese Truck. Due to his background in restaurants, Danhi said he couldn’t imagine parking in front of an operating restaurant, whether it was a law or not. “We have the luxury of saying, ‘Okay this spot doesn’t work, we’re not coming back,’ but these restaurants are stuck there,” said Danhi. “To thrive off of what they’ve got going there is not right.”

To take it a step further, Danhi said his company tries to give back to the communities it serves as much as possible. To illustrate, Danhi offers guest meltings to local restaurants that may be suffering from slow days as a way to help draw attention to them. For example, Danhi did a guest melting at the Hudson House gastropub in
Redondo Beach, which was slow on Mondays. The restaurant benefited from a packed house, while The Grilled Cheese Truck had a place to serve food. “It brings business to them,” said Danhi. “People use us as a promotion tactic, which I think is great.”

Many of the gourmet food trucks came together in January 2010 to form the Southern California Mobile Food Vendors Association, a 118-member association of mobile vendors in Los Angeles who lobby against cities' rules limiting food truck operations. The association itself has helped lobby against restrictions by making use of its Twitter-mobilized fan base to participate in e-mail campaigns to legislatures. “Without your support and activism, we would not be where we are today,” Matt Geller, chief executive of the association and a former restaurant owner with a law degree from UCLA, wrote on the association’s website. As an example of governmental intervention in the food truck proliferation, Los Angeles City Council members Paul Koretz and Tom LaBonge, whose district includes the Miracle Mile strip, introduced a bill that would prohibit food truck vendors from parking at meters in commercial zones and would set up special parking zones for them (Rosenblum). LaBonge also seeks to “restrict food trucks to no more than maybe ‘one space per every other block,’ and wants to explore the possibility of enhanced fines or towing vehicles that don’t comply” (Lee). Danhi said his suggestion for better compliance from food truck owners is to perhaps institute a permit system so that food trucks sign up for and purchase permits to be on Wilshire legally on allotted days. This would help alleviate one of the biggest complaints about food trucks – taking up metered parking, with some trucks running the risk of being ticketed for not continuing to feed the meters and absorbing the cost of the ticket as a cost of doing
business. “If you don’t pay, you’re getting a ticket,” said Danhi. “I would love to see every truck that operates correctly succeed. It just helps the industry.” Rather than deal with the complications of street parking, Danhi said The Grilled Cheese Truck is often invited to park in businesses’ private lots. If the truck is parked on the streets, it is usually after hours. “We are fortunate enough to be invited to every single place we go. We are not that rogue truck where we say, ‘oh there’s a spot, let’s go there,’” said Danhi, describing how his truck is booked sometimes up to three weeks in advance to visit certain locales. He credits The Grilled Cheese Truck’s popularity with being able to live to the letter of the law.

While cities cannot ban food trucks outright, there are ways of preventing food trucks from doing business. To operate a food truck, the owner must obtain a business license from the city. There are 89 incorporated cities in Los Angeles County. If the city has its own city hall, the food truck must obtain a business license in that city in order to operate in that city. “They just try to make it as hard as possible in some areas,” said Willows. In Hermosa Beach, the rule is that food trucks must pull away from the curb within 15 minutes after the last person leaves the line. “Like somebody leaves and 5 minutes later somebody comes up – nope, too late you had no line,” said Danhi, describing how the city indirectly bans food trucks. In another example, Culver City does not allow trucks to sell on the public street; rather it can only be done on private property. In Santa Monica, a mobile food court called The Food Truck Corner, was shut down after just one day because it violated a number of the city's municipal codes (Soudry). In theory, mobile food courts in parking lots are a good idea because they are contained and
take food trucks off the public streets, but in reality they are not the end-all, be-all of problems, said Danhi. “Creating a mobile food court takes away from the, ‘I found the truck on the street,’ and that’s part of the excitement for people with the trucks,” he said, continuing:

Part of what goes on with the trucks is all of the interaction that happens with the finding it, the getting there, the going through the lines and getting out of it. Too many trucks at one place, just doesn’t work that way.

Most recently, food trucks were banned from Abbot Kinney Boulevard in Venice during its First Friday event, in which businesses are kept open late to celebrate the first Friday of each month to help stimulate business during the economic downturn. In December 2010, the Abbot Kinney Merchant’s Association put a parking ban into effect by buying up parking spots during First Fridays due to contentious relations between Venice merchants and the food trucks over treating the neighborhood as a cash cow, “all the while leaving behind piles of garbage, crowds so big that people were forced to walk in the streets, monopolizing parking and blocking storefronts and taking away business from the merchants” (“January 2011: 1st Friday, Art Crawl, Art Shows, Events!”). A handful of gourmet trucks began parking in a private lot on Abbott Kinney in early 2009 (“‘No Parking’ for Food Trucks on AK Next First Friday”). By November 2010, the event snowballed into as many as 50 trucks lining the boulevard (S. Wilson). The food trucks, on the other hand, have argued that they bring new business to the areas and have also funded trash removal for the event whenever they participate. In January 2011, the ban was supposed to continue, however, after “No Parking” signs were not posted, seven food truck operators decided to park along Abbot Kinney Boulevard (S. Wilson). The
usual half a dozen food trucks were parked at The Brig parking lot, which has hosted
gourmet food trucks since fall 2008 (S. Wilson). Less-than-usual attendance was reported
for the event, which many people have attributed to the ban of mobile vendors. Food
truck owners said the poor attendance points to the idea that food trucks are an integral
part of the success of First Fridays in Venice and that taking mobile vendors out of the
equation is “self-defeating for merchants” (S. Wilson).
Chapter Fourteen: Restaurants Missing Out

There are reasons why traditional brick-and-mortar restaurants that are also on Twitter are not receiving as much attention as their gourmet food truck counterparts. For one, interaction with restaurants is not as exclusive or participatory for consumers. Gone is element of the “treasure hunt,” and tracking a meal into new parts of town where consumers may have never ventured otherwise. “‘Restaurants have customers,’ [Geller] says. ‘Food trucks have followers.’ The difference lies in the devotion--the latter will follow their food wherever it is” (Schrambling). Aside from this cult-like following, food trucks create buzz through their changing partnerships. Trucks have the advantage of pairing up with other businesses to create strategic and mutually beneficial partnerships. Combining a consumer’s favorite surf shop with his or her favorite meal can be a winning combination for attracting more customers, which equates to more sales. On another note, restaurants are not anything truly rare or out of the ordinary. Twittering gourmet food trucks fills a void for consumers on the constant quest for something new and exciting.

During an era in which innovation rules, consumers are increasingly shifting away from the mainstream. Rather than the New York Times, people turn to Twitter or Facebook for breaking news. And, in the same sense, rather than McDonald’s French fries, people are turning to FrySmith for vegan chili cheese or kimchi fries. Food trucks are not only a hotbed for distribution innovation, but for taste innovation as well, because they are not as tied down by a property lease or corporate obligations. In effect, they can go where the customers are by changing their location. This spirit of entrepreneurship is
infectious and attractive to both consumers and the media. Danhi said some restaurant owners proclaim the mobile food movement as unfair. But rather than complain, Danhi wonders why restaurant owners don’t join the movement by opening their own food trucks. “You can do it for much less money than [it cost] to open your restaurant and it promotes your restaurant,” said Danhi. In fact, some big-name restaurants are doing precisely that. Once a hipster trend, food trucks are truly rolling into the mainstream with a convoy of corporate entities jumping to join the mobile revolution. From Sizzler to Subway, restaurant chains are sending their food to the streets. The concept for a Sizzler truck was borne out of the Century City-based chain’s chief executive, Kerry Kramp, observing people in line waiting for almost an hour to get food from vendors parked along Abbot Kinney (Bernstein). The truck is expected to tour Southern California venues and will be used at brick-and-mortar locations closed for remodeling and for charity events (Luna). Taco Bell has also been inspired by the street food craze. In August 2010, the late-night fast food giant launched its Cantina Tacos, authentic-style tacos made with corn tortillas and topped with onions, cilantro and a lime wedge (Thorn). Taco Bell was also ahead of the mobile food truck curve; its food truck has been “giving away selected menu items at special events across the country for about two decades” (Hoyland). But the truck has recently gained more traction with consumers through its Twitter handle @TacoBellTruck, which had nearly 10,000 followers in January 2011.

Unlike the new wave of food trucks, the Taco Bell Truck tours the country with set dates, much like the Oscar Mayer Wienermobile. It does, however, take suggestions for tour stops from Twitter followers along the way. According to Will Bortz, senior
manager of public relations and sponsorships for Taco Bell Corp., Twitter offers fans a direct way to get in touch with the company: “Those Tweets are pretty powerful. With 140 characters, it's very easy for people to have a great conversation with you — and you go back and forth very quickly (especially compared to e-mail)” (Hoyland). Instead of relying on its public relations and marketing agencies to identify events for the Taco Bell Truck to visit, the company turns to its followers for ideas. This is effective public relations at its best. Ten percent of the top 200 chains will have trucks on the road within the next 24 months, according a prediction from Aaron Noveshen, a restaurant industry consultant who co-owns the Pacific Catch restaurants in San Francisco and the online food truck portal Mobi Munch (Bernstein). “I wouldn’t be surprised if Chipotle jumps on it very soon, it just makes sense. That whole, ‘it’s not fair’ thing, I do not subscribe to,” said Danhi. The trend is even going international. The California Cart Builder company in Lake Elsinore is building seven custom food trucks complete with stoves, ovens and cash registers for a Fatburger franchisee in Dubai for $300,000 to $400,000 each (Bernstein).
Chapter Fifteen: Race for Regulation

With the food fight between traditional restaurant owners and food truck operators growing, there has been increased pressure to regulate the popular meals on wheels. Clear answers to questions of who should govern and inspect food trucks and what standards should be applied to them are still ambiguous as the phenomenon continues to evolve. Increasing support for regulation of the mobile industry is a direct result of the food truck revolution in recent years. One of the pressing problems is how to ensure the meals mobile vendors serve are sanitary. “My boyfriend got really sick from a food truck,” said Michelle Bristol, 26, of West Los Angeles as she waited in line at The Grilled Cheese Truck on Nov. 13. “He had really bad food poisoning for a week so he’s sworn them off. He will never go to another food truck.”

On Oct. 18, 2010, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors took a step toward more clearly defining rules for operating a food truck by unanimously passing an ordinance that extended the A-B-C letter-grading system traditional brick-and-mortar restaurants must comply with to food trucks (Colby). The ordinance, which went into effect Nov. 18, 2010 and is believed to be the first of its kind in the country, requires twice-a-year inspections for mobile food facilities, including “operators of food trucks, pushcarts and any other kind of mobile chow wagon” (Lin II). The inspections, which are up from the current requirement of a single annual inspection, will determine the vendor’s letter grade; a separate certification inspection will still be required (Lin II). Furthermore, food truck operators must inform county health officials of their routes so surprise inspections can be made (Lin II). Based on the inspections, food trucks will get a
placard with the grade A, B, C, with C being the lowest – the same regulation that applies to brick-and-mortar restaurants (Lin II). “Any operator who scores lower than a 70 (the lowest C grade) can be shut down immediately” (Lin II). Some food truck owners said the regulation only formalizes the process vendors already go through by assigning them a placard, which must be displayed as a testament to their food handling practices. Food trucks are already inspected twice a year -- once at the commissaries where they park their vehicles to be cleaned and another in the field, according to Geller (Rogers, “Los Angeles Food Trucks to Earn Letter Grades for Cleanliness”). The grades will be doled out in the following two phases: first to roughly 3,200 full-service catering trucks, and second in July to about 2,800 limited food facilities, like churro and hot dog carts (Lin II). If food trucks do not comply with the new county health rules, they could face being shut down. Taking a cue from the county’s letter-grade regulation, the Los Angeles City Council is drafting a similar ordinance that would “establish a permit process for food trucks and set parking restrictions aimed at preventing trucks from affecting car and pedestrian traffic” (Colby).

The new rules could be a game changer for entrepreneurs trying to cash in on the food truck phenomenon: “It's cheap and easy, relatively speaking, to launch a food truck business, but profitability becomes less of a guarantee when food trucks are at the mercy of community boards and municipal legislators” (McCarthy). Domingue, however, says he actually thinks the regulation will be beneficial for the industry by bringing confidence and credibility to the trucks. “You just have to abide by the rules,” Domingue said, adding that the new system will help weed out people who don’t understand what a huge
responsibility it is to feed the public and how to serve safe food. “If you keep the place clean and keep the food hot, you shouldn’t have any problems with the health department or the regulations they have going on.” Danhi, who used to teach a food handling education course as the corporate chef of the King Seafood Company, said he also takes sanitation very seriously on The Grilled Cheese Truck. For example, the rule for any food service establishment is that there must be one certified food handler on staff every shift, he said. In contrast, The Grilled Cheese Truck tries to get every single person on its staff certified through the education of how to serve safe food. The extra effort has paid off. During a recent conversation with a health department official at Venice’s First Fridays, Danhi said the official was in awe of how clean The Grilled Cheese Truck was run, especially with the number of staff on board. (The Grilled Cheese Truck has more staff on its truck per shift than most other trucks due to the sheer number of customers in line on a typical day.) Danhi believes there can be a healthy medium of regulation in which the city can police the industry and benefit monetarily from it, while forcing some much-needed self regulation. “There are going to be a lot of regulations coming down, but at the end of the day it’s just going to get rid of the people that just shouldn’t be doing this,” he said. “People are watching L.A. to see what happens. This is the mecca right now; this is the place to eat off a food truck.”
Chapter Sixteen: Emerging Social Media Opportunities

The exciting thing about integrating social media into public relations campaigns is that the practice is still rapidly evolving. As Twitter and Facebook are starting to become old news in the social media realm, location-based applications have become all the rage. In fact, 4 percent of online adults use a location-based service such as Foursquare or Gowalla to share their location with friends or people nearby, according to a survey of 3,001 adults 18 and older conducted by the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life project August 9 to September 13, 2010 (Smith and Zickuhr). The services “use Internet-connected mobile devices’ geolocation capabilities to let users notify others of their locations by ‘checking in’ to that location. Location-based services often run on stand-alone software applications, or ‘apps,’ on most major GPS-enabled smartphones or other devices” (Smith and Zickuhr).

The same Pew survey found that 8 percent of online adults aged 18-29 use location-based services, which is significantly more than online adults in any other age group (Smith and Zickuhr). This demographic is also a key audience for food trucks, making check-in based applications another attractive avenue to reach the right consumers, while also driving company awareness, sales and traffic. The question is, are food trucks moving toward these innovations or sticking with what made them – Twitter? One of the services leading the pack in location-based applications is Foursquare, touted as a “mobile platform that makes cities easier to use and more interesting to explore” (“About”). Launched in March 2009, the platform had more than 5 million users worldwide as of December 2010, a big leap from its roughly half a million users in
Spring 2010 (Gross). Users “check in” to different locations throughout their cities to collect points and “unlock” viral badges, which can sometimes lead to promotional coupons at selected retailers. The game aspect of the application allows users to earn titles such as “Mayor” of a location after checking into the venue more than others, as well giving users a leader board of friends based on how many points they have collected by checking in each week. The benefit of using the platform for businesses is to “obtain, engage, and retain customers and audiences” (“About”). As of January 2010, 50 food truck vendors were listed in the category of “food trucks,” with Kogi BBQ and The Grilled Cheese Truck leading the pack in terms of number of users who checked in at those trucks. Kogi BBQ had more than 4,200 check-ins, while The Grilled Cheese Truck had more than 1,700. When customers check in at these trucks, they can leave advice for other users, including suggestions of what to order from the food trucks’ menus. In addition, users can also re-publish their check-ins to their Facebook or Twitter accounts, which can equate to added free publicity for the companies.

Gowalla, an Austin, Texas-based location-based application, has positioned itself as Foursquare's chief rival (Gross). Like Foursquare, Gowalla users check in to different venues to collect “stamps” or pins on their passports on each place they visit, like virtual geocaching. Digital souvenirs are left in different places for users, which can be redeemed for rewards or discounts on things like movie tickets and apparel (“Photos, Rewards & More”). The application also allows users to post photos, comment on friends’ trips or look up guides to restaurants, parks and gardens. In November, Gowalla signed a deal with Disney allowing users to check in at rides like Space Mountain and
shows like the World of Color around Walt Disney World and Disneyland to earn custom virtual stamps and pins. Despite this impressive partnership, Foursquare has nearly 10 times the users of Gowalla (“Don’t write off Gowalla just yet: huge Disney Parks deal announced”). Checking in to food trucks is also not as popular on Gowalla, perhaps because the app is a bit stricter about GPS locations than Foursquare. As of January 2011, three people had checked in to the Kogi BBQ Food Truck, while The Grilled Check Truck was not listed. Rather than specific trucks, most of the 15 spots list on Gowalla covered general areas where food trucks frequent, such as “Food Truck Alley” in Santa Monica. For both of these applications, the check-in spots appear to have been created by users rather than the owners of the food trucks. Perhaps food trucks could capitalize on the popularity of these location-based services to promote their companies by offering discount incentives for followers to check-in to the trucks and post their check-ins on Twitter or Facebook. Danhi said that so far, The Grilled Cheese Truck has not really focused on these check-in based applications.
Chapter Seventeen: There’s an App for That

Other mobile applications are a relatively untapped source of public relations for food trucks. “In the past couple of years, as Web-enabled phones have become more popular, place-based apps have been among the most buzzed-about features in the tech world” (Gross). A number of food truck-tracking mobile applications, especially for the iPhone, have sprouted up since the food truck phenomenon exploded across the nation. The Los Angeles Street Food app, for instance, provides food truck enthusiasts with interactive GPS maps, Twitter links, reviews, categorized listings and photo slide shows (Green).

The “Eat It” feature also highlights Los Angeles Street Food’s favorite dishes. Road Stoves GPS is another LA-focused food truck application, which pinpoints food trucks that have GPS units, including Kogi BBQ, The Grilled Cheese Truck, South Philly Experience, Dogtown Dogs and the Dumpling Station (“Road Stoves GPS”). It also provides driving directions, menu items and Twitter feeds. Other apps provide similar services for different cities, like Food Truck Fiesta, which locates food trucks in the Washington, DC area. There are even a number of iPhone applications for specific food trucks, including the Dim and Dem Sum Truck, the Street-za Truck and the Boka Truck. The Grilled Cheese Truck application for the iPhone was released on January 6, 2011. The app allows followers to share information via e-mail, Twitter and Facebook and provides users with useful tools like a tip calculator, company menu and contact page with a direct way to Tweet the food truck (Butko). The contact page also shows the truck’s whereabouts for each day of the week. These smartphone apps offer yet another
way for fans to connect directly with their favorite food trucks, fostering customer loyalty by allowing followers to access the truck through a different channel. The apps can either allow users to track many food trucks at once or one specific food truck’s weekly schedule. They offer an opportunity for disseminating information and endearing consumers to the brand.

Other restaurants are using check-in-based mobile applications as virtual loyalty and rewards programs, effectively replacing physical plastic cards. For example, fast-food chain Carl’s Jr. and its sister chain Hardees launched a location-based app for Android and iPhone users in December 2010 called Happy Star Rewards. The app rewards customers with free food and prizes for checking in at one of their 3,000 locations around the country and sharing it with friends on Facebook and Twitter (Patel). A cross between Foursquare and other brand apps, Happy Star Rewards encourages check-ins through its Wheel of Awesome feature, offering prizes that get progressively better the more customers check in. The first check-in and every fourth check-in thereafter give loyal customers a spin on the wheel and a chance at prizes ranging from free burgers to movie tickets and Blu-ray players (“Happy Star Rewards app”). On check-ins that don’t allow a spin of the wheel, users receive coupons for different featured menu items (“News: Carl’s Jr./Hardee’s – Smartphone Loyalty App”). Aside from the prize wheel, the app also features a restaurant locator with directions to the nearest restaurant, a menu with nutritional information, a social media interface and a video player with brand videos (“Happy Star Rewards app”). Although loyalty programs have long been a part of brand marketing, traditional paper-based or plastic-card loyalty programs are becoming
somewhat obsolete. “We’re having an app on your phone that goes with you everywhere rather than a card you don’t want to carry around in your wallet,” said Brad Haley, executive vice president of marketing for Carl’s Jr. and Hardee’s (Patel). Haley said loyalty programs are abundant, but no longer practical in the way they have been traditionally carried out. “‘Nobody's purses or wallets are big enough. Taking that and converting it to a digital format was a real opportunity’” (Patel).

In addition to making the program convenient for customers, the mobile “punch-card” allows the company to keep track of customer visits digitally. The app reaches the coveted 18- to 24-year-old demographic, which uses location-based platforms more than all other age groups (Patel). It also rewards customers with something tangible, which customers appreciate, according to Jenna Petroff, public relations and social media manager at Hardee’s Food Systems Inc. “‘It’s a robust app intended to provide a dynamic customer experience beyond a simple coupon offer or snazzy badge,’ she said” (Tsirulnik). Food trucks should to a cue from this brick-and-mortar counterpart as a possible model for rewarding their already engaged followers. Because food truck fans are dialed in to the social media and app scene, a mobile-based rewards program makes sense in terms of reaching a key audience on their wavelength.
Chapter Eighteen: Online Tracking

Another avenue in which food trucks are making it easier for fans to follow their whereabouts is through tracking them on a map using GPS or online tracking websites. Besides the mobile apps available for smartphones that track the every move of the constantly moving food trucks, traditional online avenues also help consumers satisfy their cravings by locating the exact directions of some of Los Angeles’ most beloved trucks. One such website, www.foodtruckmaps.com, tracks food trucks using Google maps and displays their corresponding Tweets with locations below the map. Roaming Hunger (roaminghunger.com) similarly offers location information via Google maps for trucks in Los Angeles, Orange County, Chicago, Atlanta, Portland, New York, San Francisco, Seattle, Vancouver and Washington, D.C. The site also allows users to search for individual food trucks by name and to type in a user’s address for the food trucks closest to his or her location. There is even a tab where users can submit a request to book a vendor for an event.

Other online tracking tools include wheresmytaco.com and truxmap.com, which consolidate real-time information on food trucks throughout the United States into one page for consumers. The goal for food truck owners, in terms of public relations, is to make sure their truck is featured on the site and tracked regularly. This is free publicity for the company and offers followers a useful service and easy way to locate on-the-go trucks.
Conclusions

It is clear that social media was the main driving force behind the elevation of the gourmet food truck as a new cultural icon in the culinary industry, according to both experts and consumers alike. The food truck has progressed tremendously from its infamous days of being derided as the “roach coach” to its credibility as a gourmet vehicle that has dialed into communicating with customers in the digital space. The question food truck operators face is whether they can withstand the flash-in-the-pan syndrome that eventually seems to affect new innovations and the mediums through which they communicate.

Chefs and culinary experts say not to worry. A “What’s Hot” survey of 1,500 professional chefs conducted by the National Restaurant Association revealed that 33 percent of chefs believe that gourmet food trucks and pop-up restaurants will be the hottest operational trend in the culinary industry in 2011 (“Local Sourcing, Healthy Kids’ Meals, Sustainable Seafood and Gluten-Free Cuisine Among Hottest Restaurant Menu Trends in 2011”). In contrast, 18 percent of chefs surveyed said restaurants with gardens will be the top trend, while 17 percent said social media marketing (“Local Sourcing, Healthy Kids' Meals, Sustainable Seafood and Gluten-Free Cuisine Among Hottest Restaurant Menu Trends in 2011”). “In addition, 55 percent of the chefs said they are currently using social media for professional purposes, and another 16 percent said they plan to start using such channels” (“Local Sourcing, Healthy Kids' Meals, Sustainable Seafood and Gluten-Free Cuisine Among Hottest Restaurant Menu Trends in 2011”). Consumers echoed this sentiment, describing why they believe gourmet food trucks will
be a longstanding pillar in the culinary industry. “I think it’s convenient food and who doesn’t love that, so I think it might stick around,” said Carmina Katigvak, 30, of San Diego in an intercept interview on Nov. 13, 2010. At the very least, food trucks will continue to be ingrained into Los Angeles culture, said Mario Franco, 24, of Santa Monica on Nov. 13, 2010. “It’s here to stay, at least in LA,” said Franco. The “cool” factor behind their popularity, their cultish following and their proliferation of national media coverage are all factors that point to the continued expansion of gourmet food trucks in the upcoming years.

As food trucks roll even further into the mainstream, social media – the innovation’s top public relations tool – will become the standard of how business is conducted. Just like the innovations that came before it, including the telephone, television and Internet, social media is changing the way the public receives messages from and interacts with the business sector. Social media, as it relates to the rise of the food truck, greatly contributed to the success of the phenomenon. The use of social media in this phenomenon was three-fold: awareness and fan base-creation, brand-building and customer service. Twitter was originally used to get the word out about newly launched gourmet food trucks. The benefit of Twitter for food truck owners was the ease in which they could reach out to local, regional and even national media outlets with a simple, 140-character message. The channel for communication makes sense for reporters, journalists and editors who are extremely busy and are constantly bombarded with wordy press releases. Twitter offered a way for businesses to get the message out in a concise, to-the-point package that is also easy to comprehend for the receiver. Rather than sit
through an in-depth pitch phone call or shift through pages on a press release, journalists could receive the gist of the story and immediately decide whether it was intriguing or not. If a media outlet finds the message compelling enough to Retweet it on its page, this translates to more eyeballs viewing the message, which is very valuable in terms of building awareness.

The ultimate goal of using social media is to build buzz and awareness before the launch of a product or brand so that when the launch does occur, there is already a built-in fan base of followers who can act as ambassadors for the brand. The Grilled Cheese Truck, for example, is evidence that social media is an effective tool for building that initial awareness. The second purpose of social media is brand-building, meaning tapping into what is unique about a company and sharing that with followers in a meaningful way. In the case of the food trucks, Twitter became the personality of many of the trucks, in terms of how followers interacted with the brand. The consistent use of an informal tone in both Tweets and Facebook posts makes consumers feel like they can relate to the brand. “Social media alone fosters that because it’s so personal,” said Danhi, adding that if Twitter is used effectively, followers will feel as though the Tweets are directed directly to them. “It’s coming to their phone.” That “brand love” connection is what keeps consumers coming back to a brand.

A third role of social media pertinent to the food truck phenomenon is as a vehicle for customer service and customer care. Social media provides businesses with more personal, direct contact with customers because owners can have one-on-one conversations with individual consumers. It is also a monitoring and listening tool for
companies. Just as praise and positive reviews can be spread via social media channels, so too can poor customer experiences, which is why it is crucial for operators to pay attention to what their customers are saying online. If customers are not happy with a company, they can share their poor customer experience instantly with a simple Tweet. For example, if a customer gets sick after eating at a food truck and shares that bad review online, this may have reputational repercussions for the company. In this instance, the food truck operator must be prepared to address the crisis online and offer a solution to the negative experience, perhaps rectifying the problem by offering a free meal, while also detailing sanitation procedures for followers.

It would be wise for food truck operators to devise a communications plan for potential crises that may occur before they happen, as a way to hedge potential reputational risks. On the other hand, customers can use social media to lavish praise for the brand by recounting a positive experience, which the operator can Retweet as a testament to the company’s quality and service. In the same sense, the company can respond directly to the consumer by thanking him or her for the feedback. This two-way communication is beneficial for both the business and the consumer. Customers are more engaged and invested in a brand as a result of this personalization, which, in turn, inspires brand ambassadors.

However, there are some risks for any entity depending solely on social media for communicating with key audiences. For one, it is a possibility, albeit a slim one, that communication via social media channels could be a fad. That is why it is advisable for food truck operators to supplement social media communications with a website, as well
as traditional media relations to reach followers. Relying on social media alone may exclude an audience that does not use social media but may be interested in eating at a gourmet food truck. For this reason, attempts to secure coverage from television and radio stations, as well as reviews in newspapers and magazines, should not fall by the wayside. Taking a channel-neutral approach to communicating with audiences, even while relying heavily on social media, can only strengthen a food truck’s brand.

To achieve strategic results, social media must be done right. Effective social media efforts require manpower to operate. Uploading updates, responding to comments and complaints and engaging with customers can be a full-time job. Organizations that only enter social media haphazardly because it is “the new thing to do” and do not invest enough time in using it as a strategic communications tool will not have optimal results. Companies cannot pretend to engage with consumers; they will recognize the lack of authenticity immediately, and this could ultimately do more harm than good. In addition, consumers appreciate and, to some extent, expect, brand interaction. It is not enough for companies to have a great product anymore. They must offer an experience beyond that in which consumers feel a connection with the brand:

Micro-interactions are the everyday exchanges that we have with a product, brand and service. Each one, in and of itself, seems insignificant. But combined they define how we feel about a product, brand or service at a gut emotional level. (Armano)

With social media, brand interaction is easier and more cost effective than ever. This type of interaction helps motivate consumers, not only to make purchases, but also to become part of the communications strategy. Because interaction with a brand directly makes
consumers feel they are important, they are empowered to spread the word about their good experience with others. This mobile form of word-of-mouth is valuable in an increasingly digital age. Brand ambassadors can sway consumers who are considering making a purchase (in this case buying food from a particular food truck) to convert their intent to an actual sale. Aside from motivating the public to action, effective social media provides incentives to consumers. Everybody loves a free meal, so to speak, so loyalty programs, contests and special codes delivered through social media are an effective way to strengthen brand loyalty. Tweeting or posting status updates with exclusive contests or promotion codes to on Twitter and Facebook rewards company followers who have taken the time to connect with the brand in the digital space. These types of incentives also serve as a call-to-action for both new and existing customers to visit or re-visit the brand. Incentives also tie in to brand interaction.

Other industries have taken note of the success of the combined mobile/social media phenomenon. Fashion trucks are the new rage, pointing to fact that the food truck model can be applied to other industries, especially to passion-based industries, according to Danhi. Retail appears to be the next phase of the phenomenon. Taking a cue from food trucks, fashion boutiques are now hitting the road in an attempt to reach new audiences: “A small group of cutting-edge entrepreneurs, often from the art and design worlds on both coasts, is skipping the brick-and-mortar boutique for highly stylized sets of wheels. The movement is literally fashion-forward” (Schrambling). The reasons for retailers turning to the streets echo those of the advent of food trucks. Brick-and-mortar shops are having difficulty staying afloat in today’s economy, and mobile boutiques offer a way for
entrepreneurs to avoid the high cost of rent and risk associated with opening a physical retail store. To illustrate, rent for a store in a busy area of New York runs roughly $50,000 a month, while the startup of a mobile boutique is about $10,000 (Schrambling). The risk and cost decreases astronomically with mobile shops. “The ‘hot new neighborhoods’ in most major cities are constantly changing, making it riskier than ever for young entrepreneurs to lay down their roots” (Goncalves). With mobile boutiques, entrepreneurs don’t have to. For example, Portland-based boutique Wanderlust houses vintage threads and locally-made handmade goods in a 1969 Cardinal Deluxe trailer (Goncalves). Wanderlust roves the streets just like its food truck counterparts. Across the coast in SoHo, New York, Cookies-n-Cream displays custom graphic T-shirts and collectible toys out of the window of a converted DHL truck (Schrambling.) The colorfully wrapped truck (in a design inspired by the apparel) blasts hip-hop music to attract customers, which goes along with its hip-hop- inspired wares. According to the truck’s founders, it was important to sell Cookies-n-Cream products directly to the public, rather than through a retail store:

    We wanted to not only allow people to connect with us based on our products but also in the way they received our products/brand. Basically, we wanted to challenge ourselves to do more creatively with the growth of our brand.

Customers can track the truck’s whereabouts on its Twitter handle @TheCookiesMob. Everyone who buys at the truck poses for a picture in front of the mobile boutique, which is then posted on the brand’s website bakedinny.com. Even fashion designers with household names have turned to the mobile movement. Cynthia Rowley, for example,
has a “mobile fashion unit” – equipped with dressing rooms – that took Rowley’s fall 2010 collection on a cross-country road trip throughout the year, also giving fashionistas a glimpse of her spring and summer lines (Goncalves). Cynthia Rowley also gave back to the communities she rolled through by forming partnerships with nonprofit charity organizations, another way to connect with consumers on an emotional level. In addition, other national retailers like Armani Exchange and the Olsen Twins’ JCPenny line have picked up the trend. The reason the mobile movement works both for food trucks and retail is the immediacy and urgency of the business plan. According to Patricia Norins, a specialty retail expert and magazine publisher based in Hanover, Mass., “The customer is not sure you're going to be back. And there's a certain level of uniqueness that's important. There's a certain level of homogeneousness in the standardized mix of shops you see other places.” This urgency can inspire impulse purchases, especially for customers looking for a new shopping experience.

In summary, the pairing of the mobile movement with social media as its main vehicle for public relations is a winning combination. With Twittering food trucks as the first real innovators of this business model, mobile appears to be the wave of the future for other industries looking to bring products and services to the streets, directly to the hands of the consumers. In the case of food trucks, social media helped both improve the reputation and reach of the food truck industry. The promotion of a product or brand through social media is not just a fad; it is the new way of doing business. It is as much part of the communications plan as the press release before it. Although the tools used for social media are constantly evolving as technology evolves, social media itself has
proved to be a viable way to cultivate and maintain mutually beneficial relationships, which is the ultimate goal of successful public relations.
Bibliography


