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Ethiopian restaurant embraces QR codes

Mesob marketing manager discusses customer response

Feb. 2, 2011 Alan J. Liddle

Quick response codes, those boxy information-packed cousins to bar codes, are being used by Mesob Ethiopian Restaurant in Montclair, N.J., to engage mobile-technology-savvy guests and spur buzz.

Consumers with camera-equipped smart phones can download free software — such as NeoReader or KaywaReader — to scan so-called QR codes for access to information, such as product details and business card data, or a link to a website with specialized content.

Mesob Ethiopian Restaurant started using QR codes last fall, said Berekti Mengistu, who co-owns the restaurant with her sister, Akberet Mengistu.

“It is exciting for us to immerse ourselves in technology and social media, and by having online conversations with our customers, we have learned more about them than we ever imagined,” she said.

“We want to create the best restaurant experience for them, and QR codes were a natural progression to engage our patrons with content they regularly ask for,” she said.

Vickie Smith-Siculiano, Mesob Ethiopian Restaurant’s marketing manager, recently answered NRN’s questions about QR code use at the East Coast eatery.

Are many guests scanning the codes?

We’ve had a very positive response from our tech-savvy patrons. What makes it so neat is that an ethnic restaurant of an ancient culture was so receptive to trying out a new technology that was so unfamiliar to them.

We found QR codes an invaluable way to enhance the Mesob dining experience for our patrons. They become involved in the culture of Ethiopia as well as have “table talk.” Complaints about wait time have decreased. Patrons are now more engaged and connected with the staff, and questions to our servers about Ethiopian culture and traditions have increased. Our wait staff has

been educated in the use of the codes so they can help patrons make use of them properly. Mesob staff has also been involved in many of our video projects.

There are videos of the processing of Ethiopian coffee, a fashion show of traditional Ethiopian clothing, a coffee ceremony in Ethiopia, the making of injera in the Mesob kitchen.

Are you able to track how many guests are scanning and who is scanning for possible ties to digital marketing programs?

We are able to learn which videos are [watched] most, as we regularly track statistics with from bit.ly (<http://bit.ly/>), which we use to generate the QR codes.

We also use our Google analytics reports to see how the views are affected on our website, <http://mesobrestaurant.com>. We track website traffic on days we put up new codes. Our website hits increased when we started using the QR codes, so we do also use this as a measurement tool, [along] with the bit.ly stats on QR code scanning. This is because we include QR codes for visiting different pages on the website, including signing up for our e-mail list on our website.

The codes are also used to take people directly to our website, to our Facebook page [and, scanned from window signage] to OpenTable.com for reservations.

How long are QR codes scheduled to run or be used?

We consider the QR code program a permanent feature of the restaurant. We constantly update table cards with new codes and include them on all promotional signage. To promote a special Valentine's Day event with traditional Eskesta dancers from Ethiopia, the signage in the window as well as promotional table cards have two codes — one for immediate access to our OpenTable reservations and the other to watch a video of these performers.

Any “aha!” moments or lessons quickly learned?

Because of the authentic ethnic culture of Mesob, we have to be careful not to “tech” it up too much. The restaurant has received high reviews for its décor, and we do not want to detract from that. Therefore, the codes are placed as unobtrusively on the walls as possible. Because a fairly large percentage [about 30 percent] of our diners are smart phone users, they spot the codes and are intrigued and interested. Other diners ask about them and are fascinated by the technology involved.

QR codes on table cards keeps diners occupied as they wait [to be] served, patrons have told us. It's great when you walk through the restaurant and see a smart phone with a video playing on it, and sometimes you will even be invited into a conversation about the video they are viewing because they learned something. We have placed them on the walls, next to authentic Ethiopian wall hangings, but we find that the table cards are most viewed, we assume because everyone has access to them no matter where they are seated.

Contact Alan J. Liddle at alan.liddle@penton.com.