The 2021 SOCIAL MEDIA AWARDS

Erin Del Conte • Executive Editor
CStore Decisions outlines best practices on social media for 2021 and highlights the c-stores performing best on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.

CStore Decisions, for the ninth consecutive year, is recognizing convenience store chains standing out on social media.

If there was ever a year where social media outreach proved vital to c-store chains’ success, it was 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic brought about social distancing and lockdown rules that drove customers inside. Those brands with a strong social media presence had the opportunity to continue a dialogue with their customers and make them aware of new safety rules, hours and deals.

“Everybody turned to social media because they were home. In March and April, especially, it was our only outlet to other people,” said social media expert Gini Dietrich, founder of Spin Sucks and author of the book “Spin Sucks.”

As the pandemic raged on, social justice issues also drove people to social media to discuss racism and Black Lives Matter, protests and sexism. In addition, the U.S. presidential election this fall inspired an uptick in political posts.

“We had what we’re calling ‘the mother of all crises’ this year because it was all of those things at one time,” Dietrich said.

But while many customers turned to screens more often, others unplugged as screen fatigue set in. Consumer intelligence research platform CivicScience found that as 2020 dragged on, social media use dipped. In Q1 and Q2, 24% of respondents reported using social media two or more hours per day, compared to 22% in Q4.

“People deliberately unplugging from devices also increased in the beginning of the pandemic, but doing so may be decreasing a bit as of (Q4),” noted Mary Acklin, marketing manager for CivicScience. “With more social media usage comes more worry.”
Social Media Awards

HOW OFTEN DO YOU DELIBERATELY “UN-PLUG” FOR AT LEAST 2 HOURS FROM YOUR PERSONAL TECH DEVICES, NOT INCLUDING WHILE YOU SLEEP? (i.e. TV, mobile phone, tablets, smart watches, fitness trackers, laptop/computers, MP3 players, etc.) - Quarterly Percentage

> All respondents responding on or after 01/01/2020 in my account
> Weighted according to U.S. Census figures for gender and age 18 and older

Against the turbulent backdrop of 2020, convenience stores were also looking to engage with their fans on social media platforms.

For this year’s Social Media Awards, CStore Decisions partnered with Seattle-based Rival IQ, a social media analytics toolkit that helps brands supercharge their social landscape by tracking results across all social profiles and benchmarking their performance against their competition and industry.

METHODOLOGY

Rival IQ analyzed the social media practices of 65 convenience store chains for 12 months, from Nov. 1, 2019, to Nov. 30, 2020, across the top three platforms — Facebook (FB), Twitter and Instagram — to determine which chains were standing out when it came to social media engagement.

“We wanted to look at a good length of data, so you’ve got some pre-pandemic time in there, and we’ve got a lot of pandemic time in there as well,” noted Seth Bridges, founder of Rival IQ. “First, we’re looking at engagement totals — actual counts of how many likes and comments, shares, retweets and replies from people who are the followers, or really anybody on the platform that’s engaging with the content.”

Next, Rival IQ measured the average engagement rate, which looks at how much a brand posts and the engagement compared with the brand’s following size, to develop a score for the amount of average content resonance a brand gets on their posts, Bridges explained.

“Each of these is interesting, each of these is important, and together we combine them into a weighted score that lets us understand who’s doing well at both generating overall results as well as generating good results given their size,” Bridges said. “We combine that, and we end up with a single score for each channel — Twitter, Facebook and Instagram — that lets us say who rose to the top.”

Finally, Rival IQ combined the single channel scores to determine the stores with the best overall ranking across all three platforms. “Brands that perform well across all three channels are the ones that really rise up to the top in the overall rankings,” Bridges said.

FOR MORE, LISTEN TO THESE SOCIAL MEDIA PODCASTS

• CStore Decisions LIVE with Seth Bridges
  Learn more about the methodology behind the awards and how your convenience store chain can learn new strategies from this year’s Social Media Award winners: CStoreDecisions.com/2021/01/08/social-awards

• CStore Decisions LIVE with Gini Dietrich
  2020 was a tumultuous year and that played out on social media, too. Learn how you can tap into the latest social media trends in the year ahead: CStoreDecisions.com/2020/12/18/social-trends
LaCrosse, Wis.-based Kwik Trip (KT) is our big winner, coming in first place in the overall category for its performance across all three social media platforms. KT keeps its content fresh with memes, jokes and a few pinches of snark, which resonates well with fans. It includes cultural touchpoints — new and old — to connect with customers, especially playing up the chain’s Wisconsin roots and culture.

“They know their customers. Their customers are passionate about KT, and they play on that very heavily,” Bridges said. “They are playing on the fact that people in Wisconsin and beyond really, really do love their KT.”

KT also isn’t afraid to go after interplay with other brands in a playful way, sparring with them through witty banter.

“They’re so consistent, too,” Bridges noted. “The content that we see from KT on Twitter and beyond, it always has that (playful) vibe. From that, you know that there is a level of buy-in at the organizational level — whether that’s all the way to the top, from the marketing and PR teams on down to the social media manager — there is clearly an agreement and a strategy about what they’re going for and a freedom for the social media team to be able to go and execute on that.”

KT also displays a solid understanding of the variance in their audience between the three channels, Bridges pointed out.

CStore Decisions also caught up with KT to hear its perspective on what’s working for its team on social media.

“Besides having a humorous approach, our strategy highly involves creating content that incorporates relatable Midwest scenarios and the strong love and loyalty toward our brand,” confirmed Paige Forde, social media specialist, Kwik Trip Inc., which operates more than 750 stores in Wisconsin, Minnesota and Iowa.

The team also takes the time to listen to and learn about its audience.

“Our guests’ opinions and experiences provide us with a fresh perspective on our stores and products. By focusing in on our mentions and comments throughout the day, content inspiration seamlessly follows,” Forde said.

Forde also noted that a crucial factor in being allowed a certain freedom in responding is ensuring KT’s brand voice remains consistent.

“With our approach to humor, it’s important to find a balance when it comes to our level of sarcasm and banter,” she said. “Encompassing an overall lightheartedness in our social presence is key. Our brand voice has evolved a bit as we test new waters and continuously adjust to what best appeals to our audience by tracking engagement levels and other metrics, allowing us to relay our learnings internally.”
Jacksonville, Fla.-based Daily’s, with 37 c-stores in Florida, stood out for top performance on Facebook, followed closely by Cenex.

Daily’s uses a solid strategy of focusing on products it has available to customers, particularly those it knows will resonate with its fan base — like Daily’s Pumpkin Milkshake in September.

“Daily’s also understands that on Facebook, particularly, organic (reach) is great, but you can always accelerate your performance by doing a little bit of boosting,” Bridges said. Putting dollars behind content to help it reach more eyeballs on FB can be key to expanding engagement.

“Looking at Daily’s promotions, contests, product launches, and then that targeted use of boosted posts behind the content they know is going to work well, has really been a key to why they were able to rise up, both from an engagement rate perspective and also just generating engagement results,” Bridges added.

Cenex also performed well on FB, but using a different strategy — evidence that one size doesn’t fit all when it comes to social media performance. Cenex grew its engagement with meme-style jokes that resonate with its Midwestern base.

“There’s some farming jokes, there’s corn maze jokes. There’s definitely a Midwestern vibe going on here, and these posts do incredibly well for them,” Bridges noted. Cenex not only inspires comments but also shares, which are key to gaining attention. The brand also asks questions.

“This is a tactic that we’ve seen work well on social media for a long time, not that many people do it,” Bridges said. He pointed to one post on driving hacks where Cenex asked if customers were falling for any of the myths listed. Customers were quick to jump in to share their knowledge and comments in the feed, which resulted in additional conversation with people replying to each other.

“They absolutely ask questions a lot, and I think it works for them,” Bridges said. “I think a lot of other folks who are trying to create more of a conversation around their social media could learn from that technique, as well.”

Kum & Go took the top spot for best engagement on Twitter.

“We saw some really strong growth on Twitter this year. If 2019 was about finding our voice, 2020 was about running with it,” said Ariel Rubin, director of communications for Des Moines, Iowa-based Kum & Go, which operates 400 stores in 11 states. “From playful banter to innovative customer conversion plays, from COVID-19 messaging that resonated, to finding new and unique ways to promote our work with marginalized groups, I’m really proud of how Kum & Go was part of the conversation this year.”

“They absolutely are all in on social media,” Bridges said. “They clearly, from the top down, have bought in on who they are and who they want to be on social media. They are funny. They are crude. They leverage lots of sexual innuendo. They are owning their name, they’re all about it, and that clearly goes all the way to the top.”

On Twitter, Kum & Go is highly invested, endlessly replying — quickly and in a playful way — to those who engage with them, including on direct message (DM).

“Someone will DM them, and they’ll have that same joking attitude, sometimes that same supportive
Social Media Awards

Kum & Go took first place on Instagram, as well. Both Kum & Go and Kwik Trip, which came in third place on Instagram, use a similar strategy of taking their most-loved Twitter content and bringing it over to Instagram, where it also performs well.

“This year on Instagram has been interesting for us,” said Nadia Trimnell, social media specialist, Kum & Go. “We have learned when it is appropriate to use humor and when we should hold back and share an important story from our community that needs to be heard.”

Kum & Go also stands out for the way it is using its platforms to amplify social justice messages. Bridges pointed to Kum & Go’s post in late May following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police.

“Kum & Go’s tweet was like, ‘We’re ready to finally tell you the uncensored story of how we got our name.’ There’s a link — and it goes to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Legal Defense Fund,” Bridges said. “They’re taking the attention that they garnered, and they’re also playing off a meme of their name, and then linking off to someone else.”

The chain also used its celebrity to highlight social justice issues when it put out a number of posts in support of LGBTQ+ rights in June, which is LGBTQ+ Pride Month.

“In 2020, we were able to share powerful stories about some really important issues that impact our communities,” Trimnell said. “So when it came to celebrating and honoring Black and LGBTQ+ lives, as well as leading on COVID-19 messaging, we found ways to show up, listen and be there for our community without losing that voice that we worked so hard to hone.”

The chain’s authentic, consistent voice in support of its values has resonated with fans in a big way.

“There’s clearly an agreement about who they are as an organization, who they are as people; and whether that’s to support their employees, their communities, their staff, they are all in on it,” Bridges said. “This is an organization that deserves kudos for kind of living their values — both, I’m sure, in person, but also all the way through to their digital presence, as well.

For more takeaways from the social media awards, listen to the CStore Decisions LIVE podcast with Seth Bridges at CStoreDecisions.com/2021/01/08/social-awards.

Best Instagram Specific Engagement
Winner: Kum & Go
Runner-Up: Buc-ee’s
Third Place: Kwik Trip

Last summer, Kum & Go and Budweiser collaborated on a limited-edition shirt and tank top. Proceeds benefited Fold of Honor, which provides educational scholarships to families of fallen or disabled military members. Kum & Go celebrated the shirts on social media, drawing customer excitement. Customers even created user-generated content by sharing images of themselves modeling the shirts.
For the full story on social media trends in 2021, check out my recent podcast with Dietrich: CStoreDecisions.com/2020/12/18/social-trends/.

ON AN AVERAGE, HOW MUCH TIME DO YOU SPEND IN TOTAL ON SOCIAL MEDIA SITES AND APPS?

Quarterly Percentage
> All respondents responding on or after 01/01/2020 in my account
> Weighted according to U.S. Census figures for gender and age 18 and older

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Spent</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>I don’t use any social media</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 hour</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 to 2 hours</td>
<td>24%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2+ hours</td>
<td>20%</td>
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Source: CivicScience® on Dec. 22, 2020

TRENDS AHEAD IN 2021

C-store chains looking to drive their social media engagement in 2021 can learn a lot from other chains that are doing it well. But what works for stores in the Midwest may not resonate as well in the Southeast. Bridges recommended that chains dig into their own social media data to discover the patterns behind what content is resonating with their particular audiences. Buy-in from the top down is key.

“You have to treat (social media) like something that you mean to do well, which means give it investment, get the buy-in, build your strategies, execute, measure and see what’s going to happen,” Bridges said.

Heading into 2021, KT’s goal is to continue improving engagement levels and involvement with its fans. KT’s Forde advised other chains to take time to dig into what your customers and the competitors’ customers are saying about your brand.

“Social listening not only provides thoughtful insight but helps seek out trends and allows you to develop content that adheres to what most interests your audience,” Forde said.

“We had a lot of fun exploring memes this year on our Instagram, and I am excited (to do) more collaborations,” said Kum & Go’s Trimnell. “I am confident that the collaborations between different brands and artists will help us connect with our audience and customers even more in 2021.”

Spin Sucks’ Dietrich also weighed in on the Top 5 things c-store chains should do on social media in the year ahead.

1.) Test, test and test some more. “Take some risk,” Dietrich advised. “It doesn’t cost you anything to do that.”

2.) Have fun. “We were social on social media, and then the marketers took over and we ruined everything. And now we’re shifting back to being social on social media again. So have fun with it,” she said.

3.) Make sure anything you share is factual, even when retweeting.

4.) If you’re partnering with nano, micro or celebrity influencers, ensure they aren’t involved or associated with anything that could hurt you and make you look guilty by association.

5.) Have fun. “I know I already said this (in No. 2), but it’s THAT important. Have fun,” she added.

In 2021, Dietrich recommended that c-stores put more social media energy toward Instagram and TikTok — the two platforms where Gen Z spends the most time. “Snapchat has had its day, and really it’s not doing so much anymore,” Dietrich advised.

Those with a robust Twitter following should continue their efforts. “But if I were starting somebody out fresh, brand new on social media, and they didn’t yet have Twitter, I probably would put it aside for now,” Dietrich said.

LinkedIn tends to be a platform geared toward business to business, as opposed to a place for retailers to engage their customers. But it can be a good platform for executive level operators to network with each other and gain new ideas.

On FB, Dietrich recommended trying some fresh strategies such as posting more videos and taking advantage of Facebook Live and Facebook Stories.

“To be successful, I think probably especially for a store operator, Instagram’s probably the very best place for you to be,” she added. CSD