

## Ep #36: Bad Influence: How Social Media Is Reshaping the Restaurant Game



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Hosts

**Patrick Totah and Andy Mirabell**

[Restaurant Deal Making EXPOSED!](#) with Patrick and Andy

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Welcome to *Restaurant Deal Making EXPOSED!*, the only show that equips you with everything you need to know about restaurant transactions. In this show, we tell you all about how to make the sale or purchase of your restaurant not just possible, but successful. Now, here are your hosts, ex-restaurateurs, and seasoned brokers, Patrick Totah and Andy Mirabell.

Patrick: Hey everybody. We are back here today with *Restaurant Deal Making EXPOSED!*. Today, episode, Bad Influence: How Social Media Is Reshaping the Restaurant Game.

The viral rise of restaurant review influencers on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube has become, in my opinion, one of the newest and biggest challenges facing the restaurant industry today. Some of it is controllable, and some of it isn't. And that's what makes it so tricky. As restaurant owners, operators, or even as brokers representing these businesses, we now live in a world where a single video, post, or review can send masses of people through the door overnight or just as easily turn people away.

We've always had critics. Google and Yelp reviews have been around for years, and of course, the old guard of newspaper and magazine critics, the New York Times food section, the Eater crowd, and so on. However, today there is a key difference. When a professional critic reviews a review, we get context. We know their background. We know their palate. We know what they've liked and disliked in the past. There's a standard.

Compare that to a random Yelp review, one bad night, or one customer who simply thought the dish was overpriced, and suddenly you're looking at a one-star review with zero context. That can be brutal, and it often feels unfair.

Now, add to that the rise of social media influencers. Whether you love them or hate them, they are here and they are reshaping the industry. These creators can wield massive influences with a single post. Unlike traditional critics, they don't play by the same rules. They're not obligated to be balanced or consistent. They are often building their own personal brand along the way. That means as a restaurant owner, what you can do, how do you respond, and how you serve

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them? How you set boundaries? Can you have consequences far beyond your four walls?

Andy: All right. This is a complicated one, isn't it?

Patrick: Yeah, it sure is. It's uh, the one thing I didn't put in there is uh, on Yelp, you can also get a bad review for a political stance, which has nothing to do with the food or service. And now it's being used to weaponize restaurants for things outside of the restaurant industry.

Andy: Yeah, totally. I have a unique perspective on this topic of influencers and how social media and things are being used to review and criticize and be a critic. I mean, I'm not saying criticize in a negative way, but be a critic of restaurants, dishes, and businesses. It's really come so far and it's happened so fast. So I have a unique review. One, I've been an ex-restaurateur and dealt with this. And two, my ex-wife was a fashion influencer and so on. So I see it through both lenses. And I think that is unique to me and I'm really happy that I can, hopefully, contribute a little bit more to this on both sides today.

But, let's go with our restaurant background, Patrick, you and I. We both have had restaurants. We both understand what it is to receive feedback from a customer about good or bad things. And you and I both lived in this era where it went from just waiting for that newspaper food critic release that was a big deal, that would make or break you or set you on the right trajectory or wrong, to then having to dive into Yelp reviews, OpenTable reviews, Google reviews. That was kind of the first wave of it, right?

Patrick: I think so.

Andy: And now we're really in social media. Now we're with TikTok and YouTube and everything else.

Patrick: Yeah, it's a lot. I mean, I have to say for myself, I was not ready for, like for instance, a Yelp review. And it took some getting used to as a restaurant owner. In the beginning, if I got a review, I would get an alert. And immediately my gut would sink and I would feel really like yucky, and even, I hadn't even

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seen the review yet, but it just gave me this immediate tightness. So I actually, at some point, had to learn to turn off the alert and not be on that rollercoaster.

Andy: Yeah, I can relate to that. It was very hard. I tried to respond to everyone. And what it felt like to me, at the time, I don't know, we're talking 2010 to 2015 kind of time range here.

Patrick: Yep.

Andy: It felt like there was a quote-unquote “deaf communication.” Why can't that guest who was having an uncomfortable experience or didn't enjoy something not address it with the service team and with me, i.e., the owner or management at the time? So it felt very difficult to navigate because, I'll speak to my perspective, I trained staff to be very friendly, open, and customer is never wrong. Period. Okay?

Patrick: Yep.

Andy: We know in our heart, there's some situations that are kind of black and white, but overall, we have to listen and be receptive. So as the communication inside our four walls of restaurants started to subside, the increase on these Yelp reviews and everything else, the increase went far up very quickly. So we were responding to these things on a regular basis. And I, like you, had to kind of turn it off because it gave me anxiety.

You can't please everyone. You can't respond to everyone. And furthermore, what I trained my management team, who also was stressed by this, is that we need to look for the themes, right? Look for those key phrases, feedback critiques that are coming from multiple parties and then address it from there.

That was my rule of thumb after being stressed for so many years.

Patrick: That's a good point. I mean, if there's a consistent message being said to you, you have to hear that. And I think that's a really important fact.

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Andy: Yeah. I know you and I gossip and talk about this stuff offline, but let's share some real-life experiences, real-life things that we see in the media in San Francisco. Don't you think? And we can kind of go off those.

Patrick: Yeah, I think the episode here, I think, kind of came to, came about, uh, with some recent examples, and it got me thinking, and I wanted to share that here. Why don't you talk about the first one here?

Andy: Can I skip forward? I'm going to choose one. Sorry about that. I'm going to choose Swan. Swan Oyster Bar, absolutely iconic, decades old. It's this teeny little oyster bar that's got national recognition. Chefs love it, patrons love it. They line out the door all the time. Great place, right?

Patrick: Yeah.

Andy: The review and influencer that wrote about it commented, correct me if I'm wrong, commented on the hat.

Patrick: There was a hat on the bar that either said like, I think I believe it said 45, 47, making reference to, Donald Trump, the current president. And there was a backlash because of that, not because of the food or the service, but because of their political stance.

Andy: That's a hard one to navigate. As a customer, if your views are not aligned politically or otherwise with the ownership of the restaurant, where do we go? Where do we go? If it's not being advertised on the walls or on your menus and all this stuff, where is that fine line? Is it really about the oysters at this point and the service at this point?

Patrick: Yeah, no, I think this is, to me, I get a little bit emotional about this kind of this one because as you know, I'm Palestinian and I know that certain people have been persecuted for whether they're Palestinian or Jewish because of their political stance on what's going on in the, in the world right now. And I think that's off limits. If I have a political issue with one person, I'm not going to go make a big ol' stink of it. I just may not go there myself, right? Like, why would I bring that to the media? And I think that we shouldn't evaluate a restaurant

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based on what their political stances. I think that's probably what's wrong with this. To me, it's part of the issue right now, right?

Andy: That's the divide, right? Now, if it's shoved in your face while you're dining and all this stuff, that's different. But we can personally, as diners, can make our own decision whether we want to return or not for whatever reason, but then to damage the business for the long term is a pretty extreme path. What are these other two examples that you've brought up that you listed here?

Patrick: Yeah, there's two other examples. One is Kis, which is in Hayes Valley, and the other was Ju-Ni, which happened more recently as well.

Andy: Yeah. The Ju-Ni one came hot and heavy. It came fast, right?

Patrick: It did, and just coincidentally, it's the same person from Swan.

Andy: Yeah. Got it. The same influencer that wrote about this, right? Got it.

Patrick: Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

Andy: Will you outline that one a little bit? What happened there?

Patrick: Yeah, so it's my understanding that a chef might have had some discouraging words with an influencer. I don't know the ins and outs of that, and I'm not going to pretend to know. And I'm sure that the influencer probably felt a certain way, and I totally can appreciate that and would never take that away from them. And also, I think this is something that should be dealt with directly and not punish somebody for. I guess my point here is that in San Francisco or even in California, the restaurant industry is so damn challenging right now. And to bring this on any business just seems like yet another challenge in operation. And I just don't know that's the right thing to do.

Andy: Yeah. I also want to defend San Francisco here. We live in a city and an area of the country that's so inclusive of everyone and we appreciate that. So there's two sides to every story, but sometimes these stories go viral. They're very fast paced, very poignant, directed, and they can really, really spread quickly, causing damage and harm.



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Patrick: I think the point here is that I don't want to take a position on either side. And I think that other people shouldn't because a lot of times when we see things in the media, we don't really know what the story is, right? We're on the outside and we're just quick to make a judgment. And all of a sudden now somebody is without a restaurant, without a job. There are employees that work there that are now without a job. Is that really what we want to do in the industry? Aren't we supposed to help people become better, not worse? And so...

Andy: Make an informed decision on how you, whether you want to dine there or not. We talked earlier about Kis, and you brought up maybe an example based on this, this situation in that there's a lot of chefs, restaurateurs, and so on that are from a different generation. And learning this and learning how to absorb influencers, their posts and how to absorb that's very, very difficult. And it causes them to have to really think about things and change, if you will, right? So...

Patrick: It's and it's hard to have good change when you're having a very bad experience with it, right? So I think the whole point here is that we're trying to be better as humans. And I just don't know that this is a great way to do that, right? I mean, yeah, we're all learning here. A lot of us have, didn't grow up with social media. I didn't grow up with social media. I didn't grow up with influencers. If I was a chef today, I think of chefs as artists. They're putting out their this thing. It can have an emotional response. So of course, if there's critique that they felt like they were hurt, there's going to be a response. And I think we have to take that into consideration.

Andy: So, you know, we named a few of the restaurants that have been through this in the Bay Area. Let me ask you a question. Do you think the rise of food influencers has done more good or more harm for independent restaurants overall?

Patrick: I don't know. I really don't know because I don't follow influencers. I'm just not that person. So I'm probably the wrong person to ask.

Andy: Let me take that one. I wholeheartedly think it has helped overall. These social media posts reach a way broader demographic, not just in your local

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community, that really, really can go viral and get momentum. So if used, I think it's overall helped. But I also think if you use these things right and use the reviews and positive and build your own social marketing campaign for your own business, you really can benefit from a lot of these things. So overall, I think it has helped. Are there bad players in every industry? Absolutely, right?

Patrick: Let me play devil's advocate here. Let me, so let's say that now because of an influencer, they make one business just take off because that person thinks that this business is good or, maybe there's some other reason they're being paid to use their influence to... So that means that now this one business has a massive line, whether it's the food is really that good or not, that means that there are other businesses suffering because of it that are in the same...

Andy: Same genre, right?

Patrick: Exactly. So is that a good thing? Or is it better for people to kind of organically find out which restaurants are good for them? And are you taking away business from other restaurants because of one person's influence?

Andy: Yeah, I'm going to be black and white on this one. I think it's like advertising. If you create and pay for a good advertising campaign for your business and you run a commercial on the TV and your business blows up, I don't see much difference in it.

Patrick: Yeah, okay.

Andy: All right. So, let's try a different question here. Do you think influencers understand the operational chaos they can create when they post about a small business? Or do you just think it's about driving their own followers? I think what my question really is getting to is intent versus impact. Okay?

I was a mom and pop, one location restaurant in San Francisco at the time, and one review really could make or break me, right? We're not talking about a chain that can absorb ups and downs of one unit because of their total revenue for the whole company, right? So there is an intent versus impact here, and I think impact can be pretty damn big when you write something that's polarizing, right?



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Patrick: Yeah. And I mean, I think, personally, like if I just use, let's say Yelp, for example, I've seen people with their reviews on there and I always wondered, were they, were they really genuinely trying to do a good review for the restaurant or are they more into building their own Yelp review? It was more about them than it was about the restaurant, right?

Andy: Yeah.

Patrick: To me, it seems like for an influencer, it's more about them and their community versus the restaurant. To me, that's just my knee-jerk response, but maybe I'm wrong.

Andy: Yeah, I think it goes also to the, this goes for every consumer in a restaurant. A lot of people don't quite, they see opulence, they see bars with really expensive bottles and nice design inside of a restaurant, but a lot of the, and it's not the consumer's fault, but the customer or consumer don't quite understand how thin margins are at restaurants. And so, like I said, something that you may, maybe your impact is, hey, I'm going to write a review and share it, but if something's polarizing, it really can drive business one way or the other, right?

Patrick: Yeah, I mean, again, I'll go back to the idea that this isn't just about one person. There's a whole team there. There's people who are counting on that to pay their, their kids. It's not just about the chef. I hope people understand that when they're doing whatever it is that they're planning on doing.

Andy: And I think on this next question, I think we kind of touched it with the Swan situation, Swan Oyster Bar situation. But my opinion on owners' personal views or political views, if it's not being put on my dinner plate in front of me or on the walls of the restaurant or on the menu, but you do perhaps know they support, let's just call it political, one political side versus the other, but it's not advertised, but I don't know how you know it, but you know it. I really think that I need to make my own decision whether I would go back there or not based on their political view or whatever other view we're talking about. But if it's not shoved in my face, that's my decision. I'm not going to smear them online.

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Patrick: I would never do that. Yeah.

Andy: Yeah, if something in the restaurant is being shoved down your throat and you're like, hey, this is not why I come to dine. I don't want political advice, then that's different. That's different, right?

Patrick: Yeah, that is different. And you know, if I had an issue with a business, I would never want to cancel them. It would be a personal thing for me, and I would choose to do something differently. I would never try to hold them, weaponize what, yeah.

Andy: Yeah, totally well said on that. I think one of the points that we need to make with these reviews and social media and all these things is that these things spread fast, right?

Patrick: They sure do.

Andy: Once, we'll call it spreading like wildfire. Once it's out there, it's out there. Reviews and posts move very fast. And you can't, for the most part, you can't retract them. They're out there once they're out there. So, and if that information is not correct, it's misinformation, it's still out there. You know what I mean? And people may be believing that. So there again, this is the side of it that I think we're like, gosh, it's this is very sensitive. People need to be careful about what they write and how they go about it because misinformation's bad. These things stay out there and it can have a lasting effect on the business, on damaging the business.

Patrick: I'm going to use an example that has nothing to do with the restaurant industry, but I am currently watching this series on Hulu about Amanda Knox. I think it's a great example because I was clueless about what was going on then. I had ideas about what I thought, but I am learning now that I was completely oblivious to what had happened. And even didn't realize that somebody else had been convicted of the murder. I just knew that she had been convicted and then at one point she got off, but I didn't know that they actually had found the actual killer. And it's a great example of this thing that stays out there and has

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transformed people's minds and yet what they believe is the furthest thing from the truth. And I think that was a really good learning experience for me.

Andy: Yeah, no, absolutely. So you want to dive in to do a little bit of on maybe some, some ways restaurants can protect themselves or posture themselves to be able to absorb reviews or use them in a positive way?

Patrick: Yeah, I mean, I think for me, being genuine and consistent with yourself, like for instance, with Yelp, you mentioned earlier responding. I did. I would respond. If it was a bad review, I would wait a few, a couple hours, kind of collect myself and just try not to be defensive. I think that the moral here is not to be defensive and come from a place where this person is genuinely saying that they had an issue and just to hear them, I think is really important.

Andy: Yeah, exactly. Receive the feedback, right?

Patrick: Yep. Yep.

Andy: I think in today's world, it's absolutely important that a business owner sets clear policies with the influencer around the promotion that is happening, especially if it's a paid promotion. You're paying for it. This is an advertisement. So be clear about what this influencer or person that you're bringing into your business to write a review or you're paying them for it, be clear about what should and shouldn't happen, okay? And I think that goes for having stock contracts for collaborations, having clear communication before anything, before that person comes into your four walls and reviews you or writes about you. It's really good to have that.

Obviously, we can't buffer that all the time because some of these people are coming in and dining without notice, right? And then writing about it, but that's different. To your point, rapid responses to reviews, take a breath first. You just kind of, that was your advice, right? Take a breath. Calm down before you respond so it's not emotional. And then, respond clearly, receiving their feedback, acknowledging what they're stating and then respond thereafter how you see fit.

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Patrick: I had a boss a long time ago who gave me the best piece of advice I ever had. He said, you know, if you get an email that you don't like, he's like, just wait an hour before you respond. And this is before social media. This is just, email had just been a new thing. And so it's kind of the same thing. It's like once you send that, there's no taking it back. So just really, really be thoughtful about what you want to say.

Andy: One thing I said at the beginning of the episode here that I've seen it through both sides, being in a relationship with my ex-wife and she was an influencer for fashion and I'm a restaurateur and so on. And I think this is very, very important for business owners to understand and to try to either resource someone who can help you in this or really take this to heart.

Build your own business content. Use these influencers, use these people to your advantage, right? Try to reach out to the right ones, the ones that you think are respectable, commendable, that you may follow, that your customer base may follow, create a relationship, and then help maybe they help you build your own content. But you really want to use these new tools, social media tools, influencers and so on to your advantage, right? Don't look at them as the enemy. There's a lot of positive that can come out of this stuff, I think.

Patrick: Absolutely. I would like to put out a message if there's any like critics or influencers out there listening, I would love to have them on so I can, we can have a conversation together about this because I'm I'm truly interested in learning more.

Andy: Yeah, absolutely. I'm glad you brought that up. We've had food journalists on with trained in that and gone to school for that and have a lot of experience to build up to where they were. And it would be really neat to have, a food influencer on. We know plenty, we can reach out to you, but if someone's listening, by all means, send us an email.

All right, here's something for you, Patrick. What is the harshest review? This is your bonus question. We're not talking about food today, okay? What's the harshest review that you've ever written?

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Patrick: That I've ever written?

Andy: That you've ever written on a, do you remember the gist of it or anything?

Patrick: Oh, I don't know that I've ever written. I had, I will admit that I had a Yelp account. I no longer do because I've decided one day that I want nothing to do with any of this. And so, I don't know that I've ever, I've always been more about telling people when they do good than not.

For instance, I just recently went to the Good Good Culture Club in the Mission. And I thought it was exceptional. And I was like, I'm going to just write an email directly to the restaurant. That's more my style. And so I wrote a, I wrote an email. I just wanted to, I told them everything that I thought about their service, the food, and just had been the best experience I've had in San Francisco in a long time.

Andy: That's fantastic. I love it. We totally didn't, we glazed over that. Write, give positive feedback. When you have it, give it. We're so quick to write negative, aren't we, in this today's society?

Patrick: Yeah. And I write positive, but also I have come to a place in my life where I'd rather just say that directly to them because it's more me and me being me versus trying to go put it out on Yelp or Google. It just that doesn't really do anything for me personally.

Andy: Well, oh gosh, I don't I shouldn't even put myself on the spot.

Patrick: Yeah, what is the worst review you've ever wrote, Andy?

Andy: I've had a few over the years. It takes a lot for me to write anything negative because I'm a restaurant, ex-restaurant owner and all that stuff. I have addressed something when I didn't feel the management or owner actually received the feedback in a person. Then it's more of a heed, a warning or a warning I'm putting out there, not a negative criticism. You know what I mean? And I'll just use two themes.

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One is revolved around unsafe practices, okay? Not people not knowing the menu, serving something to me who has an allergy that I clearly stated and they said, nope, not in there. And it damaged me, right? That's not okay. And when the management team that day or doesn't receive it, your feedback, that's not okay. I have other pet peeves like writing champagne next to cava that's not from Champagne, France, or... but that's I'm not going to totally, I'm not going to blast someone on that, but that, I just don't go back.

Patrick: I remember the worst review I did, but again, it was direct. I went and spoke directly with the manager and the, this is a big huge pet peeve of mine is in the restaurant industry, people wear gloves, as you know, and I think that there's a perception that when employees have gloves on, they think that they're just clean now. And so this person, I walk up to get a, I think it was a smoothie, if I remember correctly.

Andy: Did they stir your smoothie with their finger?

Patrick: They were sweeping the floor with a broom, right? And then they put the broom down, and they had gloves on their whole time, the same gloves, and then they went to start making my smoothie with those gloves on. And so, I spoke to the manager, I was like, I think she, this person thought that they had gloves on and they were being sanitary, but they never had changed their gloves. They just had them on the whole time. So that was probably the worst.

Andy: I got you. I got you. They lick their finger, touched the money, and then touched your fruit and your smoothie. I understand. All right.

Patrick: I will tell you, when I was in high school, I used to work at a deli and we didn't wear gloves and we used to ring up the register and then we would go, wash our hands in the sink and then we'd go make the sandwich, but we handled everything. Whereas today, you couldn't do that anymore.

Andy: That was the 80s. You had a cigarette in your mouth too when you were serving the deli sandwich, right? All right, all right. All right, enough of this. Hey guys, let's not cancel either side, either party on either side of this, but influence and things that we put out there can have a big effect. So anyways, it's a, it's a



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good conversation piece. We respect both sides of this and there you go. Let's move on to something more our lane on the next episode, Patrick.

Patrick: Absolutely.

Andy: All right. Thanks, guys.

Thank you all for listening to this week's episode of *Restaurant Deal Making EXPOSED!* If you're considering selling your business and would like a free consultation, reach out to [patrickAndAndy@therestaurantsalesbroker.com](mailto:patrickAndAndy@therestaurantsalesbroker.com) or visit [TheRestaurantSalesBroker.com](http://TheRestaurantSalesBroker.com) to learn more.