

Chico social media firm shifts to restaurants

By Laura Urseny, Chico Enterprise-Record

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Stacie Taylor-Cima, left and Heather Meyers talk social media strategies last month in Chico. Emily Bertolino — Enterprise-Record

Chico >> Two years old and 12 employees later, founder Mark Sorenson has validated his premise that restaurant owners need social media and are willing to hire for the service. Hence the business Social High Rise.

There aren't extra hours in the day that restaurant owners can toy with social media, so in minds like Sorenson's, it's not really an option.

Not only does social media create customers, it also bonds them to the businesses, he says. Partnerships develop when customers see their photos on Facebook or Instagram or are tagged in someone else's photo enjoying a meal at a local place. Getting the public to make comments via social media is how businesses can increase visibility.

Launching with three people, the start-up of now a dozen workers creates and manages social media for its clients, from the former Ballroom on Broadway. Once home to influential parties and gatherings, the big hall is filled with computers, desks and meeting areas, flanked by the nearly floor-to-ceiling windows that look out over downtown Chico. One corner is set up for videos and photographs to connect with clients. A big sectional becomes the conference room for employee meetings. Everything is neat and orderly.

What sets Social High Rise apart from other social media managers is that early on, it received both private investor funds as well as seed funding through 3CORE, a Chico nonprofit that deals with entrepreneurs for job creation. It was by luck that Sorenson was on Twitter and encountered Christian Friedland, head of Build.com, the multimillion-dollar online home-improvement company based in Chico. Friedland put him in front of a small group of angel investors.

Then, Sorenson landed \$10,000 from nonprofits 3CORE and North Valley Community Foundation, in their first round of angel funding for local entrepreneurs. The goal of the fund was "to bootstrap the business to get it to a certain scale where investors are more willing to invest," according to 3CORE executive director Marc Nemanic. In 2013, what impressed Nemanic was that Sorenson's business "offers a smart way to manage the perception of a business in the market."

Today, Sorenson said he's been pleased with the company's progress, a speedy doubling of clients at first, then another slower doubling.

Sorenson is not to be confused with the Chico mayor of the same name but different spelling.

Social High Rise started in 2013 with the idea of helping any kind of business with its social media needs, but found a calling among restaurants that work on a smaller margin, but have a huge public interaction. Mom-and-pop places often lack the social media know-how, and small chains of 20 sites or less often don't have the time to attend to online marketing.

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Like other businesses, the use of social media by restaurants is about creating relationships, Sorenson said,

“People love to talk about food, to take pictures of food, to talk about it, so social media is a good fit.”

On the other hand, restaurant owners and managers are time-strapped and not experts in social media.

“Their time is more valuable for other things,” he says.

Robyn Katz of Italian Cottage agrees. Social High Rise started working for Italian Cottage about two years ago when Katz had too much on her plate. She had launched the restaurant’s website and then was taking on Facebook. She and her husband Brian Katz handle the operation of the two restaurants and catering business in Chico, with help from founder and his mother, Judy Katz. The business turns 50 this year.

“I didn’t know how to do some things and was just too busy,” said Robyn Katz, who is mother of two teen boys as well.

“We do social media to get customers,” she said.

Now, her only concern is keeping her Social High Rise account managers supplied with new information.

“I give them information about the dishes, specials, events. They do the rest.”

Sorenson is often asked is how can social media’s benefits be weighed.

“It’s hard to measure. But social media provides customer service and can give that.”

Using social media is a new way of thinking, Sorenson points out.

“People think it’s like old marketing. It isn’t. It’s about taking stories, culture, vision and translate that into content. It’s not competitive.”

His team is all local, college graduates, generally under 35, and either graduates or interns from Chico State University.

Sorenson said the company was profitable early on, and growth is what he hopes to attain.

“There are millions of restaurants that need help. We can add value for very little money.”

What works for restaurants also works for countless other industries, so Sorenson sees the potential nearly limitless.

Clients can choose to dabble in some social media themselves or leave everything up to the Social High Rise team, which also has steps to address negative reviews which can be damaging to a business even if they’re untrue.

Sometimes it’s just a matter of acknowledging a problem or listening to a critic by making contact with that person and hearing the situation.

“They want to know their complaint has been heard. It can be that simple,” Sorenson said.

Contact reporter *Laura Urseny* at 896-7756.



Laura Urseny

Laura Urseny is a business and general news reporter, as well as a columnist. Reach her at lurseny@chicoer.com or follow Laura on Twitter: [@LauraUrseny](https://twitter.com/LauraUrseny)
Reach the author at lurseny@chicoer.com or follow Laura on Twitter: [@LauraUrseny](https://twitter.com/LauraUrseny).

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