

## **Cover Story: Is PR the secret ingredient to restaurants' success?**

Leslie Collins

Kansas City no longer is viewed as a side.

The area's vibrant food scene increasingly is gaining national attention, from landing on Zagat's "Most Exciting Food Cities in America" list to Thrillist's compilation of the food cities "you have to visit."

Its reputation even spurred California-based Broseph's Restaurant Group to open a local office last year and debut its concepts here.

"Every kind of article we read just pointed toward Kansas City," Broseph's co-owner Travis Lester told the Kansas City Business Journal.

None of it is by accident. Although top-notch food and service play a vital role, so do the efforts of in-house marketing teams and outside agencies. Marketing and public relations can begin months before the first customer is seated. It can mean the difference between being a hidden local gem and getting in the mix for prestigious national awards, including the coveted James Beard Award, that bring in customers from near and far.

"Sometimes, you don't get a second chance if you don't get that first impression right," said Helen Gregory, a founding partner of Gregory + Vine, a New York-based branding and strategic communications agency that has a Kansas City office.

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PR or another manager?

About 60,000 new restaurants open each year, according to the National Restaurant Association. Although roughly 50,000 will close annually, that leaves a net gain of 10,000 new choices for consumers.

The growing number of options has forced many restaurant owners to alter how they do business, including budgeting money for public relations.

"When I got in this business in '05, it was ego-driven PR," said Melany Robinson, founder of New York-based national public relations firm Polished Pig Media. "People wanted awards. They wanted covers of magazines. They wanted to be in Gourmet. That's no longer even open. Now, people want revenue-driving PR."

Husband-and-wife team Joe and Katy Kindred were renovating restaurant space in the college town of Davidson, N.C., and costs continued to soar. They realized that they needed help making the restaurant, Kindred, a destination.

They hired Los Angeles-based Wagstaff Worldwide, whose clients include chefs (such as Edward Lee of Kentucky and Gail Simmons of New York), hotels, travel destinations, vineyards and spirits brands.

“The risk of not making that investment was scarier to me than the risk of taking it,” Katy Kindred said. “The worst-case scenario would be a three-month commitment to them, which at the retainer fee was well worth the losses that we could have potentially encountered if nobody knew we were there.”

Now, with two restaurants, Kindred estimated that the couple pays a retainer of \$3,300 to \$3,600 a month for public relations with Wagstaff. The cost can look overwhelming on a budget sheet; it’s essentially deciding between hiring another manager or paying for PR.

And the returns from that PR work can seem intangible: How much of chef Joe Kindred’s most recent James Beard Award semifinalist recognition is because Wagstaff put his work in front of the right, influential people, and how much of it is because of the owners’ relentless networking?

The Kindreds opened their doors in February 2015, and it wasn’t too long before they got their first wave of publicity after Bon Appetit Editor Andrew Knowlton dined at the restaurant. The duo and their business made the magazine’s Hot New Restaurants list that hit in August 2015, and the attention has snowballed.

Katy Kindred draws a distinction between marketing and public relations. The Kindreds handle the restaurant’s branding, social media and marketing in-house. They had their story — about their restaurant being part of their family, about opening a nationally recognized restaurant in Joe’s hometown. But they needed help getting a chance to tell it.

They hired Wagstaff solely for public relations.

“We were never in the market for a marketing company. We were specifically looking for someone who was good at PR, somebody who has the connections so that we can have the opportunity to tell our story,” she said. “It doesn’t mean anyone will listen, but at least you can get your foot in the door.”



The Monarch Bar works with Gregory + Vine to help lead media outreach and shape the bar’s messaging and communications platform.

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Playing the trendsetter

When David Manica began planning The Monarch Bar, he wanted to create an experience in Kansas City in line with the highest possible standards in the industry. He wanted to tell that story to local and national audiences.

Manica hired Gregory + Vine to lead media outreach and help Monarch’s messaging and communications platform. He hired the agency four months before the bar launched in 2017 and continues to work with Gregory + Vine, whose client base spans the beverage, hospitality, food, travel and destination industries. The agency has built solid relationships with media outlets nationwide and tailors its pitches instead of sending out generic ones.

Every time Monarch releases a new seasonal menu, the agency meets with Bar Director Brock Schulte to talk about what’s new, what inspired him and the leading trends.

“We’ll have one-hour powwows and try all the new drinks,” Helen Gregory said.

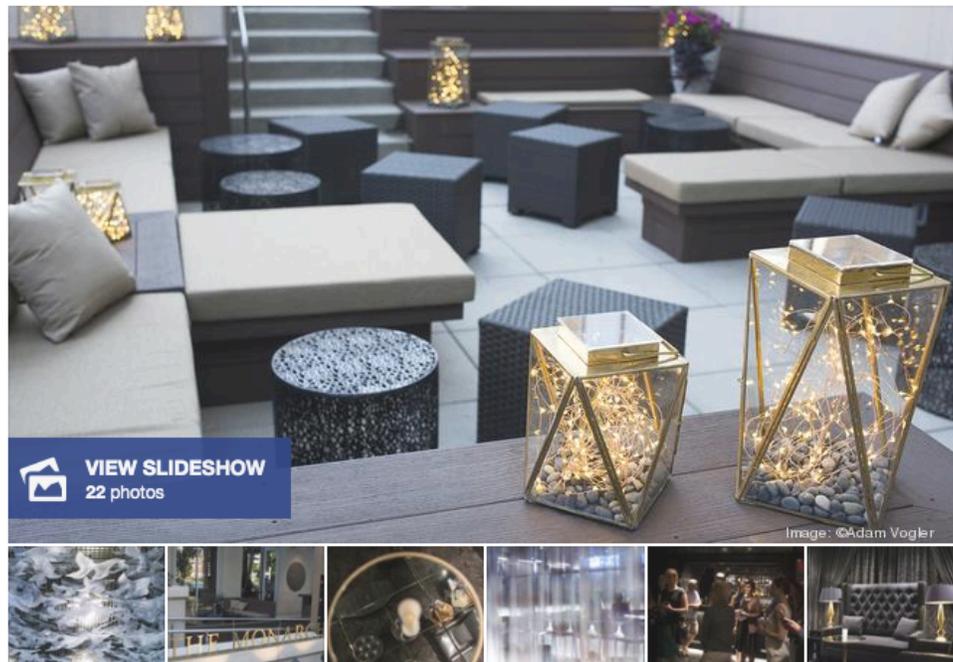
One of Gregory + Vine’s strategies is looking for avenues to turn what Monarch is doing into trend pieces. A standout practice at Monarch is harvesting blocks of ice and stamping its logo on it for cocktails. So Gregory + Vine pitched stamped ice as a national trend to Forbes, which liked the idea and featured Monarch as the lead in a 2017 article.

The Monarch Cocktail Bar and Lounge

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Although some pitches lead to a quick turnaround for publicity, others take much longer.

“We just had a story come out on CBS that we pitched a year ago,” Gregory said. “You have to balance the short-, medium- and long-term placement strategy. Helping a restaurant client understand that is really important, so they can think ahead, too.”

For awards submissions, Gregory + Vine helps clients create authentic, thoughtful answers that are targeted to a specific organization. A generic fact sheet doesn’t cut it, Gregory said.

“You don’t win those awards if you’re not spending a lot of time and energy in the submission process,” she said. “The recognition is driven by quality — by the quality product, the quality experience, the quality service the client is responsible for. Our job is to broadcast that to make sure the world knows just how good they are ... and why they’re deserving of an award.”

Often, it can take 24 to 36 months for awards to come into play, she said. In Monarch’s case, it took 18 months of campaigning. The bar has racked up local and national honors, including “Most Innovative Beverage Program” in the independent category for the 2019 Cheers Beverage Excellence Awards and “Best Cocktail Bar in North America” in the 2019 Nightclub & Bar Media Group awards. This year, Monarch was a James Beard Award semifinalist for Outstanding Bar Program.