

‘Food as a Social Lubricant’: Supporting Local Restaurants; Empowering Communities

Image



When indoor dining temporarily ended in Oak Park last fall during the Chicago, Illinois suburb’s second wave of COVID-19, some residents took to social media to share their opinions on the balance between public health and small business survival.

“There was a lot of debate but no real solution,” Oak Park Trustee Ravi Parakkat said of the controversy.

Instead of taking a side, Ravi said he did some math. He realized that if 10,000 people spent \$25 dollars per week at local restaurants, it would generate \$1 million

per month; about \$10,000 per month for each of Oak Park's approximately 100 restaurants.

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“That \$10,000, in my mind, represented additional revenue that would help them survive the pandemic — cover basic costs like rentals or leases and some payroll,” Ravi said.

Just over two weeks later, after Ravi talked to stakeholders and residents, Takeout 25 officially launched with a [website](#), [Facebook](#) page and local media coverage.

About six months later, Takeout 25's Facebook page has more than 8,000 members. Other communities bordering Oak Park have joined in.

Similar initiatives have also started in communities across the Chicago Metropolitan Area and in other American states including New York, Ohio, Indiana, Texas and California.

“The focus is in the simplicity of the math,” Ravi said. “Every community should go through that and see what is really required” based on their population and number of restaurants.

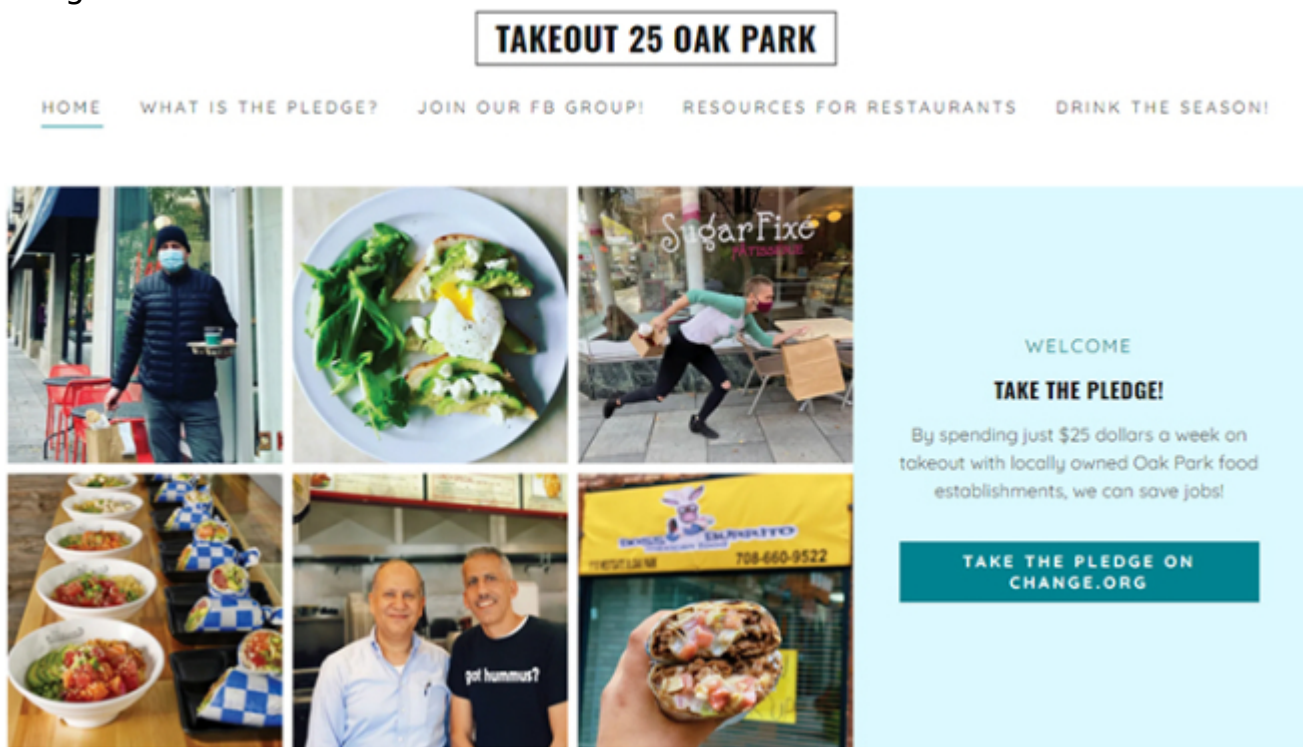
Giving people a specific dollar amount to spend each week gave them something tangible they could do, instead of a broader campaign to shop nearby, Ravi said.

“Letting people know they are actually having an impact on the local economy and they are part of a broader movement and they are contributing to a cause is important,” he said.

Through participating with other nearby communities, Takeout 25 widened its support. “Both in terms of the restaurant business and local businesses and in terms of the community we’re not that far apart,” Ravi said.

“We have to cross those borders; we have to build bridges, but the way to do that are ideas like Takeout 25,” Ravi said. “We are spending zero taxpayer dollars. There should be no reason to resist that.”

Image



Takeout 25 began in Oak Park, Illinois as a tangible way for individuals to show their support for local restaurants. It has since inspired similar initiatives nationwide. (Photo from www.takeout25oakpark.com, used with permission.)

People experience the excitement of sharing a favourite meal or restaurant, while getting to know the people behind their favourite places.

“Businesses cannot join as businesses,” Ravi said of the Facebook page. “They have to join as the owners and the managers and the staff; as people.”

Social media exposure helps restaurants with marketing, even if they don’t have a marketing team. “It enhances some of those capabilities, but it also takes people from having nothing to having something,” Ravi said, describing it as “systemic help” for the restaurant industry.

When Ravi launched the Facebook page, there was only one rule — no negativity. “Once you go through that initial hump of reconditioning people and giving them a new frame to interact, they turn around and it becomes a self-monitoring engine,” he said.

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“I consider food as a social lubricant,” Ravi said. “It definitely brings people together. If you’re looking to build a diverse community, the food in that community has to reflect that diversity.”

Experiences around food, Ravi said, are some of the “micro moments” that empower

community, or even attract new residents.

With between \$3 and \$4 million generated in additional revenue, Takeout 25 is poised to outlast the pandemic. Ravi envisions turning it into a nonprofit.

“While it started with the frame being ‘survive,’ as we come out of the pandemic, I’m looking at ‘how to help the local economy thrive’ and how do you use technology to enable that in a not-for-profit model which is aligned with the community?” he asked.

Ravi added that he is actively working to make this a reality.

Through Takeout 25, people are connecting their dollars to their values; whatever they’re able to contribute.

They’re also ensuring there will be places to gather and connect.

“It helps us time travel to a different point in our life,” Ravi said. “We’ve made friends at specific restaurants. We’ve gone and celebrated moments in our lives. We’ve created memories that are important to us — and that is what a community is ultimately about.”