

# Best Practices for a Successful Restaurant Week: Implications for Stakeholder Management

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## Abstract

The restaurant industry has been impacted worse than any other industry by Covid-19. Successful Restaurant Weeks (RW) efforts help to expedite the recovery of this devastated segment. RW promotions have become mainstay efforts for increasing customer counts and revenue. In addition, these efforts provide an opportunity for collaboration, partnership and charitable endeavors among the restaurateurs. Despite the proliferation of RW activities across the globe, little or no research has been done which assists in maximizing the effectiveness of the event. Twenty-eight semi-structured, open-ended, in-depth interviews were conducted with RW organizers from seven mainstream cities with successful RW activities, as well as Hawaii which maintains an excellent reputation for its event activities. The following provides a review of best practices focusing on marketing and promotion, increased restaurant participation, and value-added factors that may enhance RW and aid in the recovery. In addition, takeaway lessons are provided for enhanced stakeholder management in facilitation of such events.

## Keywords

Restaurant Week, Stakeholder Management, Marketing, Event Planning

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## 1. Introduction

Some five years after the Covid-19 pandemic, the restaurant industry is still feeling the effects of the crisis (Saxena, 2025). According to the National Restaurant Association (NRA), the restaurant industry was hit harder than any other segment by Covid-19 (NRA, 2021). It is estimated that the number of non-local guests vis-

iting fine dining restaurants has dropped 40% due to the pandemic. Some 110,000 restaurants and bars closed in 2020 with 2.5 million jobs and lost revenue an estimated \$ 240 billion (King, 2021; NRA, 2021). Even today, there are some 900,000 fewer jobs than before the pandemic. One method of expediting the recovery is increasing customer traffic through aggressively marketing Restaurant Week (RW) promotions (Wong, 2021).

RW promotions have become mainstream methods of promoting local restaurants and generating tourism in the United States and abroad. In the U.S., large cities such as New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Dallas, Miami and Las Vegas offer lower priced, prix fixe meals during a designated week or two each year as do smaller communities such as Fresno, Gettysburg and Kalamazoo (OpenTable, 2024; Zagat, 2010). A physical count of U.S. cities hosting restaurant week promotions totals at 150 according to OpenTable (OpenTable, 2024). Outside the U.S., London, Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver provide similar offerings as do cities in Belgium, Austria, Italy, India, China, and Hungary. In spite of the spread of this collaborative event, little or no research has been conducted to highlight the promotion, its attributes, practices or outcomes. Indeed, a search of the Proquest Research Library and Academic Search Premier databases yielded zero appropriate results when searching for peer-reviewed citations of the term “restaurant week”. The rare exception to this absence of guidance with restaurant weeks is primarily blog sites that provide some direction (RestaurantsCT.com, 2010; Abaffy, 2018). However, little evidence is provided that the advice will yield positive outcomes.

Given the proliferation of the RW promotion, exploration of the variables which impact its success seems worthwhile. This is particularly true given the scale and scope of the event. RW is unique in how it is planned, developed, and executed. For example, restaurants that traditionally compete with each other agree to collaborate in a joint effort during the designated time period. Often this includes restaurants across an entire city or county. Restaurateurs pay a fee to participate in the event with the promise of providing full-portioned of a price-fixed meal, often 3 courses at a discounted price (Hochwarth & Platus, 2005). Frequently, the process is overseen by a local restaurant association or convention and visitor’s bureau (CVB) which has limited formal authority. Consequently, addressing inconsistencies among the restaurants, restaurant dissatisfaction, customer dissatisfaction or other related problems can be difficult and politically volatile. When a public relations or advertising organization is brought in to mix, further difficulties can arise regarding communication, creative efforts and execution.

The purpose of the current study is to identify best practices used by a variety of RW cities and locations across the U.S. focused on effective marketing, increased restaurant participation, and inclusion of value-added factors. Value-added factors are those components or activities that elevate the event due to their uniqueness, value or ability to engage the consumer. It is hoped that current RW

cities and those seeking to introduce a RW promotion, will benefit from such a review. As noted by [Yuksel and Yuksel \(2005\)](#), “*the value of studying and learning from the good practices of others for destinations in need of assistance can hardly be debated*” (p. 667).

In addition, given the need for competing stakeholders to collaborate, lessons for effectively managing stakeholders will be discussed. Operators in the events industry are often required to manage a network of stakeholders whose interests may not always align. The current study sheds some light on methods for doing exactly that.

Given the dearth of empirical research on RW, this study is largely exploratory in nature. Consequently, the article will begin with the historical development of the event and its expansion rather than a traditional review of the literature. Next, the literature on stakeholder management will provide context for the current study and the sampling and data collection methodology will be overviewed. Finally, the findings from each area of analysis will be presented along with recommendations for stakeholder management in the events industry.

### **1.1. New York: The Beginning**

Food and food festivals have a rich history dating back to ancient cultures for celebration, religious ceremony or simply pleasure. Conversely, the first RW is generally acknowledged to have started some 25 years ago in 1992 in New York City. Tim and Nina Zagat, founders of the famous survey and guide take credit for creating RW with legendary restaurateur Joe Baum ([Matsumoto, 2010](#); [Zagat, 2010](#)). According to Zagat, RW was created as a 4-day event as a gesture of goodwill for media attending the Democratic National Convention. Some 15,000 reporters covered the convention and the founders believed that such a promotion would create positive public relations for the city and local restaurant industry. Restaurants that participated in the inaugural event created a three-course prix fixe menu and charged \$19.92 ([Abaffy, 2018](#)).

Local restaurants were initially concerned with the costs associated with the promotion, but its success was evident. In addition to the increase in sales during the initial timing of the event, diners began trying new restaurants which helped to expand the customer base of participating restaurants. The success of RW created an annual tradition with greater restaurant participation, and promotions offered multiple times per year. Indeed, in 2012, RW was extended for a three-week period during the summer. Given that this would be a traditionally slow business period for restaurants, the promotion helped to generate greater sales. Pricing increased from \$19.92 in 1992 to \$19.93 in '93 etc. Currently, RW is offered twice per year with options at \$21.00, \$39.00 and \$125.00 ([NYCGO.Com, 2021](#)). The \$125 option is an exclusive Signature Dining Experience that highlights the restaurant's offerings. A recent count of participating restaurants puts the total at over 500 restaurants in a variety of locations ([Wong, 2021](#)). A central goal of the update to RW was to revitalize the NY restaurant scene which was

ravaged by the COVID-19 pandemic. Loosening restrictions contributed to somewhat of a recovery, however job shortages and many restaurants still not at 100% occupancy continue to plague the industry.

## **1.2. Restaurant Week Organization**

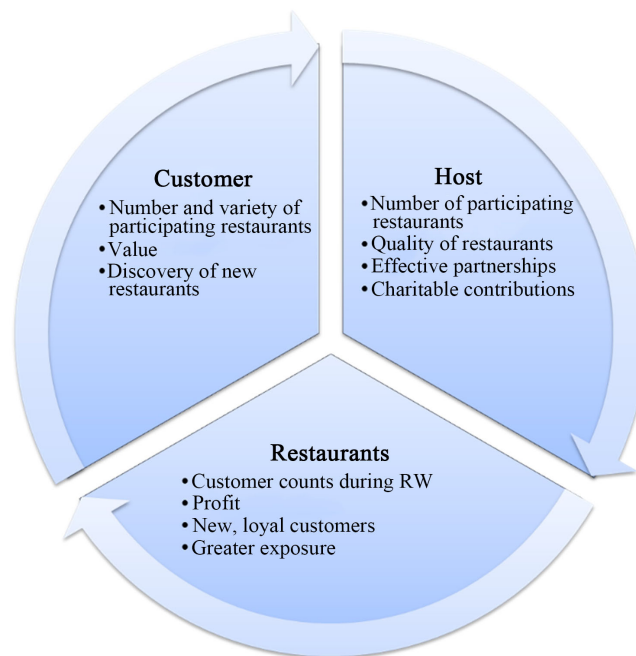
A variety of methods are used to plan and deliver restaurant week promotions. For example, New York restaurant week is organized by NYC & Company, which is the city's marketing and tourism organization that partners with local restaurants and works to organize the event. In San Diego, members of the local restaurant association form a committee to manage the restaurant week promotion with the help of a public relations organization. Boston RW is a partnership with Greater Boston Convention and Visitors Bureau and American Express. Hawaii has a varying method of organization with the Culinary Institute of the Pacific at Diamond Head taking responsibility for planning activities. Given that many of these host methods are partnerships and require the collaboration of a large network of unrelated restaurant operations, a number of challenges exist.

First, gaining restaurant participation can be difficult. Of the roughly 16,000 plus New York restaurants, only 500 participate. These tend to be luxury restaurants where real value is provided at the RW prix fixe price. Getting new restaurants to participate is an influence process where representatives of the host organization must describe and sell the benefits of becoming involved.

Next, the lack of authority on the part of the host organization can cause difficulty in ensuring that restaurants follow the guidelines for participating. Traditionally, the number of courses for each meal period, promotion length, variety of duration of merchandising, full-menu offering and full-portion size offering are requirements of participating restaurants. Restaurants engage in this contract with the implication that greater customer counts will result as well as an increase in new customers who may become loyal to the restaurant. What happens when a restaurant does not offer full entrees, but cuts its portion to ensure profitability? What happens when the number of courses provided is adjusted or only a sampling of the menu is provided? What happens if customer counts do not increase or the restaurant is ultimately not more profitable? The local restaurant association or convention and visitor's bureau has limited options in enforcing its policies. Ultimately, the host organization could drop the restaurant from the promotion, however this is counter to the goal of increasing participation.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for RW organizers is ensuring that the event is "successful". This raises a significant question, which is how is RW success defined? Clearly, the number of restaurants participating is one indicator from a host organization standpoint, but what if the restaurants that do participate do not adequately represent the local industry? Other indicators of success could include quality partnerships and/or charitable contributions that result from the event. For example, NYC & Company partners with American Express to provide greater benefits to customers and to make charitable contributions. From a restaurateur

perspective, greater customer traffic is desired but a long-term increase in loyal customers is equally or more important. From a guest perspective, a large selection of highly desirable restaurant choices is desired as is value for the dollar. It seems clear that effective marketing and promotion of RW is critical to achieving a variety of stakeholder goals. Indeed, it is possible that a highly marketed RW helps to draw a greater number of participating restaurants. It is certainly a key variable in generating customer traffic. But what are the best ways to actively drive this customer traffic? What are the dissatisfiers for the customer experience during RW? How can RW provide more value to its stakeholders? **Figure 1** illustrates the varying goals each stakeholder group has in approaching RW.



**Figure 1.** Stakeholder goals for restaurant week.

### 1.3. Stakeholder Management and Restaurant Week

Given the diversity of the stakeholders and their respective goals, RW planners face some difficulties in ensuring “success”. The following analysis of best practices may help these planners in addressing the needs of each group. According to [Freeman \(1984\)](#), an organization’s success is dependent on more than just profitability. The relationships developed and maintained by the organization are critical as well. Stakeholder theory suggests that satisfying stakeholders’ goals is critical to keep them part of the system ([Argenti, 1997](#)). Among the challenges to the host organization are the power, legitimacy and urgency held by external stakeholders ([Mitchell et al., 1997](#); [Mossberg & Getz, 2006](#)). Stakeholders are powerful to the extent the host organization is dependent on them. In the context of RW, the host organization generally holds no formal authority over participating restaurants, which are part of a loose network at large. Indeed, the host organization is de-

pendent on the participants to honor the rules set forth for participation in RW. This is exacerbated by stakeholder legitimacy, which refers to how valid, proper or appropriate the relationship is with the host company. Ethical differences, for example may cause friction between the two. For example, if a participating restaurant does not charge what it promised to charge. Finally, urgency can provide even greater challenges to the host organization, to the extent the stakeholder is dissatisfied and requires the attention of the host organization. For example, if a customer attending a participating restaurant does not receive the value they expected or if the restaurant is not receiving the increase in business it expected.

Upon completing the discussion of best practices, the current study seeks to apply these lessons to the varying stakeholders participating in RW promotions. Particularly in large cities where hundreds of restaurants and tens of thousands of customers may participate, creating and maintain a positive experience will only become more challenging.

## 2. Current Study

### Sample & Data Collection

The data collected for this study is the result of a recent strategic management project at San Diego State University. Senior students in the HTM 490 Strategic Management in the Hospitality & Tourism Industry course worked in competing teams to identify best practices in RW planning and make recommendations to the planners of San Diego's RW. A variety of methods were used to collect data. First, the country was segmented into three large areas and cities with popular RW promotions were identified. A master list of cities was compiled for the analysis based on, reputation, size, longevity, and overall popularity of the RW promotion. These criteria were assessed by reviewing articles which discussed each RW and highlighted relevant data. The final list of cities used was selected randomly. Additional cities were included in the West given the large number of cities that engage in the promotion. Using these criteria, **Table 1** shows the cities used in this analysis.

**Table 1.** Sample cities used in the study.

West	East	South
Hawaii	Boston, MA	Austin, TX
Las Vegas, NV	New York, NY	New Orleans, LA
Los Angeles, CA		Miami, FL
San Francisco, CA		
Seattle, WA		

In addition to these main cities, other smaller cities were cited if an interesting or unique component of their RW was identified. As the teams continued their search of the data, it became clear that these smaller cities were engaged in what could be termed best practices in one of the major areas of their planning.

A variety of methods were used to collect the data in the current study and were drawn largely from [Bretschneider, Marc-Aurele and Wu \(2004\)](#) and [Eglene \(2000\)](#). First, each city's RW was evaluated based on the aforementioned criteria. The selection process was not as complex as in other best practices research as the same phenomena was researched across each location. Next, a review of the facets, organization, and effectiveness of each RW was assessed through a variety of articles, press releases and web-based documents. Finally, interviews were conducted with representatives of the host organizations to identify how the event was conceived, planned, and delivered. The instrument used to conduct the interviews was semi-structured, open-ended and in-depth in nature as shown in [Table 2](#).

**Table 2.** Interview instrument.

Restaurant Week Best Practices	
Name:	
City:	
Your goal is to visit the website of your city and search for articles and learn as much as you can about how they setup and execute their restaurant week. This should include a call to the organization to ask basic questions as shown below. For each city studied, please list and explain specific examples of restaurant week best practices that you uncovered. Please provide enough detail so that others might be able to adopt the idea.	
	Details of their RW: When it runs? How long in existence? Successes? Problems? Number of participating restaurants?
General info	How is their RW setup? Does it partner with Convis, a restaurant association, etc.? Does that relationship work? Is there a PR company involved?
	How do they measure success? Do they have any numbers that show its success?

The phone interview began with questions related to the history of the event, how long it runs, the number of participating restaurants and success factors. Next, the survey asks about RW organization and structure. For example, some RWs partner with the local restaurant association while others are coordinated by non-profits. Respondents are then asked about specific best practices that help to differentiate their event. These best practices fall into several categories including marketing and promotion, restaurant recruitment strategies for maximizing participation, and any other value-added factors. A total of 28 interviews were conducted with at least 2 representatives from the host city. Participation in the survey process was voluntary and the results were anonymous.

### 3. Findings

The in-depth interviews were reviewed with the goal of synthesizing the results and identifying practical solutions to some of the issues facing the restaurant consortiums that organize the event. A sorting process was used where each idea that was identified in the interview was grouped with similar responses. Rather than focus on the results geographically, more value likely results from identifying the practice by category. [Table 3](#) provides an overview of the findings.

**Table 3.** Best practices by category.

Category	Best Practice
Marketing and Promotion	<p>Social media is the mainstay method of reaching potential RW customers. Virtually every respondent reported some type of interactive social media activity using Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. The central concern is constantly being able to deliver fresh content. Having a dedicated agency responsible for posting update information was consistent across cities.</p> <p>One concern shared by many of the host cities was the need for accurate information on social media sites. This was particularly true of restaurant participation. Many of the complaints cited by the respondents revolved around customers who planned to attend a RW restaurant only to find they were not a participant or they were not following RW guidelines. This created difficulty for both the customer, restaurant and host organization.</p> <p>Partnering with local media was cited by a number of host cities. This includes local television stations, radio stations and newspapers. By partnering, both the event organizers and media partners have a vested interest in the success of RW.</p> <p>Several of the host cities believed that direct marketing to travelers through print media was still an effective strategy. For example Las Vegas utilized travel magazines, AAA publications and Southwest Spirit to highlight RW. The host organization cited a number of contacts with travelers who sought to plan their trip around RW.</p> <p>The majority of host cities cited contests and give aways as a mainstay method of driving sales. New Orleans was particularly focused on RW goers for special promotions, special messaging including appreciation, and post event surveys. The goal was to make RW customers feel a special connection to the event.</p> <p>Kick off events also seem to be a mainstay method of marketing RW activities. Whether the event is the night before RW or week before as some part of a larger festival, live cooking demonstrations, tastings, wine and food pairings all serve to drive awareness of the upcoming event. Miami and Austin provide good examples of these kinds of events and both have charitable causes as beneficiaries.</p>
Promoting Participation	<p>One method of promoting restaurant participation in RW is to focus social media on beneficiaries, partners and sponsors. The greater the involvement of outside groups, the greater the luster of the event and the desire for an increased number of restaurants to participate.</p> <p>Having a RW theme was also identified as a means for increasing restaurant participation. For example, Hawaii has a particular focus on local chefs, farm-to-table dining, and exclusive wines. This creates a draw for local restaurants to participate. They also encourage a full range of restaurant types to participate from fine dining to fast food. New Orleans successfully used their love of food in RW promotions with an emphasis on seafood. Similarly, Miami uses the name Miami Spice to refer to its RW, which focuses on the diverse flavors of the region.</p> <p>The majority of host cities cited local restaurant media exposure as a means for promoting restaurant participation. This includes local news segments, features in local papers, radio interviews and chef photo shoots which create even greater public relations exposure.</p> <p>Partnerships with charitable organizations can enhance restaurant participation as well. Virtually all RWs studied here have some form of beneficiary. That can range from Meals on Wheels to Cancer Societies to Share Our Strength. Owners who are committed to these endeavors may be more open to becoming involved.</p> <p>Some of the larger RWs provide marketing tool kits for participating restaurants which makes engaging customers easier and more consistent. Cities such as LA and Seattle provide logos, hashtags, social media copy, posters and ready-made social graphics for restaurateurs to utilize. This removes some of the uncertainty related to participation.</p>
Value Added	<p>Partnerships of all varieties are a value-added means for enhancing RW. Being the previously mentioned media or charitable endeavors or working with Open Table or the local convention and visitor's bureau, most every host city is engaged in partnerships. The benefits range from financial help to improved marketing activities to increased sponsorships.</p> <p>Some cities use travel packages as part of their RW promotion. For example, Miami has hotel packages posted directly on their RW web page. Similarly in Seattle, Lotte Hotels participates in RW through its upscale restaurant but also promotes staycations as part of a package deal. Boston has partnered with Tripadvisor to provide hotel deals. These kinds of promotions seek to drive greater visitation and stimulate the local economy.</p>

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**Continued**

RW measurement was cited a best practice by many of the cities. Assessing the customer experience, the degree to which restaurants followed the RW parameters, the perception of value and intention to engage in RW again all add value in planning future events. The dissatisfaction some guests can experience when participating restaurants do not follow the agreed upon rules for participation can be rectified through a thorough survey process. Indeed, some cities provide gift certificates, giveaways or other prizes for engaging in the data collection process.

Several of the host cities suggested they were working on developing a mobile app for their restaurant week. Because many of them partner with Open Table, the need for an app is reduced somewhat. However, this is an excellent method of providing participating restaurant information, track rewards, provide timely RW changes directly to guests and marketing the event. RW cities such as Kansas City, Houston, and Shreveport have created such applications.

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#### **4. Discussion**

The goal of the current study was to identify practical, best practices for executing a successful RW. The strategies in the areas of marketing and promotion, restaurant participation and value-added should provide some direction for host cities seeking to improve their event or even cities considering starting one. In addition, each area has implications from a stakeholder management perspective. From a marketing standpoint, the message is to be aggressive and customer focused. Be it through accurate and perpetual social media, close relationships with media outlets or contests and promotions, event organizers need to be proactive in communicating with potential customers. That communication needs to be constant and consistent for the message to be received clearly and for potential guests to engage in RW, while also having a fulfilling experience. The individual customer has little in the way of power, and has limited legitimacy or urgency. That is, the host organization may not see the individual customer as someone they must satisfy. Such treatment however, may be a mistake. Inaccurate menu offerings, higher than advertised prices, or a restaurant that appears on the participation list, but is not actually participating can create a negative perception of the event. Social media is the main vehicle for promoting RW, however, it can also result in a negative spiral due to inaccuracies. Individual customers have an ability to share their negative message with entire cities effortlessly through such mediums. Host organizations would do well to have mechanisms in place for quickly and efficiently addressing customer concerns.

The structure and format of RW events causes challenges for event organizers given the loose control structure between the host organization and participating restaurants. Converse to customers, participating restaurants have power, legitimacy and urgency. However, the lack of formal authority possessed by the host organization makes influencing the restaurants difficult. The best practices have a theme that runs throughout the results that might be helpful in this regard. Selecting appropriate charitable partners, a theme that resonates with local restaurants and providing greater exposure of the restaurants through media, can have a positive influence in conforming to the RW policies and reduce some of the complexities of stakeholder management (i.e., power, legitimacy and urgency). Events

have a long history of partnering to appeal to important stakeholders (Hazel & Mason, 2020). If a restaurateur sees the intrinsic value of the event, a message that is in sync with the restaurant's values and can help increase their customer counts, they have a vested interest in complying. Indeed, when the charitable endeavor is valued by the host organization, the restaurant and the customer, it can galvanize the groups. The perceived value of RW is improved, which should reduce tendencies to "go rogue" on offerings, pricing, and scheduling.

Next, best practices in the value-added section provide some future direction for RW organizers. If customer counts are stagnant, restaurant participation may become so as well. One method of increasing both is by seeking out hotel packages that will promote the city as a destination and drive new traffic. If the process of booking tables is not user friendly, the restaurants can work with Open Table to make it more streamlined. If a restaurant already works with Open Table, it can seek out partnerships with organizations that can help fund, market or promote the event to new restaurants. Perhaps the most valuable recommendation is to increase measurement of important variables at the conclusion of the event. Keeping the pulse of both customers and participating restaurants is the key to innovating and improving RW. A consistent post-event data collection process can help to do exactly that. Without relevant, timely data for decision making, event organizers are blindly making changes that may actually be counter to what both stakeholders want. Timely changes can mean the difference between a successful RW and failure.

Lastly, investment in a mobile app is a path some RW cities have made. For example, the Kansas City app is designed to make guest decisions easier. The app lets end users plan out their week, has a map of participating restaurants, and allows the users to view menus, make reservations, read reviews and blogs, and to learn about sponsors and charitable partners. In addition, there is a wish list that allows guest feedback and suggestions for improvement. Factors involved in developing a mobile app are beyond the scope of the current study, but a number of others provide some direction for meetings and event planners (Luxford & Dickinson, 2015; Talantis, Shin, & Severt, 2018). It may be worth considering developing an app for these kinds of functions and the cost-benefit is in proportion.

## 5. Conclusion

The restaurant industry nationwide has faced unparalleled challenges in recent history. Many cities see RW promotions as a means for countering those difficulties (Garske, 2021; Wong, 2021). By focusing on effective marketing, maximizing the number of restaurants that participate, and seeking to add greater value to the event, success is more likely. Without formal authority to regulate restaurant participants, a greater focus must be on positively influencing stakeholders to take ownership of their contribution. It is hoped that some of the best practices reported here provide direction for host organizations seeking to maximize their event. At the same time, some limitations to the current study exist.

First, this work represents a snapshot in time. Although the data were collected over several weeks, an ongoing study of these best practices might be more valuable given the speed of change in the restaurant industry. The data were collected by senior level students with a specific methodology; however, this may impact the quality of the conclusions drawn here. Next, the varying setup and organization of RW promotions from city to city provides some limitations as well. For example, to what extent does the size, participation rate and length of these promotions impact the value of the best practices?

Going further, the qualitative results may be more valuable with the addition of some quantitative data that can illustrate systemic perceptions of various stakeholders. While a fair number of interviews were conducted here, greater representation of the population is always desired. Finally, the open-ended nature of the interviews conducted here provided an adequate starting point for an event this has been overlooked in the literature. However, specific hypotheses, identifying specific issues may have more value. For instance, to what extent are changes in the social media landscape a challenge in targeting specific demographic groups? How do the economic challenges faced by restaurants either help or hurt recruitment to RW promotions? Finally, what do host organizations see as the future of RW promotions? And what challenges will correspond with these changes? Future study with more targeted purpose will help to answer these and many other important questions.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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