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2026 CASE SCENARIO

The Phoenix Challenge

Company Background

Founded in 2024, NextWave Media is a marketing consulting startup that specializes in helping small, family-owned restaurants grow through affordable social media strategies. The company works with local businesses that often struggle to compete against large restaurant chains, national franchises, and food delivery brands with significantly larger advertising budgets.

One of NextWave Media's newest clients is Bella's Family Kitchen, a neighborhood restaurant that has served its community for over 30 years. Known for its homemade recipes, loyal customer base, and strong reputation for quality food, the restaurant has remained a local favorite for decades. However, changing consumer habits and increasing competition have created significant challenges for the business.

Unlike larger competitors that spend thousands of dollars each month on digital advertising, Bella's Family Kitchen has little online visibility. Its social media accounts have fewer than 500 combined followers, posts receive minimal engagement, and younger customers are largely unaware of the restaurant's existence despite its long-standing presence in the community.

The Challenge

Over the past two years, Bella's Family Kitchen has experienced a 35% decline in foot traffic. While longtime customers continue to visit, the restaurant has struggled to attract new diners, particularly Gen Z consumers who increasingly discover restaurants through platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube Shorts.

The owners have experimented with occasional social media posts and promotional discounts, but these efforts have produced little measurable impact. Rising food costs, labor expenses, and competition from national chains and delivery-focused brands have placed additional pressure on the business.

Recognizing that traditional marketing methods are no longer enough, the owners have hired NextWave Media to develop a digital marketing strategy that can help modernize the restaurant's brand while preserving the authenticity and community values that have made it successful for more than three decades.

All characters, companies, and events described in this scenario are fictional and created for educational purposes only.

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The Situation

The restaurant's financial position has become increasingly fragile:

- Foot traffic has fallen by 35% over the last two years.
- Social media engagement is nearly nonexistent despite maintaining accounts on major platforms.
- Larger restaurant chains dominate local advertising and online visibility.
- Food delivery brands and influencer-driven restaurants are attracting younger customers.
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- Marketing resources are extremely limited, with only a $500 monthly budget available.
- If revenue continues to decline, the owners may be forced to reduce operations or permanently close the restaurant.

Your Challenge

As consultants at NextWave Media, your team must develop a practical and innovative social media marketing strategy that helps Bella's Family Kitchen reconnect with the community, attract younger customers, and increase restaurant traffic while operating within strict financial constraints.

Your strategy should:

- Revive the restaurant's online presence and modernize its brand image.
- Increase brand awareness and engagement among Gen Z consumers.
- Highlight the restaurant's authenticity, family history, and community connections.
- Compete effectively against large restaurant chains and delivery-focused brands despite limited resources.
- Operate within a maximum marketing budget of $500 per month.
- Generate a measurable increase in customer engagement, awareness, and foot traffic.
- Create a sustainable growth plan that can help prevent the restaurant from closing and position it for long-term success.

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RESPONSE FRAMEWORK

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Your response plan should clearly outline methods for:

Situation Analysis & Brand Understanding

1. Identify the restaurant's key challenges, including its 35% decline in foot traffic, limited social media presence, increasing competition, and financial constraints.
2. Explain the restaurant's existing strengths, such as its 30+ years of history, family ownership, strong customer reviews, local reputation, and authentic identity.
3. Identify the restaurant's target Gen Z audience and explain what may influence younger customers to discover, visit, and return to the restaurant.

Marketing Strategy and Decision Making

1. Develop a clear social media strategy that directly addresses the restaurant's challenges while supporting its long-term survival and growth.

2. Identify the social media platforms, content types, promotions, partnerships, and engagement strategies you would prioritize and explain why each was selected.

3. Clearly explain how your recommendations will convert online awareness and engagement into increased in-person foot traffic and repeat customers.

Innovation & Gen Z Engagement

1. Develop creative and original ideas that appeal specifically to Gen Z customers while maintaining the restaurant's authentic, family-owned identity.
2. Show how the restaurant can differentiate itself from large restaurant chains and food delivery brands without attempting to copy their marketing strategies.
3. Present the strategy in a clear, engaging, polished, and easy-to-follow format.

Budget & Feasibility

1. Provide a detailed breakdown showing how the restaurant's $500 monthly marketing budget will be spent.
2. Ensure all recommendations are realistic for a small family-owned restaurant with limited staff, time, and resources.
3. Explain how the strategy could remain sustainable and continue generating results over the next 3–6 months.

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Evidence & Measurement

1. Support major recommendations using at least four credible sources, including research related to Gen Z, social media marketing, restaurant marketing, or consumer behavior.
2. Include relevant examples, statistics, trends, or successful marketing practices that justify your strategy.
3. Establish clear performance measures, such as social media reach, engagement rate, follower growth, promotional redemptions, customer visits, repeat visits, and return on marketing spending.

Submission Rules

Length: Maximum two pages. Submissions exceeding two pages will not be reviewed.

Format and Layout: Any format is acceptable, provided it is clearly structured and legible within one to two pages. Creative and engaging layouts (i.e. poster) are heavily encouraged.

Budget: Recommendations must remain within the restaurant's $500 per month marketing budget.

Sources: A minimum of four credible sources should be used to support major recommendations.

Team Size: One to three participants.

Deadline: November 14th at 11:59 PM PST

Any use of AI in an entry will result in immediate disqualification, and the entry will not be considered.

Please see the rubric on the next page before you begin your entry.

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Judging Rubric

	1-2	3-4	5-6	7-8	9-10
Comprehension	Shows no real understanding of the restaurant's situation, target audience, or social media challenges. It does not address anything related to the case.	Shows minimal understanding of the restuarant's situation, stakeholders, target audience, and challenges. Mentions some relevent factors but misses major issues.	Shows a good understanding of the restaurant's challenges and Gen Z audience, but explanations are not detailed and lack depth. Addresses 2-3 of the main issues.	Shows strong understanding of the restaurant's situation, target audience, stakeholders, and challenges. Addresses 4-5 of the main issues clearly.	Shows a complete understanding of the restaurant's situation, stakeholders, target audience, Gen Z marketing, financial constraints, and the consequences of the proposed strategy. Addresses all key aspects of the case clearly.
Decision-Making	Recommendations are unclear, unrealistic, or unsupported. Does not explain why decisions were made.	Makes basic recommendations but provides little reasoning. Decisions do not consistently connect to the restaurant's goals or target audience.	Makes reasonable decisions and provides some justification. Recommendations adress several case challenges but may lack prioritization or strategic depth.	Makes strong well-reasoned decisions that directly adress the restaurants goals. Clearly explains priorities, trade=offs, and why specific strategies were chosen.	Makes exceptional, well-reasoned decisions; prioritizes effectively, recognizes trade-offs, and creates a cohesive strategy that supports the restaurant's survival, growth, and Gen Z appeal.
Innovation & Presentation	Strategy shows little creativity or originality. Presentation is unclear, disorganized, or difficult to follow.	Strategy includes limited creative ideas. Presentation is somewhat organized but lacks engagement or clarity.	Strategy includes some creative and relevant ideas. Presentation is organized and understandable but could be more engaging or memorable.	Strategy is creative, original and well-tailored to Gen Z. Presentation is polished, engaging, organized and easy to follow.	Strategy is highly creative and authentic to the restaurant, with a polished, memorable presentation that clearly differentiates it from chains and delivery brands.
Feasibility	Strategy is unrealistic, exceeds the $500 monthly budget, or would be extremely difficult for a small restuarant to implement.	Strategy has some realistic elements but includes significant budget staffing, technology, or implementation concerns.	Strategy is generally realistic and mostly fits the $500 monthly budget. Some implementation details or resource requirements are unclear.	Strategy is highly realistic and fits within the $500 monthly budget. Provides a practical implementation plan that considers the restuarant's limited resources.	Strategy is actionable and sustainable within the $500/month budget, clearly showing resource allocation, execution, realistic outcomes, and long-term sustainability.
Evidence & Support	No evidence or sources are used to support the plan. Recommendations are based primarily on unsupported assumptions.	Provides 1 piece of evidence, but it may be weak, irrelevant, or not credible. Limited support is provided for key recommendations.	Provides 2 credible and relevant pieces of evidence to support recommendations. Evidence demonstrates some understanding of Gen Z, social media, or restaurant marketing.	Provides 3 credible sources that clearly support key elements of the plan. Uses evidence to justify social media, audience, or budget recommendations.	Provides 4+ credible sources that strongly support the feasibility of the plan, citing real examples of social media or marketing strategies that have successfully worked in practice. Evidence is directly connected to recommendations and demonstrates strong reach.

Maximum Possible Points: 50

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