

Michelin builds a campaign around its secret reviewers

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Here's a piece of advance information from the Michelin guide for New York City 2010: 18 new stars will be awarded to restaurants. Michelin is rigorously tight-lipped about the information in its guides until they arrive in stores, and requires similar discretion from its reviewers, who are anonymous.



An ad campaign for the Michelin guides highlights its "famously anonymous" reviewers.

But in this Facebook era, when privacy and anonymity seem like vestiges of a bygone time, Michelin is making itself a bit more accessible as it prepares for the New York guide's fifth edition, scheduled to be in stores on Oct. 6, and San Francisco's fourth edition, scheduled for Oct. 20.

It is running an ad campaign for the guides highlighting its "famously anonymous" professional reviewers. Michelin protects the identities of its reviewers to the point that they generally are not allowed to do interviews with the press, and must invent cover stories about their profession so that even friends and family don't know what they do.

Despite those precautions, with this campaign, Michelin is peeling back the mask of its reviewers. They will post items on Twitter at @MichelinGuideNY and @MichelinGuideSF, including items about places they are dining, advance critiques of chefs and complaints about service.

"One of the things we realized when we started to question people in New York, they realized what Michelin was about, but they didn't realize that this was about a team of professionals," said Jean-Luc Naret, director of the Michelin guides. "We're trying, really, to make sure that people understand they are on the road, they are out there and maybe they could spot them."

The Michelin guide was first published in France in 1900 as a free directory that offered listings of hotels to promote road travel, which would in turn help sales of Michelin brand tires.

It was distributed at garages and tire dealerships until 1920, when, according to company lore, a co-founder of the guide, André Michelin, noticed stacks of the guides piled up under a garage workbench, and decided that people respected only what they paid for. He began charging for the guide and added restaurant coverage around the same time. By 1931, Michelin was using the three-star system for its restaurants that it still uses today.

Michelin entered the United States with the 2006 New York edition. But New York already had its own restaurant guide. The Zagat Survey was founded in New York City 30 years ago, and surveys regular customers to compile its ratings and reviews.

That is one reason Michelin is emphasizing its professional restaurant and hotel inspectors this year, to differentiate itself from Zagat. Ryan Lynch, senior brand strategist at the advertising agency Cliff Freeman & Partners, which worked on the campaign, said he was also fascinated with the secret life of inspectors.

For instance, inspectors book reservations under fake names, Mr. Naret said. They surreptitiously scribble notes while they are in the bathroom or type them on their BlackBerrys. And they take pains to blend in, even recruiting people to pose as paramours when reviewing certain romantic restaurants.

"They are not going to go by themselves to a restaurant where everyone looks like a couple," Mr. Naret said. "They have to be a chameleon."

That got Mr. Lynch thinking that Twitter clues about where the reviewers were eating would intrigue food enthusiasts.

"There's kind of a 'Da Vinci Code,' a little James Bond feel, to who they are and how they go about working and your imagination tends to run wild with it," Mr. Lynch said. Knowing something about inspectors — from what standards Michelin sets for them to more specific details like where they have been eating — could be a nice piece of trivia for diners, he said.

The Twitter posts from the reviewers so far are along the lines of, "Lunch at Jaiya, renovations still under way but lookin' good. Yummy spring roll." But Michelin does not want the Twitter element to be too successful. Crowds are notoriously good at solving online puzzles: people who commented at the site Consumerist.com tracked down the makers of a Domino's Pizza gross-out video earlier this year, and brands like McDonald's and Wired magazine have set up online mysteries that crowds solve together. If readers figured out who an inspector was, the inspector would be out of a job.

Michelin is taking the precaution of having inspectors send Twitter updates to an editor who posts them, but Mr. Lynch said there were still some worries.

"With technology being what it is, and the advancements in being able to locate people, we open ourselves up for a potential chance of that anonymity being broken, and at the end of the day that can't happen — it's got to be a very slow and steady process to find how much these people give away," he said.

The print ads accompanying the Michelin guide are running in the October editions in San Francisco and New York-area issues of magazines like Bon Appétit, Time Out New York and Architectural Digest. The ads show a handful of urbane young people in a restaurant, watching and being watched, and asks, "Who's the famously anonymous inspector?" Below, smaller print gives the answer: "You'll never know, because Michelin inspectors visit restaurants without revealing their identity."

Michelin is also running the Web site FamouslyAnonymous.com, which includes information about the jobs of reviewers.

"This whole idea of anonymity is the end-all, be-all for what this guide is," Mr. Lynch said. "To finally start to open up these inspectors to the world is going to be a minute-by-minute learning experience."

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