US startup seeks to liberate diners from queues

July 20 2012, by Glenn Chapman

This file illustration photo shows a line stretching around the corner at Ben's Chili Bowl restaurant in Washington, DC. 'NoWait' app has spread to restaurants across the United States and into Canada and has been used to seat more than 3.3 million people since it launched in April of last year, according to one of its creators, Robb Myer.

Robb Myer cannot stomach the notion of being stuck at the entrance of a restaurant waiting for word that a table is finally available.

So he and some friends, tired of ricocheting between crowded eateries in a hip San Francisco neighborhood, came up with the idea for startup "NoWait" to take the agony out of queues.

"We are really trying to change the way you and I have to wait any place that has a line, and the first place is a casual dining restaurant," Myer

said. "Global is definitely our goal."

Restaurant hosts or hostesses can enter mobile phone numbers of aspiring dinners into NoWait software tailored for Apple iPads, iPhones and iPod touch devices.

People then get text message updates regarding when tables will be ready and, if they have smartphones, can even access a website featuring animated characters that shows where they are in the food line.

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Todd Sapet, managing partner of a Texas Roadhouse, uses NoWait in his franchise steak restaurant in Pennsylvania and said the reaction of guests is "Isn't this cool."

"They get a buzz out of the wizardry of it," Sapet said. "Then they start to realize the different places they go that rob them of their time by making them stand in lines."

Along with freeing would-be diners to wander away from restaurants, perhaps checking out neighboring shops or exploring neighborhoods, the NoWait service allows tables to be turned more efficiently, according to Sapet.

"Time spent arguing with a customer about how long they have been waiting is lost time when we could be selling them food and drinks and getting the table cleared and reset," Sapet said.

"We try not to rob people of their time and, quite frankly, we try to get their money in our pocket as soon as possible."

Opting for the [Internet Age](link) tactic also eliminates the annoyance of loudspeakers blaring out the names of people who are waiting, complete with the occasional awkwardness of mispronunciation.

Some US restaurants give waiting patrons paging devices that buzz or blink when tables are ready but people sometimes take their time responding or wander out of pager range.

"We are going to put those buzzers to death," Myer vowed. "They are going to be on a shelf with your Sony Discman and your beepers from the 80s; they will be replaced with a smartphone."

NoWait provides restaurants deals on Apple gadgets, and Sapet estimated the up-front investment to be approximately $1,000.

The Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania-based startup uses its servers to fire off text messages to people waiting and host the queue update website. Prices for the subscription service range from free to $200 monthly, according to Myer.

The company was built with seed funding from Carnegie Mellon University, where the two founders earned advanced degrees.

"We are revolutionizing the way people wait and get seated at casual dining, no-reservation restaurants," Myer said.

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