

Restaurant waitlist apps ease diner frustration

November 23 2012, by Heather Somerville

It's a familiar scene at any bustling restaurant during the Sunday brunch rush - the only thing standing between you and eggs Benedict is an unwieldy waitlist and an overwhelmed hostess who may not remember your name when a table opens up in an hour.

The backlog of hungry customers and an inefficient table-seating system - which has traditionally relied on a hostess yelling "Frank! Party of four!" out the restaurant door - is enough to try the patience of the most avid restaurant diner and trip up even the most smoothly run restaurant operations.

As it turns out, there's an app to help with that. Quite a few apps, in fact, and restaurants are scooping up the new technology to ease customer frustrations and create more efficient dining experiences. It's part of the digital restaurant revolution that has opened up a booming market for [iPad](#) applications and given restaurants a boost in style and service.

"You're starting to see [mobile technology](#) really penetrates into restaurants," said Daniel Conway, legislative and public affairs director for the California Restaurant Association. "I think that's kind of the leading edge of where the technology is going."

Umami restaurant in San Francisco is among the early adopters of NoshList, a waitlist application out of Pleasanton, Calif.-based incubator Firespotter Labs. Umami General Manager PJ Patton said she realized within a few months of the restaurant's opening last year that the old

pencil-and-paper method wasn't cutting muster. The trendy restaurant was juggling waitlists an hour or two long, trying to chase down customers once their table was ready.

"It was messy-looking," Patton said. "And people didn't trust us."

Convinced that the hostess had forgotten them, some customers were walking out in the midst of waitlist mayhem.

So Umami enlisted the help of NoshList. The app allows restaurant staff to manage parties - adding, seating and removing them as necessary - from an iPad or [iPhone](#). NoshList users enter a customer's name, phone number and party size, and with the press of a button send an automatic text or recorded call to the customer's cellphone when a table is ready.

"It's not intrusive," said Cody Rose, who works on the application for Firespotter Labs. "You don't have a hostess yelling out a name at the top of their lungs."

NoshList calculates average wait times by party size and tracks in real time how long each party has been waiting. Patton said customers trust the app - more than they trust a hostess - and have more confidence they'll be seated when they were told they would.

"It has changed people's attitudes completely," she said.

And because they don't have to be within earshot when their table is ready, customers can run errands while they wait or head down the street for a cocktail, returning to Umami all the more jubilant.

Waitlist apps can help restaurants turn tables more efficiently, which increases business and profit, said Conway of the California Restaurant Association.

"It's a volume business, and it's about getting that turnover," he said. "The quicker you can do that, that's money."

It's also about appearance. The iPad is much sexier - and cheaper - than those bulky, hockey puck-size buzzers, which inevitably have to be replaced once or twice a month after disappearing with an absent-minded customer. Some restaurant owners say the technology bolsters their business image and is a conversation piece for customers.

NoshList is the latest in restaurant-oriented products from Firespotter, which was founded in 2011 with about \$3 million from Google Ventures. It's done well since launching in February, and the free app is in about 1,500 restaurants, from small eateries to national chains like Red Robin. But it's far from the only option in an increasingly crowded market, where developers are eagerly courting restaurateurs with products that digitize and streamline every step of the dining experience. Other waitlist management apps and services include TimeView, Tableista, Diner Connection, TurnStar, Table's Ready and BuzzTable.

Pittsburgh-based NoWait was one of the first to the market when it landed in early 2010. The app (which, despite its name, does not promise customers will have no wait) recently sealed a \$2 million investment and is in restaurants in all 50 states - including Comal, a thriving Mexican eatery in Berkeley, Calif.

By late summer, three months after Comal opened, the restaurant was seating about 250 parties a night, and the ballooning waitlist was too much for a pencil-and-paper system.

"At that point, it felt like we were in triage at the host stand, and we really needed an answer," said co-owner and general manager Andrew Hoffman. "We will not be going back to the old way."

But the "new way" poses a few privacy concerns. Janna Cruz, a manager at 21st Amendment Brewery in San Francisco, said the restaurant invoked customer fury when it tested TimeView. The service used customers' cell numbers to text promotions and advertisements.

Cruz said the restaurant put a stop to the marketing texts and switched to NoshList more than six months ago. That app saves phone numbers, but Cruz said the restaurant doesn't use customer information for purposes other than the waitlist. Still, she said "sometimes people get a little wary" when the hostess asks for a cell number.

But because most of these apps are free, developers are looking for ways to make money by collecting data to sell back to restaurants. NoshList recently launched a premium service for \$49 per month, which, among other features, allows restaurants to obtain up to a month's worth of information about their guests.

Waitlist apps are just the start of digital [restaurant](#) transformation. The online reservation system is booming, led by giant OpenTable, and more restaurants are replacing cash registers and ordering systems with iPads and apps.

"There's enough critical mass of people trying to do this," Hoffman said. "We're fairly convinced that these applications are going to get better and better in the very near future."

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