



The Internet is changing dining-out behavior. Are you prepared?

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This article was written by OpenTable CEO
Thomas Layton

A quiet revolution is redefining how restaurateurs fill seats. Your goal may be to attract new guests, to encourage existing guests to return more frequently, or both. The Internet, properly understood, offers fresh opportunities to draw diners to your establishment.

Eye-Opening Numbers

The dramatic growth in Internet use has been widely reported. In the last five years, Internet use increased a whopping 105 percent, with two-thirds of Americans now enjoying access to the Web. What is less well understood, however, are the ways in which the Internet is significantly shifting how people decide where to dine. For example:

- Thirty percent of Americans and 45 percent of diners 25 to 34 years of age have researched a restaurant online, according to a 2004 survey by the National Restaurant Association. And these numbers have increased significantly since 2002.
- More than two million people have made restaurant reservations online. Of this large and rapidly growing group, more than 98 percent report that they have gone online to research restaurants.
- More than a quarter of diners who reserve on the Internet do so between the hours of 10 p.m. and 10 a.m., revealing a desire to book when many restaurants are closed.
- Dining enthusiasts can be highly receptive to well-crafted e-mail newsletters, with click rates for some on-line food newsletters setting new records for e-mail responsiveness.

Implications for Restaurateurs

Savvy restaurateurs know that filling seats requires business acumen that goes beyond providing appealing food, service, and atmosphere at an appropriate price. Online statistics show that when making reservations, diners are searching and comparing multiple restaurants more than half of the time. Here are some ways the Internet can help you attract the undecided diner:

If you don't have a website, invest in one immediately. According to the National Restaurant Association, about 50 percent of full-service restaurants already have a website. Diners respond best to sites that inform them quickly. Be sure your site is legible and that basic information like menus, location, hours of operation, and reviews are easy to find and rapidly accessible. Avoid the common mistake of slowing down your site with animations. Steer clear of clutter, dark colors, and other distractions that make your site difficult to read.

Your website visitors are your "hot leads." Be sure you can close the sale by enabling them to make reservations right from your website.

Ensure your restaurant is included in key online lists. Which lists matter the most? Those that diners review when deciding where to eat. These include the online version of your local newspaper, local restaurant directories, and popular food blogs. They also include heavily-visited national sites that cater to foodies such as AOL CityGuide, CitySearch, Zagat.com, and OpenTable.com.

Encourage diners to sign up for your e-mail list. Use it judiciously as a cost-effective way to drive repeat dining. Here are some important rules:

- Your subject line must be relevant and compelling. "A Special Offer" will not garner the same response as "A Special Wine Dinner at Bistro ABC."
- Include a clear call-to-action, and allow people to complete a transaction, such as making a reservation, directly from the e-mail message.
- Pay attention to message frequency and relevance. Overly frequent and irrelevant e-mails fuel requests to unsubscribe from your list. Send no more than one well-crafted email per customer each month.

- Be sure to comply with federal laws governing commercial email communications. For more information about the Federal CAN-SPAM act, visit ftc.gov/spam.

- Carefully monitor your results, revising your campaigns as you learn what produces a strong response.

Now for the best news of all: wise use of the Internet can fill your seats at a lower cost. And you can measure your results, allowing you to constantly improve your programs so that each month you are more successful than you were the month before.