

Restaurants get phone link for internet booking service

Rachel Lebihan

For Sydney restaurateur Judy McMahon taking reservations online is an opportunity to grow the business and she relies on an automated booking system to help her do just that.

The owner of the one-hat Catalina restaurant in Rose Bay Ms McMahon is one of almost 60 Sydney restaurateurs to sign up with Booking Angel an online reservation service that converts internet bookings to phone messages and delivers them to the restaurant.

While Ms McMahon said internet reservations had not yet taken off gearing up for when they did was the smart thing to do.

"People are using the Internet more and more for all of their information and so it makes sense when they're online that they'd like to make a reservation online too" she said. "it's something that's going to grow . . . and we wanted to be in it from the start"

Booking Angel works with two internet restaurant directories, eatability.com.au and cityeatery.com, which take online bookings for many of the restaurants they list. Because the hospitality industry is more prone to answering telephone call than email inquiries Booking Angel converts the online reservation to a voicemail message

that is phoned through to the restaurant Staff can accept or reject the booking or suggest an alternative time by pressing certain phone keys. The response is converted to an email reply to the person making the reservation within about a minute.

Restaurants are charged \$5.90 for the automated booking, although the fee is retracted if the table does not show. The company charges \$1 if the restaurant has to reject the automated booking.

"It doesn't cost me anything unless the booking is made and honoured," Ms McMahon said. "A charge of \$5.90 on a table for two is probably just acceptable but once beyond that and it's a table of three or four it's much more acceptable for a small percentage of the overall spend to go to a service like this"

Booking Angel founder Dean McEvoy said he saw a gap in the market for an automated booking service during a 12 Month stint working in the industry.

"A lot of restaurateurs are busy people and don't operate well on the internet" he said, adding that those who did take online bookings often told customers it would take 48 hours for them to respond "which is a bit ridiculous if you're going out for dinner that night"

Internet analyst Ramin Marzbani said the fact that restaurant reservations were an impulse-based

activity could be the downfall of a Service of this kind.

Internet reservations would more likely be made by people booking a few weeks or months in advance "but even then, most would still probably call the restaurant instead", Mr Marzbani said.

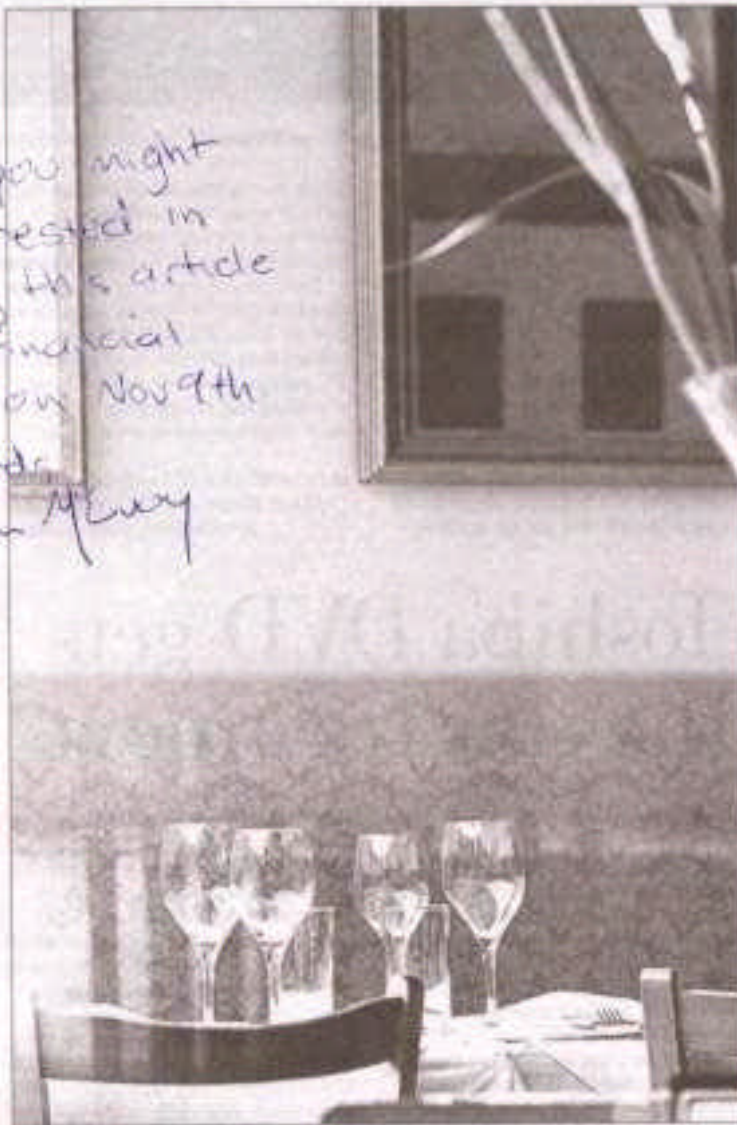
"Its one of those things that's nice and interesting but only seen as a complement to telephone service"

Mr McEvoy said the number of restaurants using Booking Angel almost doubled to 58 in October from 30 in September with about 70 bookings made over that two month period. He is aiming to have 50 per cent of the 1100 restaurants listed on eatibility.com.au using the service within six months.

"If we can sign up some of the other big directories like citysearch.com.au or bestrestaurants.com.au that number could easily quadruple. We will be the restaurants' most favourite concierge" he said.

Ms McMahon's biggest concern was how staff would handle an automated booking service in a noisy restaurant environment. But she said staff were happy with the system and could repeat every part of the telephone message until they caught all of the booking details.

"Its about making the most of the technology . . . and getting a bigger slice of what's happening online"



Restaurants usually prefer phone bookings to web-based ones. Photo: JESSICA SHAPIRO

Hi,
Thought you might be interested in reading this article from Financial Review on Nov 9th
Regards,
Dean McEvoy