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'Your usual, Mr. Smith?'

Milwaukee software company helps restaurants get to know their guests

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Brennan's of Houston features a Cajun-influenced menu and extensive wine list, including pairings like frog leg salad and a Chateau Ducasse Bordeaux blanc.

But diners also come for the restaurant's service - efficient, knowledgeable and, above all, friendly. Owner Alex Brennan-Martin calls it his "secret ingredient," a brand of Southern hospitality that includes reading the customer like an open book.

"Instead of saying, 'Mr. Smith, would you like a cocktail?' you can say, 'Mr. Smith, would you like your Macallan on the rocks?'" Brennan said. "You've got this opportunity to generate repeat business simply by providing hospitality, simply by knowing the person."

That happens with the help of computer software developed by GuestBridge Inc., a small Milwaukee information technologies firm that targets the restaurant business. GuestBridge, founded in 1999, had just four employees when it moved from Houston to Milwaukee about 18 months ago. It now has 10 employees and plans to add five more by the end of 2007, as its customer base expands, said Lewis Schrock, chief executive officer.

"There's a lot of good growth potential," said Schrock.

GuestBridge's products help restaurant operators take reservations, keep tabs on which tables are available as guests come and go and maintain detailed profiles on their customers.

That customer data allows a server to ask Mr. Smith about his affinity for Macallan single malt Scotch whisky, served with ice.

It also could mean that Smith and his wife are greeted with a "Happy anniversary" and assigned their favorite waiter. Or that Mrs. Smith is known to be watching her weight, so the sauces should be served on the side.

The automated profiles also can be used for marketing, Schrock said. For example, a special dining event involving cabernets can be pitched to customers who prefer that type of wine.

"It allows (restaurateurs) to have a better understanding of what their customers want," Schrock said.

GuestBridge's largest customer is Fleming's Prime Steakhouse and Wine Bar, which operates 49 restaurants, including one that opens next month in Brookfield. But most of the firm's customers are smaller restaurant groups, such as House of Blues, which has 11 locations scattered throughout the country, and Mackay Restaurants, which owns six restaurants in the Seattle and Portland areas.

'Customized experience'

GuestBridge's clientele includes Milwaukee-based restaurateur John "Johnny V" Vassallo, who operates nine restaurants in the Milwaukee area, Houston and Indianapolis. Vassallo, whose local restaurants include Mo's A Place for Steaks and Mo's Irish Pub, plans to open a 10th restaurant this fall in Manhattan.

Vassallo became familiar with GuestBridge software in 2003, when he saw it displayed at a trade show.

For Vassallo, installing the GuestBridge system meant he could spend more time at other locations in his growing Mo's business, which started in 1999 with Mo's A Place for Steaks. Blessed with a good memory, Vassallo prides himself on knowing many of his customers by name. But he also wanted to add more locations, including some outside Milwaukee.

"I wasn't going to be able to be there every night," Vassallo said. "I didn't want our frequent guests to not get that customized experience."

The GuestBridge software allows Vassallo's employees to more easily learn the dining and wining preferences of repeat customers. Vassallo was so happy with the results that in 2005 he bought a 35% stake in GuestBridge. That gave the company a capital infusion and a new home in Milwaukee.

Schrock and his partners, Dave Arthurs, vice president of engineering, and Claire Ellington, vice president of marketing and operations, were ready to make the move.

"All of us looked at it as an opportunity for a little bit of a fresh start and a jump to the next level," Schrock said.

GuestBridge was started in 1999 as ReservationSource Inc. and served as an Internet-based portal for restaurant and golf reservations. It wasn't a bad idea, Schrock said, but its launch came just as dot-com fervor was dying. By 2001, the company's owner had soured on the idea and sold ReservationSource to Schrock, who had served as an adviser to the firm.

Schrock changed the name to GuestBridge and focused it on developing software for restaurant owners. He was joined by Arthurs, a former colleague from Houston-based Questia Media America Inc., an online library where Schrock was vice president of consumer marketing.

Ellington, the other member of GuestBridge's management team, knew Schrock from Questia and Compaq Computer Corp., where he was a marketing director.

Schrock and his colleagues began marketing GuestBridge through the Internet and by attending trade

shows, including the National Restaurant Association's annual convention at Chicago's McCormick Place. By 2003, they had doubled the company's annual revenue.

An '800-pound gorilla'

With Vassallo's investment, GuestBridge last year rolled out three separate products that are targeted to different segments of the restaurant industry. They include software designed for casual restaurant chains, a segment that offers GuestBridge a chance to target a lot more customers.

Schrock wouldn't disclose GuestBridge's annual revenue. He said the company, which operates from 3,500 square feet at the Germania Building, 135 W. Wells St., expects to post its first profit in 2007.

GuestBridge competes with Open Table Inc., a San Francisco company that provides similar products to more than 6,000 restaurants nationwide. Brennan-Martin calls Open Table the "800-pound gorilla" of the restaurant software business.

But the data collected by Open Table is owned by that company, and not by the restaurants it serves, said Brennan-Martin. GuestBridge allows restaurateurs to own the collected data, he said, and gives them more flexibility to use the information.

And that is like gold to a restaurant owner striving to offer a high level of service, said Brennan-Martin, whose operations include Commander's Palace restaurants in New Orleans and Las Vegas, and Café Adelaide, in New Orleans.

"A great meal can't salvage poor service," Brennan-Martin said. "But great service often saves a below-par meal."

The ability to organize information on GuestBridge means that Brennan-Martin can more quickly train employees. It also means that he doesn't lose valuable knowledge when a manager or maitre'd quits to work for a competitor.

Despite the advantages, there are still a lot of restaurants that don't use software sold by either Open Table or GuestBridge. Some of that resistance comes from chef-owned restaurants, Schrock said.

"All they think they need to do is create good food," Schrock said. "The reality is people also go out to restaurants for the comfort and the experience."

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