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 Site

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Newsletters

**News**

This Week's Issue  
Breaking News  
Off the Wire  
Financial News  
Consumer Trends

**NRN Blog**

The Scoop

**Segment News**

Casual Dining  
QSR  
Growth Chains  
OnSite  
Fine Dining/Indies

**Operations**

Operational Spotlight  
Marketing  
 **Tech**  
Equipment  
Food Safety  
Restaurant Design

**People**

People on the Move  
HR & Service  
Executive Profile

**Culinary Currents**

Food Insights  
Menu Trends  
Chef Profile  
Health & Nutrition  
On the Menu  
Beverage Trends  
Dish of the Week  
Dining / What's Hot  
Recipe Index  
Chef Tips

**Events**

MUFSO  
Hot Concepts  
Menu Masters  
R&D Conference  
FS/TEC  
NRN Hall of Fame  
Industry Calendar

**Technology****Online reservations technology gains ground**

By Julie Ritzer Ross

**(June 26)** - Online reservation portal OpenTable.com says it recently broke its own record for dining seats filled each month, with that number now exceeding 1 million. The volume of restaurants using OpenTable's online seating technology — reputed to be the first of its kind in the market — increased by more than 65 percent last year, according to Liz Johanssen, senior manager of restaurant marketing for the San Francisco-based service.

Indeed, the online reservations concept appears to be catching on. Another portal, DinnerBroker.com of San Francisco, now has more than 1,400 operator users nationwide. Other players in the portal category include iSeatz.com and SavvyDinner.com. Most portal operators maintain strategic partnerships with search engines and other website operators to lead customers to their sites.

Further evidence of the trend can be seen in the debut of such online reservation applications as GuestBridge Reserve from GuestBridge Inc. of Milwaukee and ReServe Interactive from the Delafield, Wis.-based vendor of the same name. The Magellan Reservations System by Ameranth Wireless Inc. of San Diego, which is used at the Zagat Guide website, features text-to-voice conversion technology. That technology synthesizes text requests for reservations into words that can be relayed to partner restaurants via phone. It also supports fax, e-mail and browser links.

Some operators, like [ESPN Zone](#) of Burbank, Calif., are even developing their own online reservation software.

In addition, many online reservation systems' users claim to be reaping a competitive edge by extending reservations acceptance capabilities beyond normal

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Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

business hours.

"Many customers had long told us that their 'prime time' for making reservations is late at night or early in the morning, when we're closed," says Patty Pleuss, vice president of marketing and sales for [Morton's Restaurant Group Inc.](#), operator of 69 [Morton's The Steakhouse](#) stores. "Now we can accommodate them."

Chicago-based Morton's accepts online reservations through OpenTable.com. While Pleuss declined to specify what percentage of Morton's reservations currently are made online, she says diners really like the option. Online reservations capabilities also make it easier to fill tables at odd hours and, through customer registration, afford access to data that can be used to provide better service and create targeted marketing campaigns.

Specific details of some online reservations technologies and services follow.

Dinner Broker [www.dinnerbroker.com](http://www.dinnerbroker.com) Operator users (individual units): More than 1,400 in 47 U.S. regions/cities, five in Canada User examples: [Smith & Wollensky](#), [Charlie Palmer's Metrazur](#), [Johnny Rockets](#) Operator fees: \$49 per month for unlimited diner access to website, \$1 per diner reservation booked and honored Strategic partners: Google, Citysearch and Yahoo Model: The system is designed to help fill off-peak seats. Users register e-mail addresses and can add dining preference information, "opt in" for e-mails about special offers and get restaurant recommendations. A company representative telephones or faxes reservation information to restaurants.

Operator feedback: Newport Beach, Calif.-based [Rockin' Baja Lobster](#) uses Dinner Broker in its five units. The service drives an average of 50 to 75 covers per restaurant per month, says Houston Striggow, vice president of operations and franchise development. "We're definitely filling more of our tables at odd hours," he says. "Given a choice of dining with us at 5 p.m. and getting a 25-percent discount or going somewhere else, many people [choose the former]." Rockin' Baja Lobster uses e-mail addresses and customer information collected for targeted e-mail blasts about special events and promotions. E-mails contain a link to the Dinner Broker reservations page, cultivating repeat business. A real-time interface would be nice, Striggow says, but he calls the current setup "fine for casual dining."

OpenTable [www.opentable.com](http://www.opentable.com) Operator users (individual units): More than 4,500 in the United States, Canada, Hong Kong, Japan, Mexico, Singapore and the United Kingdom. The company claims that the system fills more than 1 million seats per month.

User examples: [Ruth's Chris Steak House](#), [Alain Ducasse](#) at the Essex House, [The French Laundry](#) Operator fees: About \$200 per month for hardware and software, training and service from a dedicated sales representative; 25 cents per seated cover of



OpenTable reservations made on restaurants' own sites; \$1 per cover of reservations made through [www.opentable.com](http://www.opentable.com) or its strategic partner sites Strategic partners: AOL CityGuide, Chicago Tribune's [metromix.com](http://metromix.com), Citysearch, DiRoNA, Los Angeles Times' [calendarlive.com](http://calendarlive.com), NYC & Company, Time Out New York, San Francisco Chronicle's [sfgate.com](http://sfgate.com), [washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com), Yahoo Model: The system comprises hardware and software. It tracks and maintains telephone, in-person and online reservations, and it also performs table management and server tracking functions. Diners can register restaurant, food, seating and other preferences; search for available tables for given time, neighborhood, cuisine type and/or price range; record special requests for maitre d'; and send e-mail invitations to other diners. OpenTable also accepts reservations on restaurants' websites. Website interfaces with OpenTable.com software allow real-time reservations recording and tracking. Dedicated website versions are offered for concierges and administrative assistants. The system awards "Dining Rewards Points," redeemable for "Dining Cheques" good in participating restaurants. The company also is developing a wireless product for WAP-enabled phones. Operator feedback: Morton's Restaurant Group Inc. uses OpenTable.com in Morton's Steakhouse restaurants. The system captures reservations when phones are unmanned and better serves customers by understanding their needs and preferences before their first visit. All reservation slots are available online. For brand consistency, reservations are made by clicking the "reservations" link on [www.mortons.com](http://www.mortons.com) website. The company says early and late slots are "consistently filled" and diners are more flexible about dining times when booking online compared with booking on the phone. Customer preference data attached to online reservations are shared with servers. More first-time diners are converted to repeat diners, Morton's says. A database of about 250,000 e-mail addresses is used for targeted e-mails announcing special events and offers.

The system required staff training on day-to-day, marketing-related uses. Vendor training was provided by OpenTable. Managers train restaurant staff on the system, and the operator employs a guest database manager to oversee the system.

GuestBridge GuestBridge Reserve software; GuestBridge Express hosted solution now in Beta-testing [www.guestbridge.com](http://www.guestbridge.com) Operator users (individual units): unavailable User examples: [Fleming's Prime Steakhouse and Wine Bar](#), [Mackay Restaurant Group](#), [Mo's Restaurants](#), [Commander's Palace](#) group of restaurants Operator fees: GuestBridge Reserve: \$2,500 and up; ASP option, \$200 to \$300 per month for licensing and maintenance. GuestBridge Express (proposed): setup, \$25; monthly fee, \$69; additional users/account logins, \$10 per month; data export, \$10 per month Strategic partners: The system interfaces with paging/table/call management systems from Queuent, Long Range Systems, JTech, Caller ID.com and others.

Model: GuestBridge Reserve software lets diners procure reservations on operators' websites. If a desired slot is unavailable, it can display availability at sister locations or direct diners to telephone a restaurant. It automatically generates a confirmation e-mail and can supply links to confirm reservations and forward e-mails.

GuestBridge Reserve interfaces with restaurant databases allow automatic input of guest profile information included in reservation requests. Its payment processing interface captures credit card numbers to hold reservations and process payments for prix-fixe meals. GuestBridge Express offers online-reservation capability to smaller restaurants without a technology investment. The company provides customers with links for putting themselves on restaurants' wait lists via WAPs and PDAs. Online reservation pages require a full Web browser.

Operator feedback: Seattle-based Mackay Restaurants Inc. uses GuestBridge Reserve in all its restaurants: three-unit [El Gaucho](#), [Troiani Ristorante Italiano](#), [Waterfront Seafood Grill](#) and [Sea Grill](#). The company deployed a homegrown online portal to let guests "make reservations on their own time, not ours," says Chad Mackay, president and chief executive. Mackay implemented GuestBridge Reserve when it deployed GuestBridge Enterprise Solution for reservations management. Initially a limited number of slots were available online, but Mackay opened all slots at customers' requests. Online reservations also are open to concierges. All online-reservation information is ported to an Enterprise Solution application. The system receives 1,200 covers per month companywide; eliminates potential for errors in the desired time, number in party, or name spelling common on the phone; and saves "substantial" reservationist time. The company has built an e-mail database of 50,000 diner profiles, which it uses for targeted mailings. Mackay's wish list for the system includes the ability to suggest alternative restaurants owned by his company when a requested slot is unavailable and APIs to link software to aggregator portals.

ESPN Zone MVP Club Priority Seating portal Operator users: All ESPN Zone restaurants, which are located in Atlanta, Baltimore, Chicago, Denver, Las Vegas, New York, Washington, D.C., and Anaheim, Calif. Model: Launched January in partnership with San Luis Obispo, Calif.-based Web Associates, the portal was developed as a perk for the more than 50,000 MVP Club members. Members access the portal through the MVP Club link on [www.espnzone.com](http://www.espnzone.com) and make priority-seating requests up to 72 hours in advance for up to eight guests.

ESPN Zone chose its own program to "handle the challenge of maintaining a priority-seating system in tandem with the constantly changing sports event calendar," says Christine Baum, manager of marketing strategy for Disney Regional Entertainment. The number of tables earmarked for MVP Club Priority Seating varies based on events. A "significant portion" of each environment is reserved for walk-ins.

Operator feedback: Ernie Ritchie, general manager of ESPN Zone Chicago, first was concerned about adequate customer use and the reaction from the general public. He first reserved only a few tables for priority seating but later expanded to 25 percent of the dining room and 25 percent of the Screening Room (30 to 35 seats) per diner demand. "Not only do customers use it," he says, "most non-MVP Club members go straight to the in-store kiosk to sign up for the club once they learn free registration in the club is the only prerequisite for priority seating." Training is not an issue, he says.

The restaurant was already printing a daily list of priority guests expected. The list of MVP reservations is printed along with the priority-guest roster.

[Back to Top](#)

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