

Restaurant Helper Heaven-Sent

HOWARD DAHDAH, PC WORLD

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A local company has developed a booking engine that converts your Internet reservation information to a phone message, allowing restaurants to respond by using the keys on their phone.

The company, Booking Angel, has targeted the restaurant industry first, but other industries where the solution may fit include hairdressers, doctors, mechanics and small accommodation providers.

Booking Angel general manager Dean McEvoy had been cooking up the idea for about four years – largely due to his previous experience as a part-owner of a bar and restaurant in Sydney – but was finally in a position to start the company about 18 months ago.

"Despite the popularity of the Internet, some people and businesses don't find it convenient to deal through the Web," said McEvoy. "They answer the phone all day but only answer an e-mail occasionally if at all. From a customer's perspective this can mean you wait an eternity for a business to respond to your request via e-mail. There had to be a better way."

McEvoy and his business partner David Watson, who have both worked at Hothouse Interactive, started actual development of the engine in November last year. "We have used the AT&T text-to-speech voice engine. Everything else is developed in-house," McEvoy said. A working prototype was up and running in early February and since then it has been a constant evolution of development.

Booking Angel launched in May with a site called www.cityeatery.com. The site is a directory of restaurants sorted by cuisine and distance from a person's suburb. For example, a user can ask for all the Italian restaurants within 5km of a particular suburb, and book them online using Booking Angel's technology. Another site, www.eatability.com.au, which already has over a dozen restaurants listed, went live with the technology this past weekend.

For diners, using the service is easy. The diner enters an ideal time and a window of time they would accept a booking. Once they have typed and submitted the Web form the restaurant then receives a phone call from the voice engine with the booking information and tries to accommodate the diner's ideal time. If that is not possible they try to accommodate, via keypad entries, some time within the window that the customer had entered.

If they have no times available, the booking is rejected by the restaurant. "Whether the restaurant accepts, rejects or enters an alternate time the customer is informed via an automated e-mail. The whole process normally only takes a minute or two," McEvoy said.

For restaurants the start-up costs are minimal. No equipment is needed on their part – just a touchtone telephone. Provided they are linked on food sites such as the afore-mentioned Eatability or CityEatery, they don't need a Web site of their own.

It costs restaurants \$10 to sign up to the Booking Angel service. After that they are charged a flat fee of \$5.90 per booking from a Web site directory. If referred through the restaurant's own site its just \$1 per booking.

One restaurant to be using the service is the Iguana Bar in Sydney's salubrious Kings Cross area. Café owner Uly Flevotomos has been one of the first to sign up to the Booking Angel service. He said he received several bookings a week from the service and expected this to grow as more people became familiar with it. From a personal point of view



he found it to be quite useful, as he could be "forgetful" in checking e-mail reservations.

Booking Angel is still a work in progress. McEvoy said he planned to integrate SMS responses to the service also.

However, in the immediate future he is hoping for good fortune to come his way. Last week he discovered that Booking Angel had been selected as one of eight national finalists in the Business Development category of the Yellow Pages Business Ideas Grants. If successful he stands to win \$50,000 plus other goodies. "I am very excited about getting this far," he said.

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