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Local restaurants joining online reservation trend - Part I

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By Jennifer Whitson

A last-minute meeting with a key client pops up at the end of a workday. If the host wants to take the group to dinner afterward, he could ask an assistant to scramble, calling his favorite restaurants in search of a last-minute opening.

But nowadays, there's a simpler option: With a couple of mouse clicks, he can use an online reservation system to check availability at some of the city's best haunts.

"Businesspeople use [online reservations] the most," said Kimberly Fisher-Everette, director at Café Nora.

More and more local restaurants are offering online reservations through San Francisco-based OpenTable Inc., the biggest player in online reservation and software services.

Started in 1999, the company's Web system—OpenTable.com—has grown to book more than 2 million seats nationwide every month. Other companies offer software systems to manage reservations, local restaurateurs say, but not with a Web site tie-in.

OpenTable landed its first local client—St. Elmo Steak House—in mid-2003 and now offers reservations for 34 Indianapolis-area restaurants. St. Elmo books about 15 percent of its reservations online, either through OpenTable's link on the restaurant's Web site or directly through www.OpenTable.com.

For customers, OpenTable provides convenience. But for restaurateurs, it's so much more.

For a monthly fee, the eateries get a high-tech system that's become the backbone for personalized service.

When a restaurant signs up, techies fly in and install touch-screen terminals at the host stand and load the software on management's computers.

Data is backed up regularly off site—a big selling point to St. Elmo. Before adopting the system, the restaurant kept track of reservations in big three-ring binders.

"It only takes one disgruntled employee to walk out with all your binders," throwing reservations into chaos, said Craig Huse, St. Elmo's president.

Staff also can add notes to customer profiles so that when Mrs. Smith makes a reservation, the hostess will know she likes table 20 and wants an iced tea along with the check.

"Everyone wants to feel like they're the most important person in the restaurant," said Liz Johannesen, OpenTable senior manager of restaurant marketing. "This system helps restaurateurs do that."

While most crib notes are about client preferences, staff also can troubleshoot—recording, for instance, that Mr. Jones always finds fault with some part of his meal and tries to argue his way out of part of the check.

Plus if an owner's going to make the rounds, he first can tap on the touch screen to jog his memory on the guy's name at table 11.