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Web helps restaurants track patrons' needs - Part II

The Arizona Republic

By Richard Ruelas

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Although some reports out of New York's restaurant scene had OpenTable keeping track of which male customers came in with mistresses, the comments at Sassi are not nearly that interesting.

"This is Scottsdale," Plunkett said, noting a reporter's disappointment in that night's list, "not Manhattan."

On that Saturday evening, for example, the notes included that one party likes to pour its own wine. Another guest, it was noted, likes the panna cotta.

But one note was of vital importance to the restaurant. It mentioned the customer was a manager at a nearby resort, one that sends guests Sassi's way. "Very service/detail oriented," read the note. "Be all over him."

Plunkett put his staff on alert, describing the man to them. "He's like 7 feet tall," he said, adding, "Obviously, we want to look good."

Part of looking good, however, is not making it obvious to the customer that the servers have a cheat sheet.

Much of the information is used subtly. A customer who is hard of hearing might be placed in a quieter portion of the restaurant. A customer who likes to linger might not be seated at a table that needs to be turned quickly. Frequent guests might receive an appetizer or dessert compliments of the chef.

Most times the system simply allows for that all-important trigger of recognition, something Plunkett said is important in making someone feel welcome.

Of course, if someone seemed uncomfortable with any personal fuss, that would be noted in the OpenTable system as well, Plunkett said. But that would be highly unusual. More common is the exact opposite.

"Some people," he said, "clearly like to be recognized."