

Apps For Buying Drinks

Mobile applications allow bar customers to place orders using their cell phones

Bar and restaurant patrons often complain about the time it takes to place an order or pay a tab. Two new technology platforms aim to remedy that problem, and several websites are offering ways for people to buy real drinks for friends and acquaintances over the Internet.

TabbedOut, developed by Austin, Texas-based ATX Innovation, is an application that allows restaurant guests to open, review and pay their tabs directly from a smartphone, says company CEO and co-founder Rick Orr. "The idea originated from a poor dining experience I had," Orr recalls. "The waitress brought my check and didn't return to pick up my credit card for almost 55 minutes." With TabbedOut, the wait is eliminated, which not only keeps customers happy, but it increases revenues for participating venues. Waitstaff are freed from the burden of processing credit cards or returning change—allowing more time for serving customers.

Launched in January at 12 Austin venues, TabbedOut currently is available in roughly 90 bars and restaurants in eight states, with additional venues and markets in the works. The venues pay no fee for the service and can generate business by sending out marketing messages to users. TabbedOut, which is supported by iPhone and Android, with Blackberry to come, is free for consumers to download, but they're charged 99 cents each time they pay a tab. The application also helps guests calculate tips, keeps their credit cards secure and e-mails receipts.

Similarly, SpeedMenu is a Web-based technology that has partnered with Dinerware, a company that provides point-of-sale systems to on-premise establishments. SpeedMenu allows customers to order items and pay bills via any phone with an Internet browser. Unlike TabbedOut, SpeedMenu is completely free for consumers, instead charging participating venues with an installation fee and a monthly fee. However, SpeedMenu CEO Dan Janjigian says the revenue growth from increased frequency of orders and more efficient payment outweigh the cost. One concern for on-premise operators adopting SpeedMenu technology is that their servers could become lazy, but Janjigian says customers who used the application saw waitstaff approximately 30-percent more often than previously. "Every time there's an order, the server comes to the table," he explains. SpeedMenu is currently only available in a handful of restaurants and bars in Seattle and Austin, Texas, where SpeedMenu Inc. is based, but expansion to New York City, Washington, D.C., and other markets is planned.

Several websites are helping venues attract customers through smartphone applications as well. Taking the concept of sending virtual drinks through social media a step further,



Cell phone applications like Beer2Buds, TabbedOut and Bartab offer ways for consumers to buy drinks through a mobile device, while providing marketing opportunities for participating venues.

Beer2Buds.com first launched as a site that allows consumers to go online and order a beer for a friend, who may then redeem the beer at a participating venue. It then became a Facebook application, and now it's an iPhone app. Credits in quantities of \$5 to \$25 can be used for any beverage the bar chooses. It's free for venues to participate, and each establishment is listed on the website and application, along with the food and drink specials offered. Currently Beer2Buds credits can be redeemed at 120 bars in 16 U.S. cities.

On-premise operators enjoy the promotional aspect of the site. "Beer2Buds has helped us gain more exposure outside our market," explains Eric Cozens, co-owner of Mission Latin Restaurant & Lounge in Seattle. "If someone wants to buy a beer for a friend in Seattle, he or she can see information about us on Beer2Buds.com and drive a new customer into our venue."

Bartab is another Web-based platform that allows consumers to purchase drinks for friends online or through its Facebook, iPhone or Android applications. All drinks cost \$1 to send and \$1 to redeem, and each guest may only redeem one drink per venue per day. The idea is that once customers are in a bar or restaurant to redeem their gifts, they will stay for another full-priced round or purchase food. Developed by Webtab Inc., Bartab has partnered with venues in San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York City, and plans to be in 20 markets by the end of the year.

With mobile applications being developed daily, on-premise operators are exploring ways to utilize the technology to drive traffic, service customers and encourage repeat business. **mw**

Amber Drea