

E-mail easily connects business, customers

Messages can be used for feedback, special discounts, schedules

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Faced with a price increase from a soft-drink supplier, the owners of Pannullo's Italian Restaurant went straight to their customers for guidance.

However, instead of spending weeks walking up to every table to ask the eternal question -- whether diners preferred Coke or Pepsi -- the partners simply made the query in their weekly e-mail to customers.

"I couldn't believe the response," co-owner Richard Pannullo said. Customers preferred Coca-Cola products and said so in large numbers. The Winter Park, Fla., restaurant wasted no time in switching to Coke.

The survey question not only helped the owners of the 107-seat, independent restaurant make an important business decision, it also proved the value of e-mail as a low-cost form of target marketing.

Even small businesses are finding that e-mail can easily generate repeat business and gather valuable customer feedback.

Take Dave Mann, lead guitarist for FunkUs, a jam band that performs only once or twice a week and does not produce enough income to let most of its five members quit their day jobs.

FunkUs fires off a message to everyone on its e-mail list once or twice a month, depending on the band's schedule, Mann said. "It's mostly for our fans, to keep them informed" about where the band is playing, he said.

Sending e-mail to 1,300 people is "a breeze," Mann said. "It's literally like sending an e-mail to one person."

The nonprofit Enzian Theater in Maitland, Fla., blasts an e-mail with information about the films it is showing to 1,750 members each week, said Shannon Lacek, director of marketing.

Pannullo's pays about \$300 a month for a service that packages and transmits the content the owners want to use to about 5,000 customers. The restaurant's e-mail includes the kind of graphics one might see on a Web page and has links to the restaurant's Web site and elsewhere.

The restaurant offers customers special e-mail discounts as an inducement to provide their e-mail addresses. Pannullo's sometimes gives a free bottle of wine or appetizers with dinner or offers discount dinners. The e-mail coupons have to be printed and brought to the restaurant, Pannullo said. The e-mail also provides some community news such as new businesses or cultural and recreational events that might draw people into the neighborhood -- where Pannullo's might have another shot at their business.

The Atlanta-based company that puts the e-mail together for Pannullo's, Restaurant E-Marketing Inc., belongs to Sam Rubin. An IBM salesman, Rubin runs Restaurant E-Marketing as a side business with 10 restaurant clients scattered across the Eastern United States, he said.

Rubin transmits his e-mails through emailLabs, a privately held company in Redwood City, Calif. Loren McDonald, emailLabs' marketing director, said some of his company's clients send as many as 1 million e-mails a month.

"Almost every restaurant I go to -- even delicatessens -- is trying to get your e-mail address," he said, "so I guess it's taking off."