



Online Waitlist + Online Reservations

How a new hybrid solution is giving today's restaurants the edge they need

What is online waitlist plus online reservations?

The combination of Online Waitlist and Online Reservations has emerged as a novel hybrid solution that has made a significant impact in the restaurant industry over the past few years. This informational paper delves into the details, exploring the history of these technologies, the emergence of their combination, and why it represents a viable alternative to traditional seating methods. It also examines the benefits it offers to both patrons and restaurants.

Traditional Walk-in / Waitlist vs. Reservations

To clearly illustrate this new hybrid concept, let's begin by examining the two oldest and still common methods restaurants employ to seat customers: the Traditional Walk-in/Waitlist system and Table Reservations.

Both of these options are familiar to restaurant and consumers. In the traditional walk-in service, often referred to as "First Come First Served," diners arrive at a restaurant and are promptly seated if tables are available. If no tables are available, their names are added to a waiting list for the next available table.

In contrast, the Reservation system typically involves contacting the restaurant in advance, informing the restaurant of your party size, then confirming a specific date and time for a table reservation. This can be accomplished through various means, including phone calls, in-person bookings, and, in the most prevalent practice today, through online reservation systems or digital applications.

There are advantages to both.

Walk-in service is simple and efficient. A big selling point is that it allows restaurants to seat and turn over tables faster seating tables as soon as they become available. Research and statistics for busy walk-in restaurants demonstrate that restaurants can turn around 10-20% more tables as walk-in service only compared to reservation systems. Walk-in service also requires little upfront investment. A piece of paper on which to write names for a waitlist is often as complicated and expensive as it gets. The downside? It's not customer oriented.

From the customer perspective, choosing a restaurant that does not accept reservations is often irritating. For one, they don't know the seating availability before arriving. When customers try to call asking about availability, they are often met with ambiguous "it's not too busy at this moment" answers increasing their frustration and leaving them with no guarantees. Without assurance, consumers are less likely to commit to going to restaurants operating as walk-in service only. When customers choose to go anyway, yet arrive and have to wait for seating, this can further increase frustration. Indeed, most customers that have experienced this at a restaurant are far less likely to visit that restaurant again.

Online waitlisting systems have changed the game for walk-in first come first served restaurants allowing customers to remotely determine availability without calling or driving down. But online waitlist is only for same-day real time availability and lacks the convenience of assuring a seating time in advance.

Reservations solves the problem of customers not being able to plan in advance, but this customer convenience often causes issues for restaurants. Managing incoming calls and returning messages is labor intensive. If calls aren't answered, then call-backs are required by the restaurant and frequently call-backs are unanswered causing a phone-tag scenario and wasted time. Missed calls mean missed customers. All of this "busy work" often interferes with other tasks, including take-out order calls or in-person customer service.

Online reservation systems have gone a long way toward addressing some of these pain points for restaurants. These systems greatly reduce phone calls / phone tag scenarios, and automate the manual entry of reservations in paper reservations books. As a stand-alone system, however, they have their own issues:

1. They can be expensive and overly complex.
2. They require constant tweaking to balance table availability based on staff, weather, and day of week... It is difficult to set a table reservation schedule based on an average of how long a party will be seated at a table. (No party sits for exactly "60" minutes.) As such, restaurants are left with empty tables waiting for the next party or juggling arriving parties for a table that is not yet vacant.

At the end of the day, whether table reservations are done manually or automatically online, restaurants face the age-old frustration of no-shows and latecomers, resulting in significant loss of revenue.

World famous restaurant owner David Chang once said, "***A table sitting empty is the most expensive thing in the restaurant.***" True words for any restaurant owner of any time.



Today's customers have technology in their hands every moment of the day that allows them to research and make a plan before going. They prefer to do everything remotely from their phone and “know before going” what to expect. To fill tables, restaurants need to leverage the technology of mobile phones and convert search into customers arriving at the door.

Interestingly, in a 2023 survey (1) of customers who dine at full-service restaurants at least once a month, the majority of customers are last minute decision makers. When surveyed:

- 4% stated they always make reservations ahead of time.
- 7% stated then make reservations most of the time.
- 13% said they make reservations about half the time.
- The remaining 76% said they rarely or never make reservations.

Of customers that make reservations, 71% make them within 36 hours before arrival. In summary, customers are not making reservations days or weeks in advanced like the used to. Today most are last minute decision makers.



Research at Google (2)



95% Of smartphone users conduct restaurant searches

90% Of these users convert within the day 

64% Convert either immediately or within one hour 

Online Waitlist + Online Reservations - A New Hybrid Solution

For many full service dine-in restaurants, Online Waitlist combined with Online Reservations is a hybrid solution that brings together the best of both worlds.

Online Waitlist + Online Reservations gives you:

- Book-from-phone convenience today's customers expect, **and**
- More tables filled with less manual labor, **and**
- Better guest experience

How does Online Waitlist + Online Reservations work?

Online waitlist combined with online reservations solves some of the inherent problems of being just walk-in, or just reservations. It provides restaurants the opportunity to fill more tables by capitalizing on the use of mobile phones and better balancing advanced table reservations with the last minute behaviors of consumers today.

The problem with operating with only online reservations is that you have to space your table availability schedule to neither overlap, nor leave empty tables. This is impossible to get perfect. Additionally, if all table availability is schedule into reservations, restaurants end up turning away walk-up customers, and are required to hold empty tables for arriving parties. Restaurants have been adjusting to this along the way – but the most common adjustment is to reduce the number of reservations allowed to leave room for more walk-ins. However, this causes another issue of less online reservation availability thus blocking some online conversion and dissuading customers from driving in because of the perception that the restaurant is full – no reservation times available.

The problem with operating only online waitlist is that there is no way for people to book tables ahead of time. Online waitlist allows restaurants convert the last minute decision makers. It also has the benefit of filling every table based on real-time availability. No need to stick to a fixed schedule of arrivals. More sophisticated online waitlist systems can even fill empty tables during slow times by allowing customers to hold a table for up to 30 minutes and head into a place the like. However, by the nature of real-time availability, online waitlist prevents customers from booking days or weeks ahead.

The Online Waitlist /Reservations hybrid solution gives restaurants a two-pronged approach that appeases the last-minute needs of today's customers while also providing the ability to book day ahead, delivering a best of both worlds answer for consumers and restaurants.

Online Waitlist + Reservations in Action

Let's walk through some scenarios that better help visualize how the hybrid solution works.

A group of friends are planning to go out, all between the ages of 25-35. They've texted each other through the day and heard that there is a new family-run place in their neighborhood that uses farm-fresh ingredients and they want to give it a try.

They google the restaurant and with most all restaurants today, one of three scenarios occur.

Scenario 1 – The restaurant does not offer any options via Google or their website to book a table. Immediately there is some resistance to going in the friend group. People coming from different places, finding parking, and being able to plan their schedule around a specific time becomes too risky in just driving down and taking their chances...so they likely look for other places.

Scenario 2 – The restaurant offers online reservations. However, times may not be available because they are looking same day. Frequently it shows as “no times available” and offers alternative days even when in fact the restaurant may have some tables held for walk-ins. Nevertheless, from the groups perspective when searching online, too risky to just drive down and take their chances.

Scenario 3 – The restaurant offers online waitlist. But at the moment of their search it's too early to add to the list. If they click on join waitlist, it tells them “No wait currently, come on in”. They can't know for certain they will get in later and now need to delay their plan until the restaurant is open and they can get on the waitlist.

In all three scenarios, Sally cannot confidently tell her friends if or when they can get in.

But let's assume they decide to head over anyway. When they arrive, there is already other groups of people waiting outside. The bar area is full. The host tells them that there is at least a 30-minute wait time. The typical conversation within the group ensues about “should we wait, or should we go someplace else.” Statistically when wait times are greater than 25 minutes, 35% of parties will leave to go somewhere else.

Now let's run through that same scenario with Online Waitlist + Online Reservations hybrid solution.

This same group is searching online, finds restaurant website and sees a note “Join the waitlist right now or reserve a table for a later time”. Now all the options for getting a table are available online. The restaurant has its best potential to fill every table and create a better guest experience.

The Absolute Importance of Online Services to the Restaurant Industry

The world lives online today. Consumers begin almost every purchase and service decision they make from their phone. Whether they are researching new cars, buying show tickets, booking a hotel or finding a place to eat. Consumers are so devoted to this approach that they will not even engage with a business they cannot find online. An online survey¹ of 1,500 US smartphone and tablet users and consumer behaviors gleaned from Nielsen's Smartphone

Analytics Panel of 6,000 Apple and Android users found that 95 percent of smartphone users conduct restaurant searches. It also found that 90 percent of these users convert within the same day. Perhaps more striking is the fact that 64 percent were found to convert either “immediately” or “within one hour.”

In Conclusion

It is imperative for businesses to have a method that facilitates the transition from online interest to physical visits. Conventional methods like walk-in or phone reservations are outdated and do not align with the modern expectations of online-savvy consumers.

Relying solely on online reservations can be problematic as it often leads to challenges in managing table inventory, resulting in inefficiencies, dealing with no-shows, and having to turn away walk-in customers, thus affecting the restaurant's overall efficiency.

On the other hand, exclusively using an online waitlist may suit more casual dining establishments where customers don't plan their visits well in advance. However, it falls short as it operates only in real-time and misses the opportunity to capture potential patrons who decide on dining plans hours before their intended visit.

A combination of both online waitlist and online reservations offers restaurants an optimal solution. This approach strikes a balance between online customer conversion, enhancing convenience, reducing the volume of phone reservations, and addressing operational challenges faced by the restaurant, all while optimizing restaurant capacity. This approach benefits both the restaurant and its customers.



(1) [Webinarcare 2023 survey](#) by Steve Bennett | Proofread & Edited by Editorial Staff

(2) [Google Research 2019](#) presented to National Restaurant Association MUFSSO event.