

## What's in a booking?

Its only when we step back a moment to think about it that we realize how much of our lives involves making bookings. What instantly springs to most peoples minds will probably be holidays and travel , tickets to events, and restaurants. Yet the more you concentrate, the more there are:

- Appointments for doctor's, dentists, opticians, anti-natal classes
- Hairdressers and beauticians
- Electricians, plumbers, gas fitters to service your house and business appliances
- Bank managers (sadly!), accountants, insurance advisors, solicitors

That's just what most of us will encounter in our lives. Depending upon your line of work or lifestyle there could be many more, such as visits to gyms and sports centres, booking rooms for meetings, and hiring tools and equipments.

Any time we're involved in booking some thing, some place, or some body, we get involved in the wonderful world diary matching. It's a process that quite rightly has been fodder for comedy writers for years, and is one of those unspoken stresses that make our modern lives so frustrating. For a concept so simple, it is amazing just how time consuming and error prone it can be. Think about it! All you want to do is to arrange for something at a particular time, a specific place, and for a distinct duration; as in 'I'd like to book a hair appointment at 3.00pm on the 30th at your saloon on the High Street - its just for a cut, so I assume I'll be away by 3.45 won't I'. Simple!! Well in a simple world, maybe - if you are the saloon's only customer, they don't overrun, and they haven't just decided to close for refurbishment.

So what's the problem? Well for starters:

- Someone else might have booked the time slot you want
- The time slot might be available, but the specific something (such as the senior stylist or model of cement mixer) you want isn't available
- The duration of booking you're wanting or expecting isn't available.

I know I'm exaggerated it bit here, but can you honestly say you've never had problems booking something when you want to? And when things don't fit - let the dance of diaries begin!

For now comes the frustrating, time consuming business of matching diaries to find a mutually acceptable alternative. Somewhere, somehow, there must be a time slot that the supplier and customer share which satisfies the customer's requirement. The question is how much time will both parties waste, and how disillusioned will the customer become, in trying to find that priceless gem of any booking system - the match!

Unless you are one of those terribly organized persons (known to the rest of us mere mortals as 'show-offs') you will probably hit bottom at this first hurdle by not having your diary to hand. If you're part of the 50% of the human race who seem to always have a diary available (i.e. female) or can remember all upcoming events anyway (female again), life is now reduced to a rustling of reduced to a rustling of paper as dates are matched. If it's a face-to-face booking, then it's a fairly simple process. On the phone, it becomes an example of human dexterity as you flip pages with one

hand, hold a phone with the other, and still somehow manage to write the eventual appointment details down. If you are attempting to do this diary juggling by email or post you clearly have no concept of reality and should be barred from organizing any aspect of your life!

## Giving customers control - moving to online bookings

It can all be a lot simpler - for customer and supplier alike. All you need as the customer is access to a web browser, and as the supplier an online booking system that is easy to maintain. And we're not talking revolution here! These systems already exist - as many of us who've booked travel tickets, concerts, and cinema tickets online can attest. The best of such systems are quick and easy to use, flexible enough to give you the choices you need, and often offer discounts to reflect the administration cost savings they provide to the supplier.

So why aren't online booking systems more prevalent? Why isn't the web awash with booking systems for all those services and business list before? My guess is a mix of history and technical infancy. History in the sense that its only recently that Internet access in the home has reached the levels where online booking systems have a large enough potential user base. Technical infancy in the simple sense that they're hard to build well and therefore in the past only open to the realms and pockets of big business. Except at their very simplest, booking systems are difficult to design and beyond the capabilities of the majority of website developers. Until recently, they have also been beyond the pocket of small business in terms of both site development costs and site hosting costs (they need a database server to work).

This is changing. The technical skills of web design companies are increasing, and the cost of database hosting is declining. Realistically, online booking systems for small businesses can cost as little as a few hundred pounds now (assuming you're not after online payments as well) - well within the reach of most pockets, and a cost easily recovered from reduced administration time, let alone the intangible benefit to customers of improved service and extra flexibility.

## Where to start? - Understanding your requirements!

So what's involved? What do you look for if you want to provide an online booking system to you customers? Obviously, different types of business will have some degree of different requirements, but there are some basics to look for and some key starting points you need to work through before looking for a system.

Any booking you make involves a combination of 4 things:

- The resource to be booked  
i.e. the room, haircut, consultant's meeting, cement mixer needed
- The time or times its needed for  
This could be a specific day and time; but don't forget you could be talking about some resource that needs to be bookable repeatedly. For example, a meeting room required every third Wednesday of the month. A good booking system should be able to cope with this.
- The minimum duration the resource is bookable for  
It's all about granularity of the calendar here. Do your customers need to be able to book days, or hours, or even minutes

- A list of restrictions on when the resource can be booked  
These could be times of the day, or days of the year. No point allowing your customers to book a haircut at midnight (unless you are running an all night barber shop of course)

That's the simple bit. And many booking systems such as room bookings at a hotel amount to little more than this. You give the customer a choice of resources, a calendar showing when they're available and for how much, and the ability to book one or more blocks of time appropriate to the resource they choose.

Of course things do get more complex - inevitably. Your business may involve dependent resources that have to be booked together. For example, some haircuts may involve several different staff - a stylist and a colourist for instance, while others do not. Your booking system would need to take into account the individual staff member's availability to offer your customer their idea of the resource - a haircut and colour. Even a room booking system may need similar additional complexity. You would obviously classify your rooms to describe the resources available for the customer (twin beds, single, double, suite, etc), but you might also want to offer optional extras such as cots. In this instance the number of cots would need to be set up in the booking system to make sure that no customer arrives expecting a cot, only to find the hotel teeming with couples with newborns, and you're out of cots - great for customer relations!

So before starting asking for a web based booking system do your homework on your own business. Think about what you want your customers to be able to book. Separate it into distinct resources that the customer will be able to book. Think about interdependent resources and also about optional extras. And finally, be realistic! - Don't break things down into needlessly small potential booking durations, and where you're offering people's skills as the resource be sensible about how long will take for the service they'll be providing. There's a fine balance in maximizing the use of your staff and infuriating your customers (soon to be former customers) by making them wait because you're overrunning.

## Processing the booking

Next on your list of concerns should be how you handle the bookings. What do I mean? - Well it's all a matter of trust. Do you believe that the booking is genuine and the person will keep it? The Internet is a marvelous tool for ease of booking, and hence exacerbates the ever-present tendency for people to change their minds, shop-around and not bother to tell you they've gone somewhere else, or simply conveniently, as in the case of dentist's appointments, forget to turn up! You need to weigh up the cost to your business of a particular resource laying idle due to a missed booking, then decide how to reflect this in your website. The most draconian approach is to require money upfront, either a deposit or payment in full. That leads you down the path of online payments and potentially a lot of extra cost. Moreover, for some types of business it will simply alienate your customers if they're not used to the idea. A simpler, and friendlier approach is to allow your customers to make a reservation valid for say 24 hours. During that period either you or they have to confirm the appointment verbally, and where appropriate you can take a deposit over the phone. If no confirmation is made within your reservation period the booking system can be set to automatically free the booking slot for an alternative customer. Of course, this means more work for yourself as you still need to have a telephone conversation with the customer, but at least its just a confirmation process rather than another of those dancing diary moments. If you go the reservations route you can also consider including a wait-listing option in your booking system.

This allows other potential customers to request a previously reserved resource that hasn't been confirmed yet.

If you're totally trusting (sometimes referred to by your competitors as reckless), you could just make the system totally open. You let people book and beyond a simple check of their booking details accept the booking in good faith. Do at least check the booking details though. Any booking system that doesn't capture at least a name, address, telephone number, and email address is highly suspect. Preferably it should also do some degree of automatic verification of these so that it can confirm that there is indeed a Mr. D. Duck at the address given.

## Purchasing a system

These are the basics, and from here it's a matter of looking into the bells and whistles in choosing your booking system. You should ensure it has an easy to use, but attractive web page for the customer to use. If you expect repeat bookings from some customers, make sure it gives customers the option to store a profile they can reuse for things like address details and preferences - but remember this should be an option, not a must do. Make sure you have an easy to use interface yourself for managing the bookings. You'll need reports that make sense, easy ways to confirm or rescind bookings, and simplicity in adding resources and resource booking rules. If you already have a computer based diary system you use in your business you might also want to have a way of integrating this with the web site so that online bookings are downloaded to it.

Got it all worked out? About to dash off that email to a web designer, asking them to get going on building your new booking-based website? Don't!!! Take a pause and do a few simple proving tests before spending your money. First and foremost, canvass your customer base with the idea and see what they think. Might sound good to you, but it could be your customers simply aren't web orientated, either through lack of interest, access, time, or simple preference for human contact when booking things so they can ask all those little extra questions before committing themselves. If they are interested, then one final suggestion - try before you buy. Find a supplier who will let you try both making bookings, and more importantly managing them. Then do a reality check that you really will find the management side easy enough to use that you'll keep it up to date.

Good luck!