Which restaurants are so well known, that their name becomes part of the nation’s vocabulary? I could name a few: The Ivy, Nobu, Jamie Oliver’s Fifteen. There won’t be many people who’ve not heard of at least one. Their names are more than just names; they are ‘superbrands’ in the hospitality world, mentioned in tabloids, gossip magazines, dinner parties and business meetings. How do we track the popularity and interest in these brands? Who’s developing their place? To answer this, we need to be able to track people’s awareness over time. Bigger companies with big budgets employ agencies to conduct research that gives them indexes they can track, such as ‘prompted awareness’ – all very well if you are Proctor & Gamble, Nestle or Heinz, but what about the rest of us?

A smaller company with limited resources would still want to know the answer to the questions, “have people heard of my restaurant?” and “is this improving over time?” Luckily finding out just became easier. Since the advent of the millennium, the general public has been feeding its interests to a large internet search engine you may well have heard of – Google. Every time someone types a word into the Google search engine, their intentions are monitored and stored. The more people who search using the words ‘The Ivy restaurant’, the more likely that this restaurant is “front of mind” for the public as a whole.

In August, Google launched a new test (‘beta’) service that allows us access to a huge database of historic data. It’s called ‘Google Insights For Search’. It allows you to type in any combination of keywords, and see how the use of that word has fared over time.

I curiously typed in ‘The Ivy restaurant’, ‘Nobu restaurant’, ‘Claridges restaurant’, ‘Fifteen restaurant’ and ‘Oxo Tower restaurant’, looking only at 2008 to date and solely at searches from the UK. What are the trends?

The graph given showed a month-by-month indication of search volumes over the year and an overall relative index for the whole period. I notice that of all the restaurants, The Oxo Tower is getting most interest pre-Valentine’s. Over the rest of the year, all the restaurants hold their position relative to each other. The indexes I am given show the Oxo Tower at 62, The Ivy at 54, Fifteen at 52, Nobu at 33 and Claridges at 28. Without the Valentine’s Day surge, The Ivy and The Oxo Tower would be about on a par. I must emphasise though that this is a test product from Google, and it should only be taken as an indicator, not the absolute truth.

Ok, so it’s a bit of fun. Why should you be bothered and how can you use it for yourself and your business?

Last year, the American Express Hospitality Monitor did some research showing that 62 per cent of UK consumers search the internet for information about restaurants to decide where to eat. This is an incredibly important observation. If more than half of potential bookers are online looking for somewhere to dine, are they using your restaurant name when they do so? If they are, is this increasing or decreasing over time? At what times of year do you see the demand? And from what regions of the UK do you see the demand? You can use Google Insights For Search to start finding out this information, for free.
Also worth considering is that if your potential diners are already online looking for a restaurant, are they able to book there and there? Offering an online booking interface on your own website as well as listing your restaurant to accept reservations through as many of the potential restaurant guide websites as are out there, is a sure way to increase custom.

From our own experience of delivering online bookings to restaurants at Livebookings Network, we can see that 18 per cent of bookings made on our system are generated outside normal opening hours (10pm – 10am) and 44 per cent of bookings are made during busy service times (12pm – 3pm and 6pm – 10pm), when looking at an average booking month. These are times when you are either closed or too busy to take calls. What is clear is that diners are online and booking throughout the day.

If you are not available to book online at the time when a decision is made, a diner might revert to an alternative and you’ll have lost out on potential customers. In these challenging times, only the best businesses will succeed and no-one can afford to lose a booking that they would otherwise have received.

In the UK, Google enjoys an incredible market share. According to Hitwise, an internet usage monitoring company, in July 2008 Google claimed 88 per cent of all searches made. To tap into the booking potential from the internet, you must be visible on Google.

There are four main methods to attract custom:

**Offer online booking technology**
Ensure your own website takes online bookings and make certain that it gets listed in the search results for as many relevant phrases as possible. To do this, first of all you need a website. Secondly, you need to provide some kind of booking service on the website. This is easily done by plugging in a booking engine from a specialist provider such as Livebookings Network.

**Optimise your website for search engines**
The tricky part is to get your site listed within the search engine results for the phrases most likely to deliver you business. This may require you to call in an expert, but there are some basics you can get right straight away. It’s important to realise that all search engines do is simply read text and follow links. They then analyse that data to decipher the results most relevant to the search phrase entered.

You need to ensure, therefore, that Google can read the text on your website and follow links through the site. Try and avoid using a highly graphical site, built using Flash. Keep it simple and functional. Many business owners focus too heavily on presentation and not enough on function. Complex design may look great but can Google read and store the text content? Dynamic navigation, such as drop down menus, can also make it problematic for the search engine to follow the links.

Be sure to do research on words people might use to find your website and include these in the copy on your site. Get some guidance on this by experimenting with the free Google Keyword Suggestion Tool. I would recommend focusing on your brand name, your cuisine type and your neighbourhood, including any local points of interest. Try and negotiate links from other websites to yours. Brainstorm the places you think might be keen. Local information websites, restaurant associations and local attractions are a good starting point.

**Appear in the ‘paid results’**
You can pay to appear in Google. These are the results that appear down the right hand side of the screen. To do this you need to set up an account with Google and use their ‘AdWords’ product. You pay for each click that they send to your site. This might be a good idea if your restaurant name is easily misspelt. Consider including incorrect spelling in your keyword selection to capture stray custom.

You can even go on to bid for popular terms guaranteed to bring you visitors. It’s easy to burn money, but, if done well, could be a very efficient marketing channel.

**Get listed**
Make sure you are listed on Google Local. As the business owner you can add yourself to Google’s database free of charge, meaning
you appear when users search via Google Maps. Check to see if you are already listed. If not, simply sign up and tailor your presence.

Maximise exposure
Sign up to appear on as many of the restaurant guide websites as possible. Put yourself in a consumer’s shoes and enter a restaurant name, type, location and cuisine into Google, as if you were trying to find a place to book. See which sites appear in the top 10 results. You need to make sure that your restaurant can be found and booked on these 10 sites.

You may be required to pay a listing fee with some; others you can join on a pay-for-performance model. Livebookings Network, for example, powers many of the booking engines on these sites and charges on a per-diner-seated model.

In summary, it’s important to realise that as we progress through the 21st Century, marketing is becoming much more about “pull” than “push”. Customers are telling us what they want and it’s our responsibility to respond to their needs, “pulling” them to our products rather than “pushing” advertising onto them. Tap into your consumers’ key words and you’ve the potential to increase the numbers of diners through your door.

Resources:

Google Insights For Search (beta): http://www.google.com/insights/search

Google Keyword Suggestion Tool: https://adwords.google.com/select/
KeywordToolExternal

Add your business to Google Local: http://www.google.com/local/add

Online bookings from Livebookings Network: http://www.livebookings.co.uk/join/

Prevent this from happening to your staff

- Carbon Dioxide, which is used as a dispense gas, is toxic. Small concentrations as low as 1.5% will adversely affect the human body - but how do you know if you have a leak?

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