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Surfing in public: Businesses create hotspots for tech-savvy customers

By SARAH BERKSHIRE
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ELIZABETHTOWN — Elizabethtown businesses are finding a sure way to become hotspots. It's a matter of installing a wireless Internet network.

Several Elizabethtown businesses are offering Wi-Fi. Business owners and managers said the technology has increased traffic and proven itself to be a must-have for some customers.

Some pharmaceutical salespeople have become regulars at Arnold's Coffee Café on Ring Road, where they can eat lunch in front of their laptops. Travelers who often find hotspots online before a road trip pop into Backstage Café on Mulberry Street to check e-mail. And one Panera Bread customer comes in nearly every night to work on his dissertation.

"It's extremely important to our customers," said Archie Karel, who oversees Panera Bread stores including the location near Towne Mall in Elizabethtown.

The Wi-Fi technology allows customers to surf the Internet without wires. Newer laptops come with the required wireless network card, said Michael Ramage of ConnectKentucky, a nonprofit agency working to increase broadband access throughout the state. The card enables the computer to detect and connect to the establishment's wireless connection.

The area served is called a hotspot. It might be the dining area of a restaurant or the entire building and the parking lot.

Arnold's Coffee Café began offering free wireless internet access in early 2003, said owner Arnold Myers. The store also offers wired Internet access.

He's not sure if the access had a measurable impact on his bottom line, but it's good for business.



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Aaron Critchelov uses the wireless internet connection to look up information on his laptop computer at Panera Bread recently while on his lunch break.

The café definitely has regular paying customers who use it. Though other users who aren't eating or sipping coffee occasionally set up at large tables during the lunch rush, Myers said, he wouldn't give up his hotspot status.

"It lends to the ambience of the business and it lends to customer satisfaction," he said.

Backstage Café added free Wi-Fi about a year ago, said co-owner Carla Riggs-Hall. She thinks it was a solid business move, she said, noting that selling 10 cups of coffee covers the bill.

There are more travelers than locals who use the Wi-Fi at Backstage Café, she said. (Hotspots are listed on Web sites such as www.jiwire.com.)

It seems many users come in search of a quiet place, she said.

"They know we'll leave them alone, but there's conversation if they want it. But if they're at home, they know the phone will ring off the hook," Riggs-Hall said.

Karel of Panera said free Wi-Fi has been great for what he called "chill business," which happens during the traditional lull between meal rushes.

Friday, during the chill, Aaron Critchelow used Panera's Wi-Fi while on a break from his job at Bluegrass Cellular. Critchelow, who doesn't have access at home and uses Wi-Fi in public places about once per week, was online for updates for his laptop.

"It's real convenient if you don't have Internet access at home," the Leitchfield resident said.

Elsewhere, some McDonald's restaurants have added Wi-Fi to the menu. Three Elizabethtown locations offer it for a fee.

Ramage thinks businesses can use wireless to distinguish themselves and expects public Wi-Fi to become increasingly popular.

"People are still using it more and more," he said. "Even though it's been around for a while, it's still a growing technology and will be at least for as far as I can see."

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