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## TECH VIEW

# Some businesses see value in Wi-Fi connectivity

[How to be Wi-Fi friendly](#)

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By Kiman Wong

If you've been following this column lately, you know we've been discussing Wi-Fi hot spots during the last few weeks.

These provide access to the Internet for Wi-Fi-enabled laptops or PDAs so you can surf the Net or download your e-mail while you're on the road.

Wi-Fi hot spots are beginning to pop up on Oahu and the neighbor islands - at airports, coffee shops and bookstores. What do they all have in common? Each of those businesses has decided that offering wireless public Internet access is a smart decision -- whether free of charge or for a fee.

In our decidedly unscientific survey, there's no consensus whether turning your business into a hot spot can actually add to the bottom line. Some businesses owners felt confident that Wi-Fi is bringing in more customers who stay longer and spend more money. Others weren't so sure.

The obvious question is this: Why bother with the expense and effort of setting up a hot spot?

The consensus among people we spoke to was that wireless service definitely added value, if not cache. The adjective we heard most often from customers who used hot spots was that they were "cool."

My belief is that even if you aren't able to quantify making even an additional nickel in profits by providing wireless service, you'll still gain something from becoming a hot spot.

Liz Schwartz, manager at Coffee Talk on Waiialae Avenue, said customers who use the store's wireless connection were likely to purchase more coffee and pastries.

Wi-Fi users tend to stay longer and often show up at all hours.

"There's no question in my mind that this has helped improve my business," Schwartz said.

Jaydence Goya, marketing coordinator at Kahala Mall, which operates two wireless hot spots, also said she believes providing wireless access is a good idea.

"We think the merchants are benefiting from this service," she said.

"People may be extending their shopping trips by checking their e-mail or having a meeting."

Naturally, not every business is going to benefit. High-end restaurants that depend on a high turnover of patrons aren't necessarily going to want people hanging around longer than they have to. However, businesses that want to keep customers at their tables, knowing they'll act as magnets to bring in more business, and might actually order more food and drink every once in a while, might sell enough to justify the wireless service.

Then there's the competition to think about. If one of your competitors offers Wi-Fi connectivity, it's a safe bet customers are more likely to hang out if they can wirelessly access the Internet. If you don't offer this service, they'll visit your competitor who does.

The good news is that there is no risk and little expense to setting up a hot spot properly. Gordon Bruce, director of marketing and sales for PauSpam, said, "You'll need to set up your access point in a manner that that it doesn't pose a risk to your internal network."

He said he believes business owners are "certainly not going to drive new customers away with wireless connectivity. On the contrary, you might consider it adding value and creating a new loyalty factor."

The gear you'll need to set up a hot spot costs no more than a few hundred dollars, plus the cost of "business-class" broadband DSL or cable modem access -- something you might already have.

However, make sure that your ISP agreement allows you to sell or share your Internet access.

An argument can be made that Wi-Fi freeloaders could flock to stores with

free access, buy very little and take up space all day. Businesses we spoke to didn't find that to be the case.

So where to begin? There are several options to consider.

- >> You can do it yourself.
- >> You can purchase a turnkey solution, known as a "hot spot in a box."
- >> You can hire an IT consultant who specializes in hot spots to install and maintain your gear.

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## **How to make your business Wi-Fi friendly**

Setting up a hot spot is not a big deal, but turning your business into a popular Wi-Fi hangout takes some homework. Here are some tips on how to make it happen:

>> Promote! Promote! Promote! Publicize your new services in house and externally. Send a press release to the daily papers, take out ads, e-mail your customers, put up signs in your shop and do all you can to let people know the service exists. Once people are inside your place of business, tell them (through signage) how to get access.

>> Offer a laptop-friendly environment. If customers show up with a laptop, provide an ergonomically friendly place to sit and a large enough space to accommodate their machines. If possible, give them electrical outlets. This doesn't mean you'll have to rewire the place. Run down to the hardware store, buy a few power strips and put them in lesser-used nooks.

>> List yourself in hot spots directories such as

hawaiihotspots.com and JiWire.com. Simply e-mail them and that will do it.

>> Provide customer service. Make sure your employees know enough to help customers get online. Another idea is to print up cards with basic instructions and ways to troubleshoot any potential problems.

>> Think about providing a free computer. This will both act as an advertisement (people will wonder what the computer is doing there) and allow visitors without a laptop to grab their mail.

>> Reduce interference from other electronic devices. If you already have 2.4 GHz cordless phones at your establishment, bring them home and buy a 900 MHz phone instead. If you use a microwave oven, keep it far from your access point. Both these devices use the 2.4 GHz band and are frequent sources of interference with Wi-Fi (which also uses the 2.4 GHz band).

>> Watch out for spammers. You have enough to worry about (like your P&L!). However, Gordon Bruce, director of marketing and sales for PauSpam, suggests if you offer a free hot spot, "be forewarned that spammers may want to hijack your service." Bruce strongly suggests that you talk to your hot spot consultant about monitoring user activity to avoid this nightmare.

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