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Online Reservation Systems Roll Out New Features to Help Wineries Navigate the COVID Era

With appointments required, tasting room capacities reduced and new safety protocols in place, reservation systems are more important than ever.

Jess Lander

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THOUGH MANY WINERIES HAVE been given the go-ahead to reopen to visitors after months of shutdown due to COVID-19, they are now operating in a complicated new world of ever-changing guidelines meant to ensure guest and employee safety. One of the biggest changes: most are now open by appointment only.

This sudden shift has made the use of a reliable and complex reservation system more vital than ever. "Any reservation system in the COVID era is going to be really important," said Anthony Harvell, director of sales and operations at William Chris Vineyards in Hye, Texas. "Every state has its own regulations, so we need the tools to properly manage the number of people coming through."

The top reservation platforms—from third-party providers, like Tock and CellarPass, to options under existing point-of-sale and e-commerce platforms, like Commerce7—have been working tirelessly to meet wineries' newfound needs. When the virus first struck, they jumped to add pick-up and delivery options and then the ability to reserve spots in virtual tastings. "COVID-19 prompted a ton of changes. Initially, everyone wanted to know how to do better at e-commerce, but now our number-one support questions are about reservations," said Andrew Kamphuis, president of Commerce7. "We have a ton of customers that never did reservations before and are suddenly interested."

The primary focus of reservation systems today is to help tasting rooms operate as efficiently as possible under strict safety protocols. New features help wineries navigate reduced capacities, social distancing, guest accountability and liability concerns.

Two Types of Reservation Systems

Before diving into the latest feature roll-outs, it's important to understand that reservation systems fall into two main categories. They are either offered as part of an e-commerce and POS software, like Commerce7 and Vines OS, or they are a third-party platform, like Tock, CellarPass and OpenTable. The third-party platforms generally offer more robust features, like SMS text confirmation, upselling, dynamic pricing and waitlists. They operate distinctly as reservation systems and thus are constantly adapting to the needs of the industry and rolling out new add-ons, but they are also more difficult to integrate with a winery's CRM and POS systems (each platform has varying integration capabilities).

While software programs like Commerce7 and Vines OS may be more basic, they offer a seamless, all-in-one package, and users don't have to pay an additional fee to use the reservation system. "You're already paying for it, your staff is familiar with it, and you're avoiding having to buy another piece of software that you have to train staff on," said Susanne Bullock, marketing manager of August Hill Winery in Utica, Illinois. August Hill uses Vines OS, which launched its new POS platform during the pandemic. "There are so many changes right now, and new software is kind of the last thing that you need."

Harvell recently switched William Chris Vineyards from Tock to Commerce7; and while he admits to missing some of Tock's functionality—the supplements feature, for example, brought in $15,000 to $20,000 of additional revenue a month—integration was ultimately his priority. "The most important thing is the seamless integration with our POS and member database," he said. "When using separate systems, we'd have to re-upload our member database every week."

Moreover, reservations made through systems like Commerce7 and Vines OS take place natively on the winery website, whereas third-party platforms take visitors away from the winery site to their respective websites. These providers operate like marketplaces: travelers can explore an array of winery experiences in each region, which is a great tool to attract new visitors. Yet the downside of this presentation is that it can also cause a winery to lose out on a booking if consumers see something else they like better. "It was also important for us to keep them on our website," Harvell added. "When you go outside, you're opening them up to a whole new world of things."

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Online Reservation Systems Roll Out New Features to Help Wineries Navigate the COVID Era

Limited Reservations

Per local mandates, wineries are now operating at reduced capacities—in some cases, they can only operate outdoors—and are required to limit the number of reservations they can take. To resolve this issue, OpenTable rolled out the ability to set a maximum number of people, not just parties. "If you can only have 25 or 50 percent of your normal capacity, they have basically provided a feature where you can set how many guests you can have in the winery at one time. It will actually limit how many people can reserve, regardless of how many tables you have," said John Locher, general manager and executive chef of Mayo Family Winery in Glen Ellen, Calif.

In response to many of its clients who are suddenly requiring reservations, even for a standard bar tasting, Commerce7 added communal reservations to its platform: bookings for bars or long tables can be maxed out at a certain number of people. It's a feature that William Chris Vineyards has been using a lot since reopening, as 50 percent of their tastings are bar-based. Vines OS also launched the ability to limit reservations by the number of tables available and even categorize tables, like vineyard view or vineyard terrace.

For Creeks Edge Winery in Lovettsville, Virginia, which has switched to reservation-only for the first time ever, this has been a game changer. General manager Alex Jeffries said that pre-COVID, a lot of their reservations were walk-ins, by phone or via a form on their website, and he had to manage everything by hand in a calendar. "We know we can hold 65 people, but we only have a certain number of tables," he said. "Whether it's a party of two, four or six people, we now know how many tables we have available."

Many third-party platforms also have a waitlist feature to help clients avoid going over capacity and overcrowding in a waiting area. Like CellarPass, Tock offers a few variations of waitlists but, most recently, they added one for walk-ins, which receive a text notifying them if there's a table ready within 30 to 45 minutes.

Floor Plan Updates

The intention behind limited capacities is to allow for social distancing. Wineries need to keep each party a minimum of 6 feet apart from others, which can make the tasting room table setup very challenging. Tock recently introduced real-time modifications to the floor plan to make rearranging on the fly easier. "We ended up moving our setup multiple times last week, but you can literally pick up and drag a table and move it elsewhere," said Chelsea O'Grady, DTC director at Booker Winery in Paso Robles. "If you're in the thick of it and the change needs to be made, you might not have the opportunity to convey that verbally to the team; but when you update on Tock, it's real-time. You know your team is checking Tock routinely, so they'll see that change populated there. It relieves communication on the floor."

This feature also assists with managing table turnover, for wineries now need to build in enough time to sanitize tables between seatings. "It was something we never really watched carefully before as we weren't reservation required. We had set a 30-minute window in between each seating for cleaning and to give us a buffer if people showed up late or stayed late," explained Tanya Zumach, digital strategy manager of Argyle Winery in Dundee, Oregon. Tock, she said, provides hourly insights on how long tables stay, tracked by day of the week, time of day and party size, so that they can make any necessary adjustments.

Liability Protection

In June, CellarPass was the first reservation platform to develop a feature that would help wineries protect themselves from liability in the COVID-19 era. Subscribers of CellarPass' Professional Plan now have the option to require guests to fill out a COVID-19 health survey and/or a liability waiver at the

time of reservation, an add-on that took roughly 300 hours of development time, according to CellarPass co-founder Jonathan Elliman.

The system also requests the names of all members of the party for contact tracing and sends each of them the survey and waiver to sign as well. "With these new tools for health surveys and liability waivers at the time of the appointment online, it not only creates a safer environment for all involved, it also lets us focus more on hospitality and service when our guests arrive for their appointment," said Stefanie Longton, general manager of Bennett Lane Winery in Calistoga.

Once the survey is filled out, it's good for 15 days and applies to all CellarPass reservations that require it so that the user can book multiple tasting experiences within a two-week period and only fill it out once. CellarPass also extended its own HIPAA compliance to the survey and waivers, taking that burden off the wineries.

Contactless Payment

The less physical contact between guests and employees, the better. Most of the reservation platforms now offer pre-payment options for contactless payment; and while CellarPass and Tock had this capability for years, OpenTable added this feature in May at the same time it announced its restaurant-focused platform was now open to wineries. Integrated platforms, like Vines OS and Commerce7, take this one step further as wineries can save a credit card on file at the time of reservation. If additional purchases are made during the visit, there's no need to handle cash or credit cards.

An added benefit of contactless pre-payment is guest accountability and a reduction in no-shows. Through Vines OS, Creeks Edge Winery is charging a $5 deposit for reservations, which goes towards a visitor's final bill. Payments through CellarPass are processed at the winery's discretion, whether it's right away, 48 hours ahead of the booking or the day of. On Tock, each winery can choose how it wants to handle cancellations or no-shows, and that policy can vary per experience or even by day of the week and time of reservation, meaning the winery can enforce a stricter policy on busy days and be more flexible on slower days. "As things have become more uncertain and the number of guests that we're now allowed to have has decreased, the security of those reservations becomes even more crucial," said Dallas Brennan, VP of direct sales at John Anthony Family of Wines in Napa, which uses Tock.

Third-Party Integration

For wineries torn between a feature-heavy third-party platform and one that syncs up with all of their important data in one place, there is a compromise.

Most third-party platforms offer integration with other POS and CRM systems. CellarPass and OpenTable both offer integration with a wide array of systems. CellarPass has partnered with vinSUITE, AMS and OrderPort, to name a few, while the majority of OpenTable's integrations are currently with restaurant systems, like Venga, POSitouch, Squirrel and Toast. Tock has an exclusive partnership with WineDirect, giving the winery "full visibility into the relationship with the customer," said Adrienne Stillman, marketing director of WineDirect. "WineDirect passes all of the information back to Tock, such as their purchase history and if this person is a wine club member." WBM

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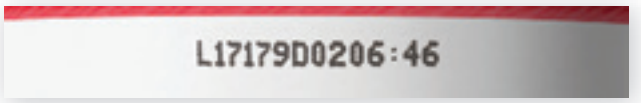

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