

Smile, you're on a bar Webcam

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Around the United States, bars and clubs are tapping the Internet to let people know when they're hopping -- or dreadfully quiet. Will this idea catch on in Australia?

On a recent Friday evening at the Key West bar Hog's Breath, Mike Murphy was enjoying a beer and potato skins in the company of his wife and friends.

Though not on reality television, his evening was broadcast online from the Florida bar's live Webcam, which showed the group occasionally waving to their grandkids at home in Indianapolis.

Reached via the bar's manager, Murphy talked to CNET News.com while still on camera: "We're down here on vacation and we called and told their parents to go online because the grandkids were missing us. But by the end of it, the grandmas were all crying."

Bar Webcams are a growing phenomenon in cities like Boston, Denver, Chicago, San Diego, Minneapolis, and even tourist spots like Key West. Of course, Webcams have been around for a long time. Remember JenniCam in the late '90s -- the girl who broadcast her every move inside a dorm room via the Web? Fast forward eight years and restaurants like the Hog's Breath are either taking the initiative to promote themselves via Web cameras or they're being recruited by several new bar promoters.

The idea is simple: with a Webcam installed in a bar or restaurant, potential customers can call up the live video stream online or by mobile phone so they can survey the crowd before venturing out. People who want a quiet night can scout for a bar with a mellow scene, and those who want a lively night can look for the crowds. (Webcam bar promoters say it's typically a 50-50 split between the two camps.)

"When you go out, you want to know if it's busy or not. The camera's not made to spy on anyone or be incriminating," said Jen Renwick, a bartender at Park Place, a bar in Minnesota that set up two Webcams in recent months in partnership with a new company called Barseenlive. She said a couple of people have complained about privacy, but the majority of the response has been positive.

For the promoters, the online traffic equals money. Relatively new services like Barmigo and Barseenlive sell flat-rate subscriptions to the bars for licensing the Webcams and promoting their sites, and other upstarts like Baroptic.com are seeking to sell advertisements to liquor companies like Coors and Bacardi to run against those video streams. The bar promoters won't disclose how much they are charging bars for the service, but at least one person said it can be as much as US\$500 a month.

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-- Leslie Criger, manager, Alice Cooperstown

As to questions of privacy, bar promoters say the live video typically isn't a clear picture, doesn't include audio and isn't recorded, so it's not archived. "In terms of legality, if you're in a public place, I can take your picture," said Jesse Newsome, founder and head of "hiring and firing" at Barmigo, based in Phoenix, Ariz.

"Our response is: If your wife or husband has enough suspicions to watch us, then they're going to drive down there and walk in on you," Newsome said.

Alice Cooperstown, a restaurant owned by rock star Alice Cooper in downtown Phoenix, put up two Webcams -- one inside the restaurant and another above the nightclub stage -- last year through a deal with Barmigo. (They're typically on all day until 12:30 a.m. on weekends.)

It's been a big hit with tourists, the restaurant's biggest constituency, said Leslie Criger, restaurant manager. People will even sit at the tables directly in front of the cameras, regardless of whether someone is serving those tables. "They'll say, 'No, no, can we sit here because our family is watching us from New Jersey,'" Criger said.

Conversely, people have been known to hide from the Webcams at times when they're at the restaurant with someone they shouldn't be. But Criger said that you can't really tell who's who because it's not a clear image, unless it's the first couple of tables in front of the camera. Alice Cooperstown, for example, tells customers that they're being watched with a sign on the wall.

Barmigo, which launched in November 2005, sets up Webcams at bars and restaurants in Phoenix, including Alice Cooperstown. Newsome said the company was about to start Barmigo Boston, when the ailing economy in Arizona dampened his business. Right now, his cameras are in only three bars in Arizona, so Newsome augments his business by taking event requests. He would not disclose how much he charges bars monthly for the service, but his company will set up Webcams at events like a local beer festival, for a fee starting at US\$1,500. He said he's also talking to major restaurant chains that are interested in setting up Webcams. People are also increasingly interested in streaming their wedding live to relatives overseas, Newsome said.

Of course, live Webcams aren't just limited to bars, restaurants and adult content. Sites like Surfwatch.com let surfers get a preview of the local waves before leaving the house. [EarthCam](#), an 11-year-old site, has set up several thousand Webcams around the world so that people can see natural wonders like Yosemite National Park. The company is even venturing into hot spots like poolside at the Hard Rock Hotel in Las Vegas, according to Justin Camerlengo, marketing director of EarthCam.

It's no wonder. Setting up a Webcam is as easy as visiting a Best Buy and picking out a US\$129 wireless camera. What's changed in recent years is that most bars and restaurants now have a Web page, or are at least wired to the Internet. The cost of bandwidth and the tools to program a Web site are also less expensive, making it easier for companies like Baroptic and Barmigo.

Joseph Salvador, founder of Colorado-based Baroptic, said he thought of the idea three years ago when he drove an hour from Cape Cod, Mass., to a club in Boston with his girlfriend, only to find the place was near-empty. He started the business a year later selling monthly subscriptions to bars in Boston and Denver, but he recently changed his business model to offer the service free to bar owners, who are typically reluctant to spend the money anyway. He plans to build a directory of the top 100 bars across the country and sell 10-second video ads that air before the live streams. (He did not disclose how much the video ads would cost.)

So far, Salvador has Webcams in 15 bars in cities like Denver and Boston, but he has aggressive plans to expand to 200 bars in 15 cities over the next year and a half. With that in mind, he's looking to fund his company, which is not yet profitable. Last year, two of his Webcams -- at Boston's Cask'n Flagon and Denver's Jackson's Sports Rock -- had a face-off during the World Series between the Boston Red Sox and the Colorado Rockies. (His site on Myspace has more than 4,000 friends.)

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-- Charles Golvin, principal analyst, Forrester Research

"We don't want to have Joe's bar in here. We want the top bars," Salvador said. "We're building a broadcast network where we can play commercials," he said.

"Give it a couple more years, and every single one of these clubs will be using live video or video in some sense to promote themselves," he added.

Barseenlive, a directory of bars in Minneapolis, was conceived by three friends who decided at a happy hour that it would be ideal to be able to look up online what the crowd was like at the next bar they wanted to go to. After two years developing the concept, Barseenlive launched with its first bar in Minneapolis last summer, according to co-founder Jon Elizondeal.

Barseenlive runs a dedicated server for the cameras, which span 14 bars around the area, said co-founder Damian Jelich. The company's servers can support around 100 people watching the Webcams, but when it gets to the low thousands the stream will cut out, he said.

Not a perfect business

Although it makes money by subscriptions, Barseenlive is not profitable yet. Its customers pay a monthly subscription for use of the Webcams and for a listing on its bar and restaurant directory. The company would not say how much it charges, but others in the industry say it can cost about US\$500 a month. Barseenlive also plans to start selling more advertising on the site, next to video feeds. It wouldn't accept ads for other bars, but it would feature alcohol distributors.

It's not a perfect business. Despite lower costs of technology and bandwidth, it can be expensive to scale many Webcams with heavy traffic. It's also not easy for these companies to persuade bar and restaurant owners to sign on to the service when budgets in that business can be tight. Other complaints surround the privacy of patrons or the workers at bars and restaurants.

"If you're a bar owner, would you really want this if things aren't going so well? Or it could give your employees the sense that they're being watched by you," said Charles Golvin, principal analyst at Forrester Research. He did say he could also see the upside to it.

Bill Ashton, owner of Jersey's, a 6-year-old blue-collar bar in a suburb of St. Paul, Minn., started testing the Web cameras six months ago. He views it as a new form of advertising because traditional print and broadcast aren't working for him as well as the bar's follow-up on MySpace.

"One good thing is that you can't tell who the people are," Ashton said. "You just never know, you don't want to get anyone in trouble being where they're not supposed to."

Bar owners have also expressed concern over the possibility that the liquor board could watch the bar staff from their office and come in and write tickets. Stranger things have happened.

Newsome said a woman once walked up to the camera bearing a piece of paper with a phone number, then her friend ran over and tackled her. Barmigo also gets e-mails like: "Who was the girl in the red dress last night, what's her e-mail, and can I talk to her?"