Coffee, with a laptop and an extra jolt of Wi-Fi: Cafes struggle with how to stay a draw for all, not just tech users.
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Nick Bimmerle was driving by his Smyrna coffee shop at 1 a.m. one morning when he discovered several cars in the parking lot. The cafe was long closed, yet there they were, Internet junkies hovering over their laptops, slurping up the cafe's free Wi-Fi.

In that moment, Bimmerle, owner of Rev Coffee, realized the world of coffeehouses had fundamentally changed. It's not just about good coffee and good conversation anymore. For many customers, java is down on the list of draws, behind the availability of a Wi-Fi connection, an electrical outlet and a comfortable place to set up their laptop.

Cafes have evolved into hyper-caffeinated portable offices, luring laptop-carrying customers seeking a place to camp out --- sometimes for hours --- to check e-mail, work on a project, surf the Web or write the next great American novel. What were once destinations for music, poetry and lively debate are often now more like college computer labs.

This change on the leisure landscape poses challenges not just for cafe owners, but for customers who seek something other than a remote office in their coffeehouse experience.

It's not a quite a revolution, but some coffeehouses, both locally and nationally, are instituting changes. They want to remain profitable during the digital age, but they also want to ensure that the cafe still serves as an escape from technology as well.

Since his early morning drive-by about a year ago, Bimmerle has made one modest change at Rev Coffee: adding a password requirement for those using his Wi-Fi connection (printed on every receipt). But otherwise he embraces those with laptops.

But some other establishments are imposing restrictions on Wi-Fi use, and even covering up outlets to keep laptop users from plugging in.

At the bustling Dancing Goats cafe in Decatur, for instance, a few outlets have been discreetly covered and signs ask laptop users to share tables and make space for other customers. Daniel Thompson, coffee bar manager, said creating designated spaces for laptops was necessary because the cafe would get so full that some customers couldn't find an open seat.

At many Panera bakery cafes, there is now a 30-minute limit on Wi-Fi use during busy lunch periods (generally 11:30 to 1:30). In some Panera shops, the 30-minute limit is monitored by staff or the Wi-Fi connection ends automatically.

Starbucks stores, meanwhile, have gone in the other direction. Once limiting Wi-Fi use to two hours, the coffee giant started offering unlimited access to customers last year.

Julian Diaz, chairman of the real estate department at Georgia State University, believes coffee shops are facing a real dilemma --- the need to attract customers while not making them feel so comfortable that they settle in, spend little and slow business significantly.

'No turning back'
Gene Kansas, who helps develop and design coffee shops, is a partner in a soon-to-open Octane cafe in the Bank of America Plaza. He said his new cafe will feature a coffee bar that will make it easy to grab a quick jolt of java, as well as a "coffee rail" featuring pendant lighting, coffee served in porcelain cups and a vibe he hopes encourages clients to occasionally unplug and savor a face-to-face encounter along with their espresso.

Still, he believes the modern-day coffeehouse must always offer free-flowing and easy access to Wi-Fi.
"You've got to have the Wi-Fi, and it has to be free and easy to plug into. If not, it would be like going to a Mexican restaurant and being charged a $1 for chips and salsa," Kansas said. "People wouldn't stand for it. Now, if we were always charged for it, then it would be fine. But there's no turning back. The same goes for Wi-Fi."

And electrical power, apparently. The 900-square-foot cafe will have multiple electric outlets. "Anywhere you sit down, you'll be able to plug in," he said.

**Lost among laptops**

At Rev Coffee on a recent afternoon, Jonathan Guerzon, a freelance graphic artist who lives in Smyrna, settles in. He calls this place "his home away from home."

He has visited other cafes but likes this one the best --- it's not too hectic, he explains, not too crowded, just right. He gets a bold brew of the day, adds a couple of teaspoons of sugar and finds his spot. At home, he said, there are too many distractions to stay on task. But here, he can get totally absorbed in a design project.

"Five hours can go by without even knowing it," he said.

Nydia Tisdale of Roswell enjoys cafes with charm and character, lively conversation, and not dominated by computers. One of her favorites is Land of a Thousand Hills in Roswell because it's in an old house with lots of rooms and lots of conversations going on.

"I go to a cafe to get away from my computer," she said. "I remember once going to a Starbucks and I saw several laptops and it seemed a little discouraging. I watched them and they would sometimes glance when the door opened, but they were mostly absorbed in their own little world of laptops.

"It's nice to be among people talking and interacting, and when that's happening at coffeehouses, you can get that energy. When it's just laptops, I think you do lose something."

Yet Karen Akridge, "bright ideas coordinator" of Land of a Thousand Hills's three coffee shops, said she doesn't see laptops sucking the energy out of cafes, and she has seen reasons why keeping laptop users in the shop all day makes sense. After seeing customers with laptops spend hours there but leave to get a bite to eat, the shops began offering sandwiches and other items to keep them tapping where they are.

'Just buy something'

Back at Rev Coffee, owner Bimmerle also said he doesn't mind if customers take refuge at his coffee shop; he also offers eggs and sandwiches, too.

"I embrace the laptops," he said. "And I don't care if you are here all day, but if you are here for four hours, I just ask you buy something, even if it's a Coke for $1."

Still, said the easygoing coffee shop owner, "I just let it ride."

He pointed to a recent example of one customer who whiled away the day at a table sipping a cup of coffee. Then he returned the next day with a group of co-workers for lunch.

Bimmerle works hard at making his cafe a place for many things. He has open-mic sessions twice a week, poetry reading, comedy sketch nights. There are oversized chairs and comfy couches. But the ones that fill up first are the repurposed church pews and wooden tables.

Sure, they're funky and cool, but there are also electric outlets right underneath the pews.

Sometimes he looks out onto the maze of computers being operated and feels like he needs to be quiet.

"But we can't," he said of his staff. "We are all too hyped up on caffeine."