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Free Wi-Fi

Free wireless Internet access lures customers to restaurants, hotels and small airports.

Free hot spots pay dividends

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Sidebar: Cities Back Free Wi-Fi Hot Zones

Story by Bob Brewin

OCTOBER 20, 2003 ([COMPUTERWORLD](#)) - While restaurant and hotel chains plan to use free Wi-Fi hot spots to serve customers within their establishments, cities and community development organizations have adopted the technology to create "hot zones" that can cover downtown areas ranging from blocks to miles.

Cleveland has what is probably the most ambitious free Wi-Fi project in the country. This month the [OneCleveland](#) project, backed by Case Western Reserve University, launched a 1-square-mile free Wi-Fi hot zone in the city's University Circle area. The network consists of 1,230 Cisco Systems Inc. Aironet 1200 series access points connected to a Gigabit Ethernet backbone.

Lev Gonick, CIO at Case Western, says that by next fall he expects OneCleveland to offer free Wi-Fi access over a 10-square-mile area, with 2,600 access points.

The city of [Long Beach, Calif.](#), launched a hot zone in January that covers four square blocks to attract new business, says Chet Yoshizaki, the city's economic development manager. The hot zone covers about 30 businesses, including a number of restaurants. To ensure that surfers don't abuse the system and take up a restaurant table too long, Yoshizaki says, the network is "designed to kick users off after an hour."

Meanwhile, the [Downtown Alliance](#), a business development group in lower Manhattan, offers free Wi-Fi service via seven hot spots that cover a number of office building and parks, including City Hall Park and Bowling Green Park, at the southernmost tip of Manhattan.

Jordan Silbert, director of rebuilding initiatives for the alliance, says the free Wi-Fi service is designed to show that downtown Manhattan -- devastated by the 9/11 disaster -- is "a more livable and dynamic place" than nearby New Jersey locations, which are trying to lure financial institutions away from New York.

The alliance also uses the hot spots to promote downtown retailers and cultural events, Silbert says. When users access the network, they're directed to a splash page that provides a wealth of location-based information. It's "an innovative way to market" downtown attractions, Silbert says.

Anthony Townsend, a spokesman for [NYC Wireless](#), the nonprofit organization that supplies the Wi-Fi service to the Downtown Alliance, says the growth in community- and business-backed free Wi-Fi sounds the death knell of paid Wi-Fi service. The paid model will probably survive in niche markets with captive users, such as high-end hotels and hub airports, he says. But free Wi-Fi -- funded as an economic development tool or as a customer amenity -- will dominate, Townsend predicts.

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