

## Refill app lets users buy drinks with tap of phone



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Anthony Reynolds, left, chief marketing officer of Refill, and Oliver Convertini, chief operating officer of the company, show off some of the products that Refill will deliver. With a tap of an app, customers can order beer, wine and cocktails for delivery. [Brooke LaValley/Columbus Dispatch]

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The Columbus Dispatch

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Two years ago, if you wanted a beer, you had to go to a store, brewery or a bar. So much has changed.

Now, alcoholic beverages have joined restaurant food and groceries as items that can be brought to your door, and some central Ohio men are central characters in the phenomenon locally.

Anthony Reynolds and Josh Walker, who were working at JPMorgan Chase in 2015, saw a need and decided to wade into the "bring-it-to-me" economy.

Refill was born one day at work. Their mobile app takes orders and payments for alcohol, then links up with liquor stores to provide delivery.

The former U.S. Air Force intelligence officers were batting around ideas about starting a company, and one of their ideas was a riff on Uber, the ride-sharing company that has blown up the taxi industry.

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"You can get a car anywhere. I wonder what else you can get?" Reynolds said, recalling the conversation. "You can get food. Can you get alcohol? No, not really."

At that time, East Coast-based alcohol delivery outfit Drizly had yet to expand into Ohio, and Amazon's Prime Now was nowhere near Ohio.

The lack of local competition then spurred Reynolds and Walker to develop their idea.

They found a willing market.

Refill launched in Columbus in summer 2015, and this year started servicing Cleveland. Cincinnati is next and parts beyond Ohio are well within sight, Walker said.

The company has received interest from people in a host of cities, including Nashville, Houston and Miami.

The men also have plans that go beyond hauling a case of beer to someone's front door.

They are testing the app in restaurants, at events, arenas and other locations where products are consumed on site. Any venue where food or drinks are ordered is a market for Refill.

## **'Bring it to me'**

The hot start for Refill is thanks to a rising consumer base that has embraced delivery services — for food, packaged goods, just about anything.

"From a growth standpoint, delivery is going to be a huge opportunity," said Tim Powell, vice president and senior analyst for Q1 Consulting in Chicago. "It is set to take off."

Younger consumers are driving much of the growth of delivery as they have been raised with smartphones and a fleet of apps from which they can order and pay to avoid standing in lines, battling traffic and handling cash.

"They want it — and they want it now," Powell said. "It is the new paradigm everyone is trying to adjust to."

Reynolds, 28, grew up in Columbus and graduated from Bishop Hartley High School and Ohio State University. Walker, 35, is from Youngstown and went to Wright State University. Neither had much experience in developing apps, so they enlisted one of Walker's cousins.

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"We knew we needed something that looked good for people to put their credit-card info in it," Walker said.

They found partners in liquor stores across Columbus. Many of them have been looking for ways to tap into delivery services as a way to capture new customers.

"It's bringing in sales," said Sidhu Gursej, owner of Arena Wine and Spirits in the Arena District. "The people who order on the app are not people who would come in here normally."

Gursej estimated that 10 percent to 15 percent of his total sales come through the Refill app. (A service called Stripe handles the payment aspect.)

## Tap to table

Other Columbus business owners see opportunities for Refill as well.

Jeff Parenteau, owner of the Bogey Inn in Dublin and Imperial Renovations & Designs, which often works with Short North restaurant and bar developer Chris Corso, sees Refill as a way to speed up service and make transactions simpler.

No more waiting for a bartender's attention or for your server to find their way back to your table. The app let users place an order directly to the individual responsible for mixing the drink or pouring the wine. It handles paying for the drink as well, allowing customers to bypass another human interaction. Another time savings.

Parenteau tested the app at the Bogey Inn during its busiest time, the Memorial Tournament.

"People liked it," Parenteau said. "When you told people they didn't have to wait in line (for a drink), their eyes widened, they were like, 'Really? All I have to do is push that button?'"

Refill might become the ordering platform for Corso's next concept, the Short North Food Hall, where customers could order from four different kitchens and a single central bar.

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The road for delivery services isn't a superhighway yet. There are plenty of potholes.

According to Mintel, a marketing research firm, consumers between the ages of 18 to 24 are the most frequent users of delivery services. But they also tend to have the lowest disposable incomes.

The tide is turning, though.

Last year was the year of bring-you-own-bottle, according to a report by Foursquare, a mobile app that tracks consumer locations and other data.

Traffic in liquor stores was up 20 percent last year over 2015, while overall bar traffic rose just 2 percent, according to the report. Foursquare surmised that many consumers, particularly millennials, are opting to pick up alcohol, or have it delivered, and drink in their (or someone's) home.

"You can open your phone and do everything you need from your device," Powell said. "There is no question, there's a market for it."

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