Innovation Assignment – Changing the Full-Service Restaurant

According to the Nation's Restaurant News, in 2018, full-service restaurants in the United States have generated $274.8 billion in sales. (Ruggles) Working at a restaurant is not always an easy task; it can be demanding physically and mentally. 1 in 3 of these restaurants has a 20%; more alarming is that 12% of them suffer from over 40% turnover. (Klein) Part of these percentages may be associated with people choosing these jobs as temporary until they conclude their higher education. But in many cases, people are switching restaurants in hopes of finding better pay (or tips) and a better environment (less stress, less physical demands). There aren't exact numbers of the difference between turnovers in kitchen workers and servers, but from personal experience and talking with many restaurant owners, they have found it easier to maintain the kitchen staff for consistent for many years as opposed to servers.

To prevent confusion, I would like to familiarize the reader with a few terms:

- Full-service restaurant: a restaurant in which you are seated at a restaurant's dining area. All the service (food, drinks, recommendations) is brought to the guest's table. The customer orders at the comfort of their table. Dishes and waste are removed by the restaurant's staff.

- Server – also known as a waiter, their primary function is to take the order at the table and ensure customer satisfaction throughout the dining guest's experience at the restaurant. Depending on the restaurant's size, they may be responsible for bringing the food & drinks to the table and removing dishes from the table. But these duties are often given to food runners or bussers.

- POS System – Point of sale system, retail, and restaurants usually have computers in which any sales transactions are made. At full-service restaurants, servers use these to send a customer's order to the kitchen; the order remain open until the customer is ready to leave, as is it expected of the customer to consume more throughout their stay at the restaurant. (picture in the right for reference)

My innovation proposal is a way of reinventing the point of sales and how the customer interaction with a server will be. This innovation will make the job of a server easier and potentialize increased revenue for full-service restaurants. A less stressful workplace and one where they are likely to increase their tips can be a strong motive for more organizational commitment, causing less turnover for the restaurant.

I propose the use of an app on the customer's phone to place all orders. We'll call this app Sidekick; it's not replacing the server, but rather than that a tool to make their job easier. Sidekick is not only app, but a whole new process that changes how the server works.

The traditional way of ordering at a full-service restaurant has been a physical menu handed to the customer at the arrival. After the customer orders their food, these menus are taken back and reused by another customer later. It's not particularly sanitary, as its being touched by many hands throughout a single night. With the arrival of Covid-19, this becomes an even greater concern. It's time-consuming for employees to sanitize them, and according to their material, sanitizing will significantly increase their wear and tear. Disposable menus have been an interesting alternative since then. However, they are not feasible, and further distances us from the goal of becoming a more sustainable society. A more attractive approach has been QR codes at the table, that when scanned by the customer's phone, will lead them to an online menu.

Traditionally, after reading the menu, the customer tells the server their order. Ordering like this has one common problem. Humans are liable for making mistakes. A server may mishear the customer's order or even press the wrong button at the POS system. Another case is customers themselves incorrectly mentioning their order to the server. In this case, most customers never even realize their fault and blame their server for the problem, only discovered many minutes later when their wrong order arrives. These are undoubtedly frustrating and stressful experiences for both ends.

Some restaurants such as Applebee's and Outback already have touchscreen devices on their tables where a customer can order food from rather than speaking with their server. While this was also an innovative approach, it has too many cons:

- There are tacky.
- They take ample space off a table; in expensive real estate areas such as New York City, you're likely to encounter smaller tables as "every inch of the area counts." No wants an even tighter table.
- They're expensive and vulnerable to being damaged by careless customers.
- Customers make mistakes when ordering, leading to a frustrating dining experience.
- They eliminate human interaction. Unlike fast-food and fast-casual restaurants, human interaction with customers is still an essential touch in full-service restaurants. People don't dine there only for the food; they dine for the "experience."

Sidekick borrows ideas from previously mentioned concepts but integrates them into a better

experience for both the customer and the server. The guest uses a QR code at their table, leading them to the restaurant's menu at the app. From there, they may select their order, very similar to what is done in apps like Grubhub and UberEATS. They can customize the order and write observations. They will also see a picture of each item, improving their experience, and preventing uneventful surprises. However, the order is not immediately sent to the kitchen. The server with their portable electronic device is notified when everyone at the table has placed

their order. They come to the table and repeat the order to the customer; from there, they can either approve or edit the customer's order if required, and only then it gets sent to the kitchen. This substantially decreases the chance of mistakes from occurring. Mistakes in either part is a stressor to the server, something we're finding a way to reduce.

Whenever the customer feels like they need further assistance from a server, they can easily notify them through the app—no more need for awkward waving from a distance or begging a busser to call them. The app will also allow the customer to receive and pay the bill through their phone. Covid-19 is leading us to a society that is attempting to reduce points of contact between people. Therefore, this would further help do that by not having to hand credit cards or cash to the server. Another advantage would be to further advance into becoming paperless as paper receipts would not be necessary, reducing the restaurant's costs.

It's important to notice that the Sidekick process will also help the server save substantial time and be more productive. With everything done through a click of a device they are carrying, the server will be required to walk less throughout the shift. No more walking across the dining room to the POS system to send the order or to print a receipt! No professional research has been done on how much they walk. However, on the online forum Reddit, servers have commented on the issue. (Reddit) Using fitness workers, they have reported walking anywhere between 6-12 miles in a single shift. This certainly carries a physical toll on one's body. And double shifts are not uncommon in this industry. From personal experience, I can mention the knee pain you have by the time you arrive home from work.

The time-saving approach may allow servers to increase the number of tables they are responsible at a time. For example, if before a server would be responsible for 8 tables, they can now do 10. That's 20% more. A shift where five servers were necessary to take care of 40 tables will only now require 4, which means a reduced cost for the organization in terms of decreasing the number of employees needed. But in American restaurants where tipping is already a norm in our culture, this can be viewed as an added benefit to a server—doing 20% more tables than before also means making 20% more tips, a significant extrinsic motivator for servers.

Overall, Sidekick has the potential to be a strong innovator inside the full-service restaurant industry. It can help save time, reduce costs, increase organizational commitment, be more sustainable, and improve the dining experience. It does not eliminate the server from the job but instead keeps them as the guide for perfect dining experience.