WHITE PAPER

5 Tried-and-True Technologies that Improve Restaurant Operations

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With the rate at which technology is developing, nearly every day brings a new tool that promises to make it easier to manage a restaurant operation and improve profits.

A 2015 survey by point-of-sale providers indicates that technology does in fact have a direct impact on increased revenue for restaurants. According to the report, 67 percent of restaurant managers and owners said that technology such as mobile POS systems, accounting software, broadband and voice services, Wi-Fi and mobile apps was responsible for an increase in revenue. The survey also discovered that 35 percent of restaurants depended on technology more than they did the year before.

Often, though, those tools are pricey, and a problem with them can bring an operation to a screeching halt. Most of us have had to wait in line or been turned away from a business after being told, "Our computers are down."

While many of these new tools do deliver on their promise, there are plenty of applications based on existing technology that can help improve operations. Those technologies are in use precisely because they have an extensive history of reliability and dependability.

Because of the number of technological tools being unveiled these days, it can be easy to overlook some of those tried-and-true applications that can help provide better service and boost the bottom line.

Here are just a few of those applications:

Guest paging

Casual dining restaurants can easily manage a busy wait line by handing guests a pager, allowing them to get a drink in the bar without worrying about hearing their name called. A restaurant operator can avoid crowding in the order area by giving guests a pager to notify them when their food is ready.

"Having a paging system gives the guest the opportunity to relax, enjoy time with family and not have to worry about when their food will be ready," said David Futrell, who owns nine Fuddruckers locations in Texas and uses a guest paging solution from Addison, Texas-based Long Range Systems. "Also, with the loud music we play in our restaurants, customers don't have to worry about missing their name being called and can just rely on the pagers to alert them."

Staff paging

The same dependable technology used in guest paging systems can work on the other side of the menu as well. Instead of expeditors having to shout "Order up! Table 3!" to attract the attention of a food runner, staff can be issued a pager that the kitchen can use to alert them when an order is ready. That technology can come in particularly handy when the kitchen is re-making an order and time is of the essence.

And with managers often stretched thin trying to cover all facets of a restaurant operation, a pager can immediately alert them to an issue they need to handle.

Push-for-service

Anyone who's been to an old-style drive-in is familiar with the push-for-service buttons on the menu board. Guests pull into a parking spot, press the button on the board and communicate their order to someone inside the restaurant. A few minutes later, a server delivers that order to the car window.

Today, those systems are being integrated with paging technology to perform the same function without the need for a hard-wired connection.

Such a system helps eliminate the frustration on the part of guests trying to flag down a server, and are great for large settings where a table might be out of view of the counter or hostess stand. In addition, those systems can help re-create that atmosphere of the drive-in, providing guests with a fun experience.

Staff radios

Few technologies have more history behind them than the old-fashioned radio. For restaurants, two-way radios allow staff to verbally communicate with each other without disrupting their work flow. Employees can reach a manager or one another to request assistance or provide updates to a service issue.

Outfitting key staff with handheld radios can make it easy to coordinate activity during a busy shift, eliminating the need to shout over the din to attract attention. And with many radios incorporating rechargeable batteries, the cost of operation is minimal after the initial investment.

Table trackers

Many QSR and fast casual operations are moving to a system under which guests place their order and sit wherever they wish, with staff delivering the food to the table when that order is ready. Unfortunately, the process of matching guests with orders can be fraught with difficulty, resulting in the food going cold while runners search for the correct table.

Some operations have tried to solve that issue by giving guests a number to place on a table stand. While those systems do help, they still require the food runner to tour the dining room to locate the correct table. Others rely on a notation on the receipt that describes the guest.

One solution that has proven particularly effective is the Table Tracker, which leverages the radio frequency identification technology long used in warehouses and retailer operations to track inventory. When the guest places an order, the cashier gives them a Table Tracker, a device similar to a restaurant pager, and a timer is started for that order.

Guests take the Table Tracker to their chosen seat, and the device reads their location number via RFID tags installed under the table. That information is communicated to the point-of-sale system, so when the order is ready the runner knows exactly where the food should be delivered, ensuring guests receive their food as soon as possible. The systems can be set to alert management if order times pass a preset level.

And if for some reason the guest isn't at a table, the device can be used as a traditional pager. It can also be used to alert carryout customers when their order is ready. In addition, the analytics derived from the Table Tracker solution can be used to spot problems and improve service.

Cody Pierce, vice president of marketing for Orange City, Iowa-based Pizza Ranch, said that the company saw an immediate increase in guest satisfaction with restaurant's Buffet Your Way program, which allows guests to personalize their meal. "After installing Table Tracker, we were able to consistently meet delivery time goals for custom pizzas." Pierce said.

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