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For many independent operators, the knee-jerk response to the idea of adopting table technology ordering and payment systems into their concept is ‘that’s fine for the quick-service and casual chains, but not in my place – we’re here to serve the guest.’ These restaurant technology developers and consultants, however, believe that tableside and tabletop technology has a place in independent and full-service concepts, and gives wait staff more time to serve and drive sales – with caveats.

Funny thing about even the best restaurant service – it can always be better.

Just ask any guest.

Tableside and tabletop technology such as iPads, tablets, tableside payments and tabletop kiosks that lets guests order food and beverages, pay their checks, listen to music, play games and provide feedback is promising to make restaurant service better.

Tools for leveraging at-the-table mobility to gain efficiency in the hospitality sector have been available for many years, according to Tim Pincelli, global segment leader, restaurants for Oracle Hospitality; however, today’s solutions offer what he calls “a new recipe in portability, design, and functionality.”

“With modern solutions,” Pincelli explains, “service staff is empowered to deliver an improved guest experience with a multipurpose table-side and mobile solution that combines a size-friendly tablet with ample screen real estate, full-shift battery life, and full functionality — as if the staff member was at a fixed workstation.”

On a single mobile device, a server can interact with the entire lifecycle of a guest experience “not just by taking a more efficient and accurate order, but also by engaging the guest at the beginning of the experience with a stunning digital

presentation of today's food and drink specials, wine lists, specific meals that accommodate food allergies, and nutritional information, as well as taking a credit card payment table-side."

Guests can also experience table-side video presentations, review local attractions and events like movie times and theater productions, enroll in restaurant rewards programs, and many other types of engagement, all on a single device.

Shifting the Focus on Serving

These types of table-side engagements make sense, Pincelli believes, because of the opportunity to improve the guest's experience while giving the server more time to do what he does best, which is sell. "When a server has the opportunity to focus on serving and not on saving steps, he can positively increase sales."

"Order-taking technology is likely the easiest way to help restaurants provide better service and have an option to reduce labor requirements for this task," says Juan Martinez, the founder and principal of Miami, FL-based consultancy Profitality. These include kiosks at the store (in the line, for QSR and fast casual) and at the table for casual dining. "It also includes web ordering and smart phone ordering. In the case of what Panera Bread is doing, this includes phone ordering at the table, which would be analogous to what some casual dine concepts are doing at the table."

While one can do the full order and pay through a pad at the table for casual dine, "most of the ones that are trying it that I know of are only doing some pieces of it," says Martinez.

These include closing and paying for the order, which he thinks "not only addresses the issue of taking the server's time but also security, since the credit card never leaves your hand." It also gives the guests control of when they want to close the order and pay to leave without having to rely on flagging down a server."

Martinez points to other, "in-between" technologies that restaurant operators should not forget, like tablets for servers to take orders at the table.

"This still requires a human touch, but since it sends the order to the back faster depending on how the concept applies it, the server would have more time to manage their tables and provide better hospitality."

An intended consequence of this is that since the order goes to the kitchen once the server enters it at the table, food should arrive to the guests faster. This provides him with the potential to turn the table faster and drive more sales for the concept, as well as earn more in tips.

“My suggestion to concepts is that they should embrace these technologies,” Martinez says, “and starts figuring out how they want to be applied in their concepts. I assure you that all the minimum wage increase battles going on in the political arena will have a huge impact on concepts embracing these sorts of technologies. Time will tell.”

There are Operational Caveats, However

Not all advancements in technology necessarily make sense, says Dave Schofield, CEO of Restaurant Revolution Technologies, Inc. in San Diego, CA, a provider of phone, online and mobile takeout, order management, customer loyalty and catering solutions.

Says Schofield, it is important to perform the due diligence required for that specific restaurant operation. While many mobile apps and ordering portals claim to add new orders in takeout, for example, “the reality is that many do so without regard to peak dining times, thereby leading to significant problems operationally.”

When orders are placed in this way, the kitchen becomes overwhelmed, the service is poor and the customer doesn’t want to come back. “So for a short-term gain, the restaurant sacrifices the long-term value of a potential returning customer due to a lackluster experience and an error-riddled order.”

There are, however, solutions and services available that institute order management and metering “that essentially apply customized business rules to appropriately meter orders into the kitchen for proper fulfillment and dispense accurate pick-up times to customers,” Schofield says.

The result from this type of order-management technology reduces customer wait times, enhances the customer experience and consistently delivers more accurately fulfilled orders leading to an increase in both short- and long-term sales volume for restaurants.

Jim Pinto, a veteran consultant and futurist based in Carlsbad, CA, points out that having a restaurant's menu available on the tabletop can give guests "lots of the latest information that cannot now be on menus, [such as] the latest pictures of each item, including variations selected by customer." Wines and ratings can also be reviewed, he adds.

Such technologies also help diners when it comes to calculation of suggested tips, paying via credit-card scan and tracking any points or credits that maybe awarded by the restaurant, Pinto says. "This also allows the choice of whether or not you want to be on their mailing/follow-up list." Each of these, he adds, is another way "to make your food/visit/experience pleasurable, and provide 'stickiness' – that is, to make them want to come back."

"The all-inclusive tabletop kiosks are really becoming popular now," says **Nick McRae, CSM**, the owner of [McRae Technologies, LLC](#) in Memphis, IN. "Guests have the opportunity to purchase their own drinks, desserts and appetizers at their table instead of waiting on wait staff to take their orders." Beyond just taking orders and presenting menus, the ability to pay at the table "expedites the table turnover, which is good for wait staff and busy guests who can leave at their convenience."

Games on the devices can be offered at a premium to entertain guests while they wait for their food and drinks, McRae adds. Ziosk and E la Cart are two big players in the tabletop kiosk realm, and there are many others showing up as well with their own proprietary software/tablet combos or with apps that run well on mobile devices." At the same time, he says, companies like iWaiter are using mobile apps to connect the guests and their servers. "The server can now be more responsive to guest issues as well as manage their sections more effectively."

Leading by Example

Pincelli is convinced that table-side engagements are equally valuable for chains as well for independent dining establishments. "Our modern mobile solutions create value regardless of the operation's size or volume. A key attribute of our tablets is their multipurpose usability. The tablet is an excellent tool for servers to use to engage a guest and empower a better guest experience."

Beyond guest-facing activities, he continues, these same solutions are equally as useful for facilitating staff training, onboarding new employees, delivering secured brand content, and communicating with employees after they log on.

Paul Bartlett, CEC, FCSI, the principal of KitchenSolutions, LLC, a foodservice consultancy in Baltimore, MD, points to the ubiquity of such technologies today. "Look at Royal Farm Stores and Sheetz convenience stores in the Mid-Atlantic.

“Tablet/computers are the only way to order in these operations,” he says. “Touch-screen interfaces are very intuitive. All screens present graphics and choices to ‘have it your way.’ Everyone has learned to pump their own gas and check out their own groceries at the self-checkout counter.” His point: These quick-service operations have familiarized your guests with the advantages of this technology, so bringing into your restaurant is not a paradigm shift, at least for them.

While it is unlikely an upscale operation wants guests ordering directly from a tablet, server operated tableside ordering and payment systems can be adopted seamlessly, says Bartlett recounting his experience in San Diego at a fine sit-down, table service restaurant.

The server provided a well-designed printed menu to his party of four, “then took our order on her touch screen, hand-held device. A ticket printed in the kitchen. When food was ready she served it in a traditional manner. When it came time to present the check, she forwarded the command to the printer and presented the check. We paid with a combination of cash and credit card. She swiped the card on a mobile reader. This restaurant had already eliminated the cashier and a number of remote POS stations.”

Technology, says Bartlett, is making it easier to accomplish tasks that used to require a human face and brain. “Bob Cratchit (a fictional character in the Charles Dickens novella “A Christmas Carol”), has been replaced by Quick Books. Everyone has a mobile computer that can interface with compatible systems. As soon as the POS model is universally compatible with smart phones and tablets, the industry will not look back. In the future, table service will look very different.”

Of course, Bartlett continues, it remains to be seen how the Millennial generation will redefine the nature of food preparation for paying guests.

“The narrative reads: ‘Craft production meets high-tech delivery in a crowded sphere of interaction,’” speculates Bartlett.

“Creative people will define the models to suit their budget, time frame, location and culinary objectives. A lot of rules will be broken.”

Does Table Tech Generate Sales?

When using a tablet to take customer orders, up-selling is the cornerstone to increasing sales, says Pincelli. When servers use the tablet to take orders tableside, the solution may prompt the server to suggest high-margin or meal-complementing additions such as a salad or particular wine-pairing. In a line-busting scenario, the tablet solution can include prompts for a larger combo-

meal. “Without a mobile device, these actions depend upon the server’s memory, or force return visits to the table for follow-up questions that slow service and require the guest to revisit their order.”

Oracle’s MICROS Engagement Feature, which is part of Oracle’s MICROS Symphony point-of-sale solution, allows a manager to carry one tablet for taking orders, accessing actionable sales data, and viewing their Twitter feed, all from the same interface. This allows managers to keep a close eye on what’s being said without having to go into an office and log on to a PC or use a phone alongside the tablet. It can all be done from a single device.

The sophisticated technology solutions and services packages do indeed help with suggestive selling, Schofield says, “and are increasingly important to restaurant operators. Knowing the customer’s ordering history, favorites, dislikes and allergies among other things leads to a better guest experience, processes the fulfillment of the order in a more expeditious manner, and creates more returning and loyal customers.”

Guest experience and customer loyalty programs “are certainly tied into social media,” Schofield agrees. Many restaurants are tying into social media as part of the guest experience, and provide rewards and special offers to those customers loyal to their brand by remaining active and engaged through their social media channels. “The downstream effect creates a loyal base of brand champion, and essentially markets the restaurant to others.”

An Evolving Revolution

Tabletop technologies and their uses will, of course, continue to evolve.

Tucker W. “Bill” Main FCSI, CSP, the principal of Bill Main & Associates in Lafayette, CA, says that “the only trend I see in fast casual that is truly prescient is the establishment of a concierge-type position in a greeter-oriented setting. He or she is greeter, seater, order taker, cashier, all in one position; very efficient and fast paced.”

The ability to both do order-entry on a tablet and simultaneously swipe a credit card for takeout and delivery “is *huge*,” Main suggests. He is currently working with a start-up in Florida and reports, “I am actually building a job description for this position. The entire cashier, POS, runner, re-order and related queuing issues are virtually being redesigned to stay aligned with the Millennial generation’s short attention span and desire for speed.”

As Main sees it, whether the tablet is in the hands of the server or the customer the result is not only speeds, but the ease of quickly reordering and resulting higher check.

In studying other fast-casual concepts, Main noticed that a guest who wants to order additional food or beverage is required to stand on line a second time, something many, especially Millennials, will refuse to do.

“I’m a pragmatist,” says Main. Many diners today “want full-service amenities but don’t want to pay for them. And in the fast casual business don’t want to get into the tipping mess. I see the evolution ending up with fast casual behaving like full service but without the tip. This is the direction we’re going to take.”

Not All Fun and Games

Games at tables “keep them occupied while the food is being made,” Ellinsky believes, and consumers today want and need diversion. “Nobody talks to anybody anymore. You see people at a table and nobody talks. Everybody’s got a phone or something in their hand, so with this type of things, if you can have some type a game going on that the whole family can interact with, and also be able to place their orders through the system and pay right there at the table” it will prove popular. “If they want more drink they hit the button, no problem; someone is running it right out to you.”

Beyond all this, Ellinsky predicts, it is economics that will bring these technologies to the guest table even more than their novelty or utility. “More and more, unfortunately, [patrons] are going to be *forced* to like them because [operators] are going to start heading more and more into the technology stage to save them more money and time, and to be more accurate with their numbers in their restaurants.”

There is, says Pincelli, a lot of innovation on the horizon “that will change the way guests pay, including mobile wallets, enhanced security with point-to-point encryption of credit card data, and EMV-card–capable payment terminals. We’re preparing for continued payment technology disruption over the next few years.”

Checklist:

Gauging Return on Investment (ROI) of Table Tech

As with every capital expenditure you make in your business, before you adopt new technology into your operation, you need to determine how long it will take before it has paid for itself, by generating sales and cutting costs.

Tim Pincelli, global segment leader, restaurants for Oracle Hospitality recommends that restaurateurs consider the following in their projections:

- Are sales increasing due to servers having more opportunity to sell? Did the wait time for entrees decrease, leading to faster table turnover?
- Are guests who place orders in line getting served faster, or are more cars being served in an hour in the drive-through when taking orders car-side?
- Does it save time to do inventory counts on a tablet rather than by hand? Is food presentation improving after additional training delivery on a tablet?

These questions, he says, present “the firm statistical route, but let’s not forget less-tangible statistics.” These include:

An improved guest experience leads to more repeat diners. Can you track increased repeat traffic?

- A wait staff empowered with better tools that enable them to sell more will attract repeat customers and, in turn, make itself and the operation more money.

As to whether or not these devices always worth the cost, Pincelli believes tableside tablets are worth the cost, particularly if the solutions are integrated into an existing POS system. “Driving this assertion is a low barrier to entry between low up-front costs for tablets and software and a low installation burden to add to an existing Oracle Hospitality solution. We’ve made it cost-efficient and easy to add tablets.”

Pincelli says that it is hard to find a downside to modern tablet solutions. Adoption and culture change for both guests and operators “are going to be interesting to watch as more restaurants add tablets.” He and his colleagues believe the guest will increasingly see a mobile device as an improvement to his experience.

“Cultural perception at first might be that technology doesn’t belong where it hasn’t been widely adopted, but if that is a barrier it will quickly disappear with improved guest experiences.”

Consider the Training Costs and Flexibility

Staff training is also a cost of new technology, Pincelli says, touting his firm's software, which can require "zero training," since "the user experience presented to the server is identical to what they experience on a fixed workstation,"

He adds this is not the only option. Flexibility allows an operator to choose a unique tablet user interface if desired."

Before trying to gauge the ROI, it is important for restaurant operators to first understand the purpose of the specific technology employed, and to regularly analyze the data and metrics captured as a result. "If a restaurant is employing new mobile ordering technology, for example," says Dave Schofield, CEO of Restaurant Revolution Technologies, Inc. in San Diego, CA. "They should start by determining basic benchmarks prior to implementation and then monitor to see if the needle moves in any particular direction." The questions in this scenario to ask are:

- Is there an increase to the top line order volume?
- Is the number of returning customers growing?
- Is the rate in which customers return accelerating?
- Is the bottom line revenue number supporting the continuation of the ordering technology?

Every restaurant has to weigh its options and determine the appropriate priorities for its operational needs versus the specific cost structure. "However," adds Schofield, "by not moving quickly or minimizing the role of technology or its place on internal operational priority, the restaurant runs the risk of leaving significant sums of money on the table."

Schofield calls it "quite common" to employ some new form of technology and not have it meet expectations. "It starts with the values and vision of the restaurant and what makes the most sense to prioritize within the organization." If the restaurant is committed to enhancing the sales volume through mobile and online ordering but not at a cost of the guest experience, "then the technology employed needs to fully serve that purpose to be regarded worth the cost."

It becomes far easier to determine its financial value and return on investment, he has found, if the data captured supports the goal of raising the sales volume and revenue numbers and there is hard and anecdotal data that suggests the guest experience either improves or remains at the previous level.

A basic functionality understanding of all devices and technology employed “is certainly the starting point,” Schofield explains. “However, dine-in servers are not information technology professionals, so it’s perhaps more important to employ solutions and services that essentially removes any issues or trouble shooting from their already hectic routine.”

Does Tableside Tech Replace Wait Staff?

Not according to Alexandra Sewell, executive director, enterprise marketing for Comcast Business.

“Tabletop ordering is a trend growing in popularity enabling guests to order food and drinks right from their tables using tablets, kiosks, and smartphones,” says Sewell. “These innovations allow guests to order their food quickly through interactive tablet menus without having to wait for restaurant staff to place their orders.’

Several popular chains have already incorporated tablets into their restaurant experience and equipped their guests with tablets at each table, he adds, which are used for fast meal ordering and easy checkout payment.

“This technology has reduced order wait times as it allows customers to quickly communicate their orders to the kitchen without interacting with their servers,” says Sewell.

Guests no longer have to wait for their servers to place their order or provide the check at the end of their meals, which can quickly improve the overall guest experience. Restaurateurs have also been using this technology to increase order accuracy by eliminating the need for servers to manually write down guest orders.

“These mobile devices will not replace wait staff,” Sewell says, “but rather enable servers to spend more time with guests to provide improved guest service with less time traveling to the kitchen to place orders. In order for these tablets and mobile devices to run smoothly they must be powered by reliable Internet and Wi-Fi provided by a supplier with expertise in understanding what restaurants need.”

Sewell points to what she calls a “new trend quickly growing in popularity” in the restaurant industry. “Just like when you order your airline tickets; when demand is high prices are high, when demand’s low prices drop quickly.

Users of the Uber taxi service might be well familiar with this approach, made possible by mobile technology.

“Many restaurants are incorporating this type of pricing into their restaurants to quickly change prices throughout the day. Dynamic pricing is enabling restaurants of all sizes to control their pricing throughout the day and adjust quickly to customer demand via interactive menus, tablets, and display monitors. It is expected that we will see more restaurants incorporating this pricing into their restaurants with the expansion of tabletop ordering.”

Case-in-Point:

Are Handheld POS Devices Right for My Concept?



A full-service, upscale steak and seafood restaurant in the Midwest wonders if upgrading its POS system to providing handheld devices for wait staff makes sense.

Rational operators will always consider the financial effect of any additional expense, whether short- or long-term. Part of that equation, of course, is the cost of the new technology. We contacted two manufacturers of hand-held POS systems to get a “ball park” estimate of the pricing of these particular devices. They declined to respond, citing policy not to provide pricing and costing information to the press. This makes sense giving that pricing can change, and that the cost to each concept can depend on a number of variables.

The primary “return on investment” to an operator of any table-side and -top ordering technology gets down to operational efficiency as measured by lowered labor cost, increased table turns and increased guest satisfaction. Other factors include whether the technology is appropriate for your signature ambience.

The owners of the Midwest upscale concept might ask if being able to communicate directly with the POS system in placing orders and processing payment would allow them to reduce the number of wait staff or increase table turns. For example, on busy nights, it is not uncommon for the restaurant’s wait staff to be lined up to use a POS terminal.

A concept that typically has a number of walk-ins and a long line of guests waiting for tables on a busy shift might find saving 10-15 minutes service time per table would increase table turns sufficiently to make this technology a good investment with a relatively rapid payback.

This might be particularly true if the upscale concept has a “fast message” – such as a place that caters to young urban patrons, who dine early – perhaps drinks and small- and shared-item plates — on their way to other activities. In fact, the presence of the additional technology might also lend itself to the appeal of the concept to a younger crowd, who appreciate gear that speeds up the dining experience and relates to their use of technology. In that sense, technology becomes part of the ambience.

In a “slower message” upscale restaurant, where guests typically expect to enjoy, and pay for, an elegant and leisurely meal, the technology might not influence table turns. In fact, the presence of devices that appear to move them along might be resented – at least if it is flaunted. Always remember, part of what you are selling is an experience that compliments your fare.

Other factors might include the effect on service staff morale, in terms of making their jobs easier. Concepts that have lower server turnover, and look for ways to reward loyalty might factor this into their decision, along with more tangible financial benefits.

If interested in starting a concept with this technology or making an upgrade, the first step would be contact vendors to determine the cost as compared with more traditional solutions. Considering these factors, however, might help you determine the value it might bring to your concept.