

Bringing Technology to the Table

By David Rothschild

One of the things that strikes me when we visit casino properties is how little current technologies are being utilized in the restaurants. When I enquire about why they aren't making better use of their POS systems, the usual comment is that it's difficult to get IT to commit the time and energy necessary to work with the dining room manager to program/reprogram the hardware or install and make adjustments to the software.

Imagine the following scenario — this isn't a vision of the future; it's modern-day technology that's probably already built into your POS software but currently underutilized...

RESERVATIONS

A guest calls the restaurant for a reservation. The Caller ID identifies him as Mr. Swift. The computer terminal at the reservationist's desk tells her a whole bunch of things about Mr. Swift, a regular at the restaurant. It informs her of the date of Mr. Swift's last visit. It also tells her where he sat, what he ate, and his server preference if he has one, his birthday, his wife's birthday, and their anniversary. It could also inform her as to any dietary, allergies or special needs the Swifts may have.

ARRIVAL

When Mr. and Mrs. Swift arrive at the restaurant, they're informed that a table is ready for them. They could be advised that if they'd be willing to wait another five minutes or so, they could have their "regular" table and their favorite server. The POS has the ability to give accurate wait times to the hostess. As she seats the party, she then adds the new table into the computer. The next time the server logs onto the POS, he's notified that he has a new table. He's given all of the retrieved information from the POS.

ORDERING AND FOOD DELIVERY

The server approaches the table and greets the Swifts by name. He adds, "Will you be enjoying your usual cocktails this evening?" Of course, he can easily access this info via the POS. A common guest pet peeve is when the server has to return to the table to inform them that the menu item that they had just ordered is no longer available. It won't happen in this case. The server already knows what has been "86ed." The POS has an opening screen that lists those items.

When he takes the dinner order, the server "remembers" the guest's favorites and assures him that they're certainly available this evening. The POS has also made recommendations for

wines that will pair nicely with those choices.

When the food is ready, it's delivered to the table without an auction. The server has been forced to use the pivot, or seat-designation system. Before the software will let him move on to another screen, it asks, "Seat Number?" The food runner or back waiter can easily serve the food to the appropriate guest, again without asking who gets what. I've heard guests exclaim, "How'd he do that? He didn't take the order." It's not a magic trick; it's using the software that's already available and a standardized pivot system.

The POS times all orders so a server can properly pace the meal. It allows for a "Hold/Fire" system, which should eliminate the problem of delivering an entrée to a guest while he's still eating his salad. A supervisor can check on the progress of a table if it looks as if they've been waiting too long.

PRESENTING AND SERVICING THE CHECK

After dinner, Mr. Swift asks for his check. When a credit card is provided for payment, processing and authorization are handled by the POS system — right at the table.* The credit card never leaves the guest's sight. If you've ever experienced restaurant credit card fraud (as I have), you'll immediately appreciate the peace-of-mind this affords your diners.

THE ALL-IMPORTANT GOODBYE

As the Swifts leave the restaurant, the hostess on duty says goodnight, using their name. Even if she didn't meet them when they came in, the information that the Swifts had just paid the check is flashing on the hostess screen.

FOLLOW UP AND MARKETING

A few days after the Swifts' visit, the system prints out a thank-you note and addresses it to the Swifts' home. A nice touch is to have the server personalize the note and invite the guest back. Noting that this was the Swifts' fifth visit to the restaurant, the system also prints out a coupon for a free appetizer the next time they dine there.

I hope these illustrations will prompt you to come up with even more ways to use the technology that's available to you to improve your guests' experience and add efficiency to your operations. Here are a few more areas that warrant consideration...

SEPARATE CHECKS

Restaurants that refuse to accommodate guests' requests for separate checks are costing themselves business. We recently heard of a server telling guests that it would take half an hour for him to break the check down and give the diners individual checks. Nonsense. The POS can do it in seconds, easily, no fuss, no big deal. The particular guests mentioned above vowed never to return to the inhospitable restaurant.

SERVER INCENTIVES

Many of us use our POS systems to track check averages and turn times. I like to use them to conduct contests between the servers as well. The system can track how many appetizers or desserts the server sells. I usually run these contests for a two-week period, with prizes awarded at the conclusion. Many times, bragging rights amongst the staff is all that is awarded. But dining certificates, concert tickets, or other incentives you or your property's marketing team can provide can add even more of a healthy competitive spirit.

GUEST FEEDBACK AND PROMOTIONS

The technology is there to track information and guests' preferences. We can use it to generate e-mail and snail-mail addresses to alert guests to upcoming special events at our restaurants or food-and-beverage-related promotions. Guests' suggestions and input can be registered and used to help you better pinpoint your diner demographics, tastes and expectations.

Maybe the time isn't right to upgrade your POS or its software. But that doesn't mean you can't maximize the capabilities of the system you already have in place. Talk to your IT guy. Find out what your current equipment is capable of doing. You just might be surprised!

All right, I admit it. This isn't currently available to all of us. You need a handheld POS with credit card authorization capabilities. One such device can be viewed at: <http://www.digitaldining.com>. **MFC**

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