

Operators face new realities, tech solutions, customer expectations, laws — and opportunities

by Sonya Bice

Some of the coolest ideas restaurants are using these days are like fusion cuisine—combinations of various established technologies, brought together to create totally fresh solutions. Combine surveillance cameras, digital video, POS software, and Internet access, for example, and you get integrated surveillance technology, with remote access to video that is searchable by transaction—which means you can see not only what is happening right now but also what happened yesterday at lunch when a “void” was entered. Sometimes changes are customer convenience-driven, such as restaurants increasingly accepting texted and online food orders and reservations.

Other solutions are nothing more than finding new ways to solve the same old problems—like using popular online classified site craigslist.org to find employees or advertising on a search engine to get to the potential customers who are searching for somewhere to eat in your city.

“Customer expectations are changing,” said Megan Turk of the Chocolate Shoppe Ice Cream Restaurants, Madison. That also means if you want to be in the game and understand the next steps you have to look for innovations and play with what is available now.”

WRA members are doing all of the above, and more, with new tech applications as they work to survive in a tightening market.

Integrated surveillance technology

Trey Hester, vice president of Oconomowoc-based Rocky Rococo Restaurants, said the company has been using surveillance cameras in its stores for years. But in their newest restaurant, they’ve installed a system that allows

remote viewing and remote control of the digital video recorder. “You can see real time what is going on in the restaurant and are also able to review a prior event,” Hester said. “Depending on the size of the hard drive, this can range from a few days up to months of recorded video.” Without the hassle of videotape, there is no issue of forgetting to change the videotape, he said.

“Being able to control the DVR from offsite allows you to research a complaint or how a lunch ran at a previous time without having to get your hands on the



physical tape,” he added. “If a customer says something occurred the previous lunch, you can bring it up and see what happened right now. It helps with security, researching worker’s comp claims, operational issues, and allows owners to be there even when they’re not.”

e-Marketing

Prentice Berg, an owner of Restaurant Magnus, Madison, calls himself the “crazy tech-head of the business,” and he identifies one specific piece of new software that’s been helpful to the restaurant: “What’s making life a little bit easier is the most recent version of Microsoft Publisher 2007 and how it now integrates with Outlook so you can build an online e-club – and easily send out a regular newsletter. That’s where technology has been effective in keeping

us alive in this market.”

Restaurant Magnus’ customers are given small sign-up cards asking if they wish to be notified of future events. “It’s not an outside marketing scheme at all—it’s guerrilla marketing,” Berg says. “It’s nothing that original, but the fact that most restaurants don’t do it makes it definitely a competitive advantage.”

In a little over a year, the restaurant built an email list of more than 3,000 subscribers. Berg says that the direct promotions make possible measurable results that were not knowable with the restaurant’s past t.v. and newspaper marketing campaigns. It was clear, for example, that a promotion targeted at couples celebrating anniversaries was spectacularly unsuccessful, but a birthday-related promotion “works outstandingly well” and regularly brings in groups of four to eight people.

Other WRA member restaurants and restaurant groups including Capitol Chophouse, Madison; Heinemann’s Restaurants, Milwaukee; The Charcoal Grill, New Berlin; and Bartolotta Restaurant Group, Wauwatosa, use Dinner Bell Marketing (online at www.dinnerbellmarketing.com) to manage their e-marketing.

Internet advertising – for customers, for employees

Doug Krushke of Haymarket Grille, Eau Claire, faces the challenge all independents do: battling for market share with better-financed corporate competitors. The Internet, however, is one tool to level the field by reaching specifically targeted customers at low costs. One way is via Google AdWords, which connects businesses with people who are searching for information about their products and services online. You pay only for those times when someone

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clicks on the ad. It's like having a Yellow Pages ad that is accessible world-wide and yet doesn't cost anything until people actually look at it.

Krushke can see tangible results from the marketing. "When people call in to make reservations, especially when they are in from out of town, they tell us that they found us online," he said.

Jo Chern, owner of Jo's Tazzina Café, Madison, goes where her audience is when seeking employees. "I find all of my employees by posting jobs on Craigslist," she said, referring to the non-commercial online classified site. The people she wants to reach are far more likely to visit an online site to look for a job than they are to read a newspaper. In addition, an applicant can reply with an instantaneous email message provided on the job posting.

Online orders

Megan Turk, of Chocolate Shoppe Ice

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The need for speed

In a recent *New York Times* article on developing technology in the restaurant industry, tech consultant Robert Grimes identified the biggest issue for restaurants as "speed of service." In addition to speed, convenience of ordering for customers has to be a consideration, given a National Restaurant Association survey finding that six in ten full-time workers had ordered lunch from a restaurant in the previous five days. Sizable percentages reported picking up breakfast at a restaurant (31 percent), and getting dinner on the way home (44 percent). Reaching that market means making it easy for working people to place orders—via text message, email, web site, or fax. Among the speed-enhancing devices and ordering systems restaurants are experimenting with:

- **Texted and mobile ordering.** A January article in *USA Today* called texting possibly "the future of takeout and delivery." While Starbucks and McDonald's have only tested it in stores abroad, Papa John's and Pizza Hut have already launched marketing campaigns promoting text ordering.
- **Hand-held ordering and pay-at-table devices.** Mobile mini POS systems that transmit orders and accept credit card payments are starting to show up at restaurants including TGI Fridays. There is even one device that uses handwriting recognition to convert a server's "written" order to the kitchen directly, at



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Cream, says that the company is upgrading its technological capacity in a number of areas. "We have actually added a number of new technologies to our store locations and our wholesale business," she said. "We have remote access to our business server so we can share files and information. We have added Wi-Fi to two of our store locations and we will be testing an online order placement system this summer." The online order system, like other changes the company is making, is based on "a combination of customer request and a desire to be competitive within the marketplace," she said.

"As the understanding of the Internet and its capabilities grows and as food service business owners are being developed from other industry backgrounds, they are looking for faster, easier, and more convenient ways to communicate with us on their time schedule. With being competitive in the marketplace, people are looking to the web to find answers and solutions." **WR**

The need for speed *continued from page 18*

the tap of a stylus (info at www.actionsystems.com). The advantages, at the point of ordering, are speed and accuracy, as well as the ready availability of waitstaff in the dining room because they do not have to go back to the kitchen or bar. The advantage, at the point of payment, is the customer's ability to keep possession of his or her credit card. A potential disadvantage, at least for some operations, is image-related: does it fit the ambience of the restaurant?

- **Self-serve technology.** The NRA reports that forty-six percent of Americans say they are likely to use customer-activated ordering and payment terminals if available in their favorite tableservice restaurant. Younger consumers are more likely to do so, as 71 percent of 18 to 24-year-olds, and 64 percent of 25 to 34-year-olds say they would. About half of all adults—and roughly two-thirds of those aged 18 to 34—say they would use a self-serve order and payment terminal at a quickservice restaurant if it was available. A tableside touch-screen order system and customer-controlled payment system is part of the concept at uWink, the newest restaurant concept from the founder of Chuck E. Cheese. *QSR Magazine* reported that self-service kiosks are one option drive-through restaurants are looking at to minimize delays.
- **Even faster payment options.** The next generation of payment processing systems will allow "contactless" payment via chip-embedded smart cards. Currently, according to Foodservice Equipment Reports, most McDonald's and Arby's units are equipped for contactless payments. The card never leaves the customer's hand. **WR**

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