TABLETS AND E-MENUS

Tablet PCs are more usable than hand-held units due to their larger screens, but they are still too bulky and heavy for widespread use except for back-of-house operations in warehouses and receiving docks. A few restaurants around the country have experimented with e-menus and wine lists. Most all of these experiments have taken place in fine dining environments where the display screens can be housed in protective folders and the necessity for keeping a large supply does not exist. These e-menus are particularly effective in establishments where the menu changes constantly as they eliminate the printing costs associated with the production of new menus. Further, they allow management the ability to delete items from the menu if they should happen to sell out.

These e-menus have also proven effective for displaying wine lists as information about the wine (tasting notes, vintages, suggested food pairings, etc.) can be displayed. They also allow the guest to search for wine by suggested food pairing or by taste characteristic. This might eliminate the need for a highly paid sommelier, but it could also slow down service times as guests review all the available information.

These systems are, of course, substantially more expensive than traditional menus. Also, like other guest-driven applications (kiosks, for instance) they must be intuitive and easy to use. Again, unless the operation is a fine dining operation, it is probably wise to steer away from these systems.

BACK OF HOUSE SYSTEMS

Back of the house (BOH) systems, as noted previously, are those systems that manage the restaurant functions that do not involve guest interaction. These systems include inventory management systems, purchasing systems, business intelligence and data analysis systems, and scheduling systems. The one thing these systems all have in common is that they help in controlling costs.

Cost control, of course, is not the glamorous portion of the restaurant business; it is only the essential part of the restaurant business. Restaurants run on such small profit margins that effectively managing costs is necessary for survival. In the past many operators, especially those in small stand-alone operations have operated essentially blind. They have not been able to generate the kind of data that allow for the timely and in-depth analysis of sales and costs. There is now no excuse for not having this information. Further, before the rise of enterprise management systems, generating this data was a time-consuming process. Now it is possible to have this information in real time, allowing managers to react to problems as they arise and not have to wait until the end of the month to find out that the problem even exists.

Larger operations, like hotels with many different food and beverage outlets, require greater BOH IS capabilities than do smaller, stand-alone operations. First of all, large operations generally warehouse their food items and issue them to their outlets from a central holding facility. This offers these large properties opportunities for greater control as the individual outlets can maintain lower inventories on a daily basis; the outlets do not incur costs until the items are requisitioned.

Running such a system, however, requires an extra layer of IS functionality. The warehouse itself must maintain an inventory system that tracks the contents of the warehouse in real time. This inventory/purchasing (I/P) system must maintain a running count of all items in all storerooms, adding and subtracting from inventory as deliveries and requisitions are received. Purchasing for the warehouse is a rather straightforward process; par levels are established for each item and purchase orders are generated automatically based on a predetermined reorder point. Purchase orders for other special order items can be generated manually on an as-needed basis.

The business intelligence and data analysis systems (including menu analysis) allow operators to monitor their sales and usage to levels unknown in the past. It is now possible to know not only food cost and beverage cost in real time; it is also possible to know waste factors in real time and to determine exactly where the waste is occurring. We begin by looking at purchasing systems.

PURCHASING SYSTEMS

Purchasing in many hotels is still often managed differently for F&B and "general" items, the latter covering retail outlet items, FF&E and all other hotel supplies. This is changing to some extent, especially in casinos where outlets offer both retail and F&B products, and many larger operations with enterprise accounting suites try to use these applications' general purchasing modules to cover both areas. However, F&B ordering does have special requirements. Restaurants buy an amazing mix of perishable and other products on a daily basis from multiple national and local vendors, with considerable variation in local and regional item specifications reflecting guest preferences and product availability. Apart from menu changes, individual item container and pack sizes in particular often change frequently.

Although good integration with accounting, especially accounts payable, is still essential, managing all these factors effectively requires a specialized application. In addition to the purchasing modules offered by POS vendors, modern systems are also available from independent vendors such as Adaco, Culinary Software Services, CBORD, Moreton Bay, Agilysys, RHR Systems and RedRock. All combine detailed and complex functionality with great flexibility and significantly improved ease of use compared to older systems. One advantage of using the systems is that many purveyors like Sysco and US Foods have purchasing systems that interface directly