

change. When the cooks use their display terminal to note that the appetizers have been served the table status will change, and so on. The only time any employee will be required to physically input any information is when the bus person resets the table. At that point the busser will have to use a work station to alert the host staff that the table is now available.

Even if they are not integrated with the POS system (and in this day and age there is no reason they should not be), the table management and reservation systems should be integrated with one another. Doing so will allow managers to maintain lists of both guests with reservations and those who have walked in. Some of the more casual dining establishments have made use of video wall displays that show walk-in guests where they are in line while also displaying their expected wait time. This has the effect of letting guests know they haven't been forgotten while keeping them from adding to the congestion around the hostess stand. Casual dining establishments have also made use of paging systems that utilize pagers to alert guests when their table is available. These alert systems, however, need not be integrated with the table management system.

GIFT CARDS AND LOYALTY PROGRAMS

Offering gift cards is an almost essential part of business these days. A plastic restaurant gift card (in form much like a credit card) will provide better tracking and control than traditional paper gift certificates. With a restaurant gift card system, you keep 100% of the sales because customers use the card until the given amount is depleted—no more giving away revenue in change. A restaurant gift card is a great way to communicate the restaurant's image, and they provide durability and convenience to customers. Generally, gift card services are contracted for from third-party service providers, with card balance information being stored on the server computer belonging to the card provider. It is very important that, whatever gift card service is chosen, the service can integrate with the POS payment system. As gift card balances run low, servers should encourage guests to "recharge" them, ensuring that the guests return. Management should offer guests incentives to add value to their cards. The revenue lost in promotions will be more than accounted for by having customers pay in advance for food, beverage, and services that they may not use for weeks.

More and more restaurants are offering customer loyalty programs today, either in conjunction with a gift card program or separately. The best loyalty administration systems will allow managers to track individual customer purchases and by obtaining the customer's personal information management can tie those purchases back to the individual customer. This capability allows managers to reward customers for their behaviors, either in terms of the frequency of their visits or for the number of dollars they spend.

It is necessary that management track all customer purchases. When the customer makes a purchase, the card should be swiped at the POS payment

terminal to log the purchase with the host system. Management can then reward the customer according to their own system. The better loyalty card systems, like Fishbowl and MICROS, also allow customers to log into the rewards system via the internet and see the status of their own rewards. Providing this service also allows operators an additional opportunity to market their customers.

In the future, look for customer loyalty systems to not only track the number of dollars individual customers spend, but to also track individual customer purchases. By knowing specifically what it is that each individual customer orders, management can tailor marketing campaigns to customers based on their personal buying habits. If, for instance, customers spend a lot of money on menu items that are not as profitable as others, they can be offered promotions designed to steer them to different menu items. Customers who are already buying the more profitable menu items will be offered promotions designed to bring them in more often.

HAND-HELD TERMINALS

Hand-held terminals have gained in popularity recently as the size of such units has decreased even as memory and capabilities have increased dramatically. Generally speaking, these terminals are best suited to environments where either speed is of the essence or distances to server work stations are great, like pool areas and stadiums. Because the units are necessarily small, the screens are also. This makes the use of hand-held units for extensive menus very problematic.

When using hand-held devices it is often preferable to utilize all-in-one units, units that include signature capture, credit card reading, and printing capabilities. Because the use of hand-held devices is best when speed is required or large distances need to be covered it is best not to require servers to traverse large distances to process checks. Hand-held devices are often not well suited to fine dining environments or more casual restaurants where guests often have special requests. The units take away from the aesthetic appeal of such restaurants and the higher number of special requests that guests make in these environments might actually cause servers to spend more time at the table than they would if they only had to write down the order and input it to a larger, more capable POS terminal.

Hand-held terminals for generic use are available from many vendors like ActionSystems and Pocket Cheff. These terminals are made to interface with a variety of different POS systems. They do, however, carry the same caveat as other generic options, namely the necessity for separate service and customer support functions. And while these systems are ostensibly made to interface with a variety of POS systems, it is always best to test them thoroughly before making a purchase decision.