

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.