

Posted On: 8/10/2008

.Next: The New Generation of POS

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POS is POS: the functions of the point-of-sale system have been well-established, and increasingly well-executed, for years.

But recent developments in point of sale software have been devised with a larger goal in mind: to build systems that are flexible enough to do things as yet unimagined. To attain this goal, developers are exploiting more recently minted technology innovations, such as Microsoft's .NET and SQL server, Java, Open Source, Ruby on Rails, XML and other Web-based protocols and software strategies such as reusing components.



The degree to which such architecture issues matter to restaurant operators varies widely. What does universally matter is what these systems can deliver: faster development time and smoother integrations and functionality that would be unavailable, or more difficult to deliver, with older platforms. That means it's more likely that what the operator can dream up, the technology team can deliver.

Where the rubber hits the road is in how restaurants can leverage these developments to make their customers happier and their businesses run better.

Enhancing the customer experience

XML is what brought harmony to Taco Tuesdays, the biggest event of the week at Rosa's Caf   (www.rosacafe.net), a 28-unit Fort Worth, Texas Mexican chain operated by Bobby Cox Companies. The chain is a cross between cafeteria style ordering and table service dining, but the atmosphere was marred by the constant announcement of order-ready numbers. Combined with the din of Taco Tuesdays, it was just too loud.

The company asked Custom Business Solutions (www.cbs-posi.com) to help. Custom Business Solutions used .NET and packaged components to write a server-based bump-bar application to display order up numbers on a series of LCD monitors throughout the dining room. The application takes live XML feed out of the POS, filtering among 30 feeds for the two related to dining and to-go orders, and sends the data to the screens.

"If it was a standard POS without XML output we would have had a harder time writing good custom third-party software," says Robert Nowlin, POS systems manager for Bobby Cox Companies (www.bobbycox.com). "This was really accomplished because XML is so robust."

Exploiting technology to enhance the customer experience is also the goal of the new Wand (www.wandcorp.com) NextGen POS platform. Designed around "conversational ordering," it offers a user interface with the flexibility to take the order in whatever way the customer wants to give it, rather than forcing order-taking in a linear way, and allows the cashier to go back and make order changes without manager intervention.

Rob Ireland, director of IT for Tar Heel Capital (www.tarheelcapital.com), Boone, NC, operator of 77 Wendy's, was a part of the collaborative effort between franchisees and Wendy's International to develop a version of NextGen for Wendy's. He says the software also enables nuanced remote management, such as the ability to push changes like menu and price updates out only to certain stores. That was not possible with the previous version.

"The use of .NET and SQL...opened up the whole system to take a new perspective," says Ireland. "With the old system we would never be able to get the kind of functionality and the ability to be creative."

Working the Web

Web-based applications are also making their mark. Rinaldo Montrosse, co-owner of award-winning Italian eatery Villa Romana (www.villaromanamyrtlebeach.com), Myrtle Beach, SC, can check customer traffic, wait staff performance, sales volume, or any other metric he wants remotely, thanks to the Web management interface integrated into the Aldelo (www.aldelo.com) POS system installed a year ago.

That's the same benefit Franklin, Tenn.'s Tasti D-Lite had in mind when selecting pcAmerica's (www.pcamerica.com) POS software and Web portal to help corporate and franchisees gain visibility into its ice cream restaurants to manage more proactively. The application is written on the Open Source platform.

"It's very customizable and flexible; when you want to plug something in, you can, and the developer base is broad," says BJ Emerson, director of IT for the 60-unit chain.

In addition to using pcAmerica's multi-site enterprise system, based on ASP.NET, to remotely access stores and gain reporting, Tasti D-Lite also created a dashboard layer above the system to do some additional custom reporting, an easy export thanks to Open Source, Emerson says.

Web technologies also made it easy for Pub and piano bar Roxy's, West Palm Beach, Fla., to begin shifting its phone order business to the Web, thanks to SoftTouch (www.softtouchpos.com) Online, a hosted solution which uses the nightclub's existing SoftTouch menu configuration to create a Web presence. Orders automatically flow into the kitchen, and proprietor John Webb can effect one price or other changes instantly in both systems.

Easing integration

One of the more heralded advantages of many newer platforms is ease of integration. At Tehachapi, Calif.-based Wine and Cheese Cellar (www.wineandcheesecellar.com), a Berg liquor control system and Oz Winebar both talk to a Windows-based Future POS point-of-sale system (www.futurepos.com). This is thanks to the POS system's inherent programming and set-up utilities, which enable adaptations of the application by the user or dealer, in this case Gibbs Office Machines of Bridgman, Michigan.

The interface Gibbs and OZem Corp. developed for Wine and Cheese Cellar "works great," says Mary Amos, co-owner of the wine bar. While Amos' business elected not to do self-service, other users choose to allow pre-payment of cards that can be debited by the pour; the user interface is built on Future POS, and the transaction passes back and forth between the point of sale and the Oz dispenser.

Seamless integration of NCR's (www.ncr.com) InfoAmerica software with the Wendy's Wand Classic solution is enabling MJM LLC, Phoenix operator of 14 Wendy's restaurants, to boost order velocity and increase average checks by as much as 70 cents at its airport locations. That's thanks to countertop kiosks that run a customer self-service interface; when orders hit the kitchen, they seamlessly drop into the number sequence assigned to orders being taken by the Wand POS terminals. Data also flows into backend reporting. "The integration was very smooth," says Steve Treichel, district manager for MJM.

Sometimes technology innovation is best applied to making existing functions work better. Timed price discounts are a common feature, for example. "A lot offer it, but the question is, does it work?" says Ron Kveton, owner of Ole Piper, Rosemont, Minn. "I've tried a lot of systems that said it could, but it didn't."

Kveton recently replaced a system he had for only six months with one from Speedline Solutions (www.speedlinesolutions.com), which enabled him to easily set up drink specials in multiple iterations of times and days, a lifesaver given his extensive liquor and food menus at the large dine-in and delivery concept.

Such flexibility helps operators adapt their business processes without concern for whether the software can keep up. McDonald's Torex (www.torexretail.com) NewPOS-POS software, for example, operates in restaurants in 84 countries on a wide range of platforms including handheld terminals, kiosks and POS systems.

"POS systems have been the same over the years," notes Dan Connolly, associate professor and director of undergraduate programs at the University of Denver, "but the next generation is faster, more reliable and more open." His checklist for potential POS partners: How do they differentiate in the market? What does the architecture mean to IT and to the lay person? And, What are the top development priorities?

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