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Cutting the Cord

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Restaurants take advantage of new peripheral technology

By Curt Harler • Contributing Editor

The days of peripherals tied like an umbilical serial cord to the point of sale (POS) seem to be coming to a close. Whether it is credit card swipe at the drive-thru or wireless printers in the dining room, restaurants are taking advantage of the capabilities of a new generation of peripherals and finding a whole range of new opportunities to improve service.

Stealing the show

Nelly and Kenny Chesney are big name music performers. But even when they perform at Club Red in Jonesboro, Arkansas, they are not the hottest thing in the house. Recently, the POS system has taken over the limelight.

Every weekend 1200 people come through Club Red. On its peak nights, Club Red does \$25,000-\$30,000 in business between 11 pm and 2 am. That's a whopping 92 percent of its business, so there is no time to keep customers waiting for missed connections.

Club Red is a 25,000-square foot "private club," open 23 hours a day. There is a band every night and both food and alcohol are served. During dinner, servers use mobile printers and handhelds to serve a little over \$8,000 in food to the 700 or more dinner guests.

Located not far from the main campus of Arkansas State University, they club has always had high employee turnover, so having an easy-to-use solution was essential. "If you read, then you can work with this technology," insists the owner. "It takes away training time—it's so integrated with our cash register system; servers don't have to know everything to use it. If a customer asks, 'what's in this or that,' the server hits a button and tells the customer the ingredients. A new server can come in, and within three nights of following another server, they're in business and ready to run with it."

Management figures Club Red reduces one server for every five the company employs, giving the club a healthy return on investment. The club's value added reseller outfitted Club Red with a variety of POS peripherals, from biometric readers to security cameras to wireless POS.

The job, completed November 2005, includes 14 Dell Workstations (dell.com), 14 Epson Mobilink (pos.epson.com) wireless printers and 14 Symbol MC50 handheld units (symbol.com) running Digital Dining (digitaldining.com) POS software. The single access port offers two levels of security, assuring that only Club Red devices can get on the network. The handhelds allow management to look back at two month's of stored data and access it from anywhere.

Modern POS

While not every restaurant is quite ready to cut the cord to the point of sale, many are now demanding more hardened peripherals to smooth operations. Back in 2001, Vicorp, for example, was running its own homegrown POS on IBM (ibm.com) 4655s and according to Darren Pastore,

manager of application technology for Vicorp, that had to change. “We rebuilt in Java, using Elo Touch and other components,” says Pastore. Vicorp uses Surface Wave touchscreens from Elo Touchsystems (elotouch.com) at its company-owned Village Inn and Bakers Square locations throughout the Rocky Mountain and Midwest regions. The screens’ pure glass construction is scratch-resistant, making it nearly impossible to wear out the touchscreen. “We chose them on the basis of cost, support and performance,” explains Pastore.

About half of the franchisees also use the system. “If they want our support, they use our hardware,” Pastore notes. Other than the usual growing pains, the switchover went well and the units are performing properly, he says.

For Monical’s Pizza, the most important advance for point of sale peripherals has been the improvement in quality and lifespan. Doug Davis, IS coordinator at Monical’s, says its old printers had a little valley in the design that caught everything from pizza sauce to paper clips. “If you have a flat place in a printer, it catches sauce, flour and the spices. If the printer gets warm enough, it bakes up a pizza concoction.”

Monical’s migrated to TransAct’s Ithaca (transact-tech.com) POSjet 1000 inkjet printer. “The boards are placed vertically, so things fall through,” Davis says. “They are bottomless, so anything that falls in the top comes out the bottom.”

The 55 shops are primarily corporate-owned, although there are some franchise stores, and each has five to eight printers. Monical’s likes to say its success is based on people and vision, but, sometimes staff had challenges threading paper into printers.

Davis says he likes the 1000’s ease of loading and is also happy the printers do not require thermal paper. “Put thermal paper next to a hot surface and the paper turns all black so you can’t read what is on it—you have no way of knowing whose pizza is whose,” he says. Davis’ next project is migrating the printers to IP hookups. Since the company standardized on Macs, and Macs do not use serial ports, IP will make the process easier.

Crediting the drive-thru

At White Castle, taking full advantage of the credit card swipe was critical to reviving its electronic payment initiative. By using customer-facing credit card terminals at the front counter and the drive thru, White Castle has cut wait times and dramatically increased usage.

“Anyone who is not using high-speed credit needs to change. It’s well past time,” says Susan Carroll-Gale, director of IS. She is a 16 year veteran in retail technology and a 12 year veteran in QSR. “Getting times down below six seconds and integrating into the POS is key,” she says. Credit cards were first rolled at White Castle to half its locations as early as 1989. “That’s unusual for QSR,” Carroll-Gale notes. But because of slow systems and staff error, about half the Castles dropped it and use went into decline.

“When the possibility for high-speed came up, we wanted a system that would assure the customer stayed in charge of the credit card,” she continues. In early 2003 White Castle tested VeriFone’s (verifone.com) Everest units in custom-made weatherproof housings designed by Delphi Display Systems (delphidisplaysystems.com).

In its Minneapolis Region, which had continued with never abandoned dial-up credit card, six to eight percent of sales were credit card. “Now it’s 12 to 18 percent,” Carroll-Gale says.

“Customers are more comfortable with it.