

Handheld devices carve restaurant niche

by [Richard Webster](#) * • 03 May 2007

During the summer months, Keith Tatovich, vice president of Chicago restaurant Oak Forest Bowl, would watch his waitresses make the long walk across his 20,000 square foot beer garden, take an order, then make the long walk back across the garden to input the order into the computer.

Then they would walk to the bar or kitchen and wait.

It was an incredible waste of time, Tatovich said, so he invested in a new handheld technology that allowed his waitresses to input a customer's order while standing at their table, the order is then immediately transmitted to the bar or kitchen.



"Our speed and accuracy have really improved," Tatovich said. "The receipt prints the minute she sends it and by time she walks to bar the drinks are ready to be brought back to the table. The way the system was set up before there was a lot of repetition."

Handheld technology is slowly transforming the restaurant industry and soon the waiter's order pad may become a relic of the past.

Handheld devices can be used not only take an order but to pay a bill with a credit or debit card as well. The goal is improved customer service and security, said Louise Casamento, marketing manager of Micros which, in conjunction with Verifone, rolled out a POS handheld system in September.

"The first benefit is convenience," Casamento said. "The device can be left at the table so the customer has the option when they want to pay and leave. You're not reliant on the server coming back to bring your bill, then coming back to get the credit card, processing it and bringing it back a final time."

The second benefit is added security against the threat of identity theft.

"The card never leaves your possession so it's a highly secured transaction," Casamento said.

And restaurant owners benefit by allowing customers to pay with debit cards that come with reduced transaction fees compared to credit cards.

Action Systems, based in Silver Spring, Md., offers the Write-On Handheld, a POS device that enables customers to order and pay at their tables. Instead of using touch-screen or button technology it offers handwriting recognition capabilities often built into pocket PCs.

"We do that because the screen real estate on pocket PCs is so small that when you work with a touch button system it can be very cumbersome, and when you have waiters trying to push buttons and searching around trying to find menus it can detract from the service they give to customers," said vice president Lisa Wilson.

The efficiency factor

The Action Systems handheld POS device allows managers to dial into the system from remote locations and perform tasks in real time like void checks or approve compensated meals.

At first Action Systems targeted their new technology for fine-dining restaurants as opposed to fast casual or quick-serve because it eliminated the double-entry.

"The waiter takes the order down manually at the table then they go back to a computer and process it all over again," Wilson said. "Sometimes they make errors or forget to ask cooking temperature so they have to go back to the table. It's an inefficient system. By being able to do order-taking at the table you create tremendous efficiency."

But fast casual and quick-serve restaurants quickly became part of the equation, using the new technology for line-busting. When rush-hour lines overwhelm the cashiers, managers can equip employees with handhelds and have them walk up and down the lines taking orders and payments.

Thom Richardson, owner of Carey Hilliard's, a seafood and barbeque chain in Savannah, Ga., said he equipped his waiters with Verifone handhelds in March to speed up his curbside service. On any given day a Carey Hilliard's restaurant sees more than 300 curbside customers.

"Before the handheld, people would drive up and park in spot 11 waiting for two shrimps to-go," Richardson said. "They'd have to wait for the waitress or waiter to come get their credit card, walk back in, run the card, and walk back out. And sometimes the waitress has to wait to swipe the card because someone else is putting an order in. It all takes time, especially when there are 10 other cars there. But now there's no wait. You have your device right on your hip. Being able to pay at the car really changes the dynamic of our service."

The transition is not always easy. Richardson said it is taking some time for his older customers to get used to the change.

"They've been coming to us for 46 years and we've only done it one way. Now all of a sudden they're pulling this gun out of a holster saying, 'Swipe here.' They were taken aback by the technology but after we explained this is exactly like you do it at Wal-Mart they're much happier. Now they can do the transaction and get home while the shrimp's hot."

Robbie Lopez, senior vice president of software solutions for Verifone, said he expects handheld technology to become the industry standard in five years.

"Five years ago you couldn't go into a quick-service restaurant and use your credit card," he said. "But now you can't go into a QSR without having the ability to swipe your card in something. Having lived through that, (I believe) the same thing will happen here especially as the credit card industry pushes to eliminate fraud and ensure the card never leaves the customer's hands."

Casamento said restaurants have been slower to adopt the technology than anticipated but the interest is growing.

"These devices will take off faster in locations where you have a younger audience that are used to facilitating their own payments. It's not an impossibility for older audience as they're being forced to become accustomed to these devices as well," she said. "It's not dissimilar from a counter pay device you see at any grocery store or retailer. This is very commonplace in Europe and it's only a matter of time before the U.S. catches on."