

As seen in the Careers Section of the *Ottawa Citizen* in Ottawa, Ontario
(Circulation: 155,000)



CAREERS

Handheld computer aids restaurant service

BY ANGELA PACIENZA

TORONTO · Waitress Rachel Ng has a new weapon to cope with the lunch rush.

The weight of a pack of cigarettes, only thinner so it cradles perfectly in her palm, the handheld PC is becoming a digital replacement for the traditional pen-and-paper method of serving tables. And since it works with wireless technology, the kitchen gets the order seconds after the customer has made the request.

But does restaurant gadgetry equal better service for hungry patrons? Ng says absolutely.

"You have more time to chat with the customer because you're not worried about running to punch in the next order," said Ms. Ng, 27, who works at Spring Rolls, a bustling pan-Asian restaurant across the street from the Eaton Centre in the heart of downtown Toronto. "They think (the units) are really cool."

Other advantages, she adds, are fewer order errors and more detailed food allergy notes for cooks.

After taking an order on the Write-On Handheld point-of-sale system, Ms. Ng can move to another table rather than run to the kitchen or a computer terminal at the other end of the restaurant. By the time she takes the fourth table's order, plates are being served by "runners" to her first customers, she says.

The instant an item is entered onto the handheld, the food order appears on a screen in the kitchen, allowing the server to move immediately to other tables.

That's because the instant an item is entered into the handheld, the food order appears on a screen in the kitchen. Using a stylus, the device combines touch-screen and handwriting recognition.

In a demonstration, Ms. Ng — who keeps the PDA tethered to a black belt — was able to continue being interviewed from the moment she took an order until the food was brought

to the table.

Hospitality experts say the gadgets, popping up in restaurants in North American and Europe, are a welcome addition at busy restaurants and pubs because they streamline work in chaotic environments.

"It's very practical," said Gabor Forgacs, assistant director at the School of Hospitality and Tourism Management at Ryerson University in Toronto.

"It speeds up the whole process of taking an order and getting the order to the production area. It also eliminates miscommunication opportunities."

How many times have you been at a restaurant and had the wrong food item brought to you? Or the server forgot to mention "no tomatoes" on your salad? Have you ever ordered a special of the day only to have the server return five or 10 minutes later to say the kitchen just ran out?

Those behind the technology insist it will change the restaurant experience because it expedites the kitchen-to-table process and eliminates errors when the information is being relayed to either the kitchen or central computer system.

"From a customer standpoint, you're getting more accuracy," said Alex Malison, CEO of Maryland-based Action Systems Inc., which makes Write-On Handheld. "The whole idea is that the information is right there. Pencil and pad doesn't give you information."

Mr. Forgacs says he wouldn't be surprised if more and more locations implemented the handheld gadgets because they make restaurants seem hip and sophisticated.

"I see it coming, slowly but surely," said Mr. Forgacs.

Mobile payment-processing units are also popping up in restaurants, he added. These units allow servers to process credit cards without leaving the table.

"The customers like it because at the table you don't lose sight of your card. It's not like somebody grabs your credit card, walks away, out of sight," said Mr. Forgacs.

Other uses for handheld computers



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Waitress Rachel Ng uses a palm-sized wireless to take an order from customers at Spring Rolls restaurant in Toronto. The device accepts both touch-screen and stylus handwritten messages.

nclude virtual concierge systems. The Fairmont Hotel and Resorts location in Bermuda gives guests handheld computers so they can access local nightclub, restaurant and shopping information.

So how much will wireless technology change the hospitality experience? Will it completely eliminate restaurant wait staff with electronic menus and automated payment stations?

Write-On's Malison says those scenarios will never become the mainstream.

"The reason you go to a restaurant

is because you don't want to wash the dishes, or you want to chat," he said. "To ask the customer to start punching in things themselves? That's not really what eating out is about."

He admits some niche, gimmicky restaurants might try such a system, but on the whole, customers will want full service when they go out to eat.

"Restaurants have been around since we were hunter gatherers. That's not going to change," said Mr. Malison.

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