June 2005

Hospitality TECHNOLOGY

An [redacted] Publication

Rock Solid Support

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The Sky is the Limit

Wireless point of sale pushes into uncharted territories

In the last few years, wireless point of sale systems have begun to show up in an increasingly diverse range of food-service locations. Whether at the scion of American horse racing, Churchill Downs, a Canadian tourist destination, an independent Brazilian Japanese restaurant or a host of other locations, restaurants are taking advantage of increasingly rugged hardware and streamlined software solutions that permeated the hospitality industry allowing restaurants to set up simple yet powerful solutions that offer endless flexibility in network configuration.

Using personal data assistants (PDAs or handheld computers) or tablet PCs and connected wirelessly to the Internet via strategically placed access points, wait staff can take orders at the table and beam the information directly to the kitchen. For large operations, like stadiums or restau-

rants with seasonal outside service, the time wasted running back and forth between dining areas and the kitchens are a critical service and efficiency improvement. For still others, the ability to cut the wired network connection provides service were it might not be possible any other way.

A wireless storm

The board of directors at the Harbour Ridge Country Club in Palm City, Florida had no idea how necessary their wireless POS network was until disaster struck late last year. In the span of one month, the country club was devastated by two hurricanes that eliminated most of their kitchen and dropped the entire dining room ceiling onto the floor. In fact, the damage was so bad that the club had to bring in semi trailers with kitchens in them and erect tents to use as a makeshift dinning room while they rebuilt.

"Suddenly we weren't able to use the club house for dining rooms," says Peter Cavitt, CFO of the Harbour Ridge. "We had to put our tables and chairs outside to serve people. The nice thing about the wireless application is that we just had to readjust our access point from one end of the building to the other and the servers were able to take their PDAs outside and take orders."

Using the Menusoft Digital Dining POS (digitaldining.com) and Symbol (symbol.com) MC50 handheld terminals (implemented before the hurricanes hit), the country club was able to run at full capacity outdoors without running any additional wire. Wait staff take orders on the handheld units that are transmitted wirelessly to kitchen displays in the remote kitchens. Security is not as much of an issue as club members do not use credit cards. Instead meals are charged to club membership accounts.

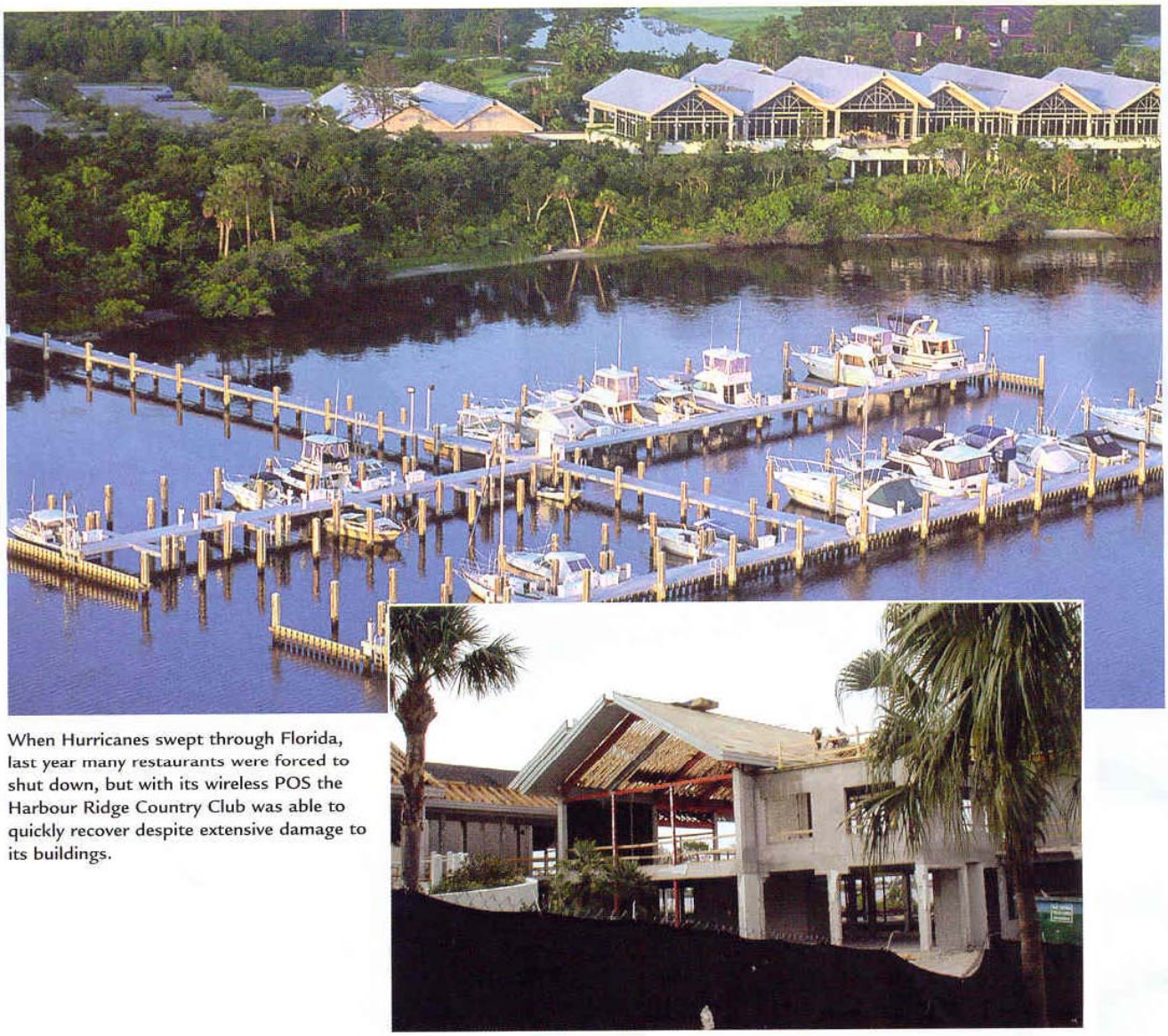
"Initially we got some grief from club members who felt the [wireless solution] wasn't necessary and that we shouldn't have spent the money to install it, but it's amazing how many people have told me, after the hurricanes, how fortuitous it is that we have the handhelds," Cavitt explains.

The wireless POS network has been so well received that the club is continuing to serve outdoors while proceeding with renovations above and beyond restoration of the damaged facility.

Wireless by a nose

At the Kentucky Derby last month, Giacomo was not the only long-shot. The stately race track rolled out one of the most advanced wireless solutions at any stadium.

Designed by Opera Glass Networks (operaglassnetworks.com), the on-demand system enables patrons located in select areas of Churchill Downs to: place wagers; access real time, multi-source, multimedia handicapping information; view simulcast race feeds from other tracks; watch other video entertainment; and of course place food and



When Hurricanes swept through Florida, last year many restaurants were forced to shut down, but with its wireless POS the Harbour Ridge Country Club was able to quickly recover despite extensive damage to its buildings.

beverage orders directly into the InfoGenesis POS system (infogenesis.com).

At the Kentucky Derby, patrons sitting at select tables equipped with IBM (ibm.com) Anyplace Kiosks can swipe their credit cards at the terminal for a fully automated self-service experience. Part of a $110 million renovation project, Churchill Downs rolled out more than 300 of the wireless IBM kiosks.

Later this season, wireless handheld PDAs (personal digital assistants) will augment the deployment and offer Churchill's patrons the convenience of track-wide mobility. The system will receive its connectivity via high-speed local-area network (LAN) and a Wi-Fi wireless local-area network.

The on-demand system is fully-integrated into Churchill Downs' CRM and business systems. This unique feature will enable the track dynamic communication with individual patrons inside the wagering interface in an effort to immediately address and meet the changing needs of those customers.

"Churchill Downs ongoing introduction of new technology to our patrons will be just as critical to our success as the bricks and mortar portion of this sweeping renovation project," explains Steve Sexton, president of Churchill Downs. "The interactive wagering platform at Churchill Downs is exciting on many levels. It will make available a large and varied array of real-time information to our patrons in selected areas throughout our facility. It will place that information at their fingertips and in their seats, and provide us with the ability to immediately identify and satisfy the needs of those patrons as they enjoy a day of racing at our sparkling new Churchill Downs."

Skyward bound

While some restaurant operators opt

for a wireless POS solution because of its ability to speed along the ordering process, a few establishments have no choice but to go wireless. The Skylon Tower at Niagara Falls was given a wireless makeover because the entire dining facility actually rotates giving dining guests a 360 degree view of the falls.

"We had to do wireless because that was the only system we could use," explains John Riley, director of IT at the Skylon Tower.

The restaurant has four server stations where wait staff place orders and swipe credit cards. There are three access points spaced equidistantly apart on the ceiling. According to Riley, this serves as a wireless umbrella blanketing all the server stations with a signal. Even if one access point were to malfunction, the other two provide a strong enough signal to compensate for the loss. The access points are wired through the ceiling to a wireless hub located on the top of the tower, allowing for a completely wire-free POS solution.

A Walking Dilemma

A drawback commonly heard from restaurants using handheld devices to take orders is that the technology takes a way from the intimacy of fine dining. John Riley, director of IT, didn't install handhelds at the Skylon because the owners felt that it was too impersonal. "The owners wanted the servers to be talking to the people not looking at a terminal in their hand," Riley says. "They didn't want to cheapen the fine-dining experience."

Peter Cavitt of Harbour Ridge Country Club agrees, however he insists that this was only a minor issue. "We made a strategic mistake by forgetting to ensure that the servers, as they were learning to put orders into the PDAs, didn't forget their pleasantries," Cavitt says. "They got hung up on using the PDA at first, but once we got through that things got better."

The last wireless mile

"Wait staff waste a lot of time walking around," explains Ian Morrison, chef and operator of the Royal Mile Pub in Wheaton, Maryland. "They take an order, then walk to the point of entry, walk back to the table and get the drinks. If they have a handheld it frees them up to sell so much more."

That's why the Royal Mile Pub's management opted to arm their waiters with four Dell (dell.com) Axim and Symbol (symbol.com) handhelds linked wirelessly to an access point in the dining room that allows them to communicate orders to the kitchen.

"A normal POS that you would use in a restaurant is menu driven," Morrison says. Staff needs to wade through a series of macro buttons or keystrokes to order an individual item. The ASI Restaurant Manager (actionsystems.com) POS software

doesn't use menus; instead it relies on a letter recognizer. A waiter need only type in a simple series of letters (such as clgt for Coors Light) and the software recognizes it in less than a second. Menus and inventory can also be updated on the wireless units from the back office, allowing for real time information.

The Royal Mile Pub staff also use the wireless units to run credit cards wirelessly through an encrypted Internet line, cutting authorization time down to a few seconds rather than up to two minutes using a dial-up connection. In the event of downtime, the pub's Internet provider created a cache in the system that can hold credit card numbers in a queue and charge them when the Internet is running again.

Tableside ordering

São Paulo, Brazil-based Nakombi restaurant started using electronic order taking at the end of 2001, when owner Paulo Barossi realized that it would be a good way to expedite customer service and avoid loss.

Some of Barossi's problems at Nakombi included the difficulty in reading the orders in the kitchen, slow service—since waiters had to take several trips to the kitchen at each order—and complications when closing checks, mainly when the consumption of the same customers included orders from the sushi bar, the bar and the restaurant—the three environments of Nakombi.

In order to expedite customer service, Nakombi replaced the orders on paper with HP (hp.com) iPAQ Pocket PC H3970 handheld, chosen because of its performance and good cost/benefit relationship.

Using Pocket Cheff from Tango Software House (pocketcheff.com), the handhelds show the restaurant's menu with all its variations and combinations possible. There is also a map of the restaurant showing the position of each seat at the table. To place an order, customers choose their meals by looking at the menu on the screen of the iPAQ.

Thanks to the Bluetooth and Wireless LAN technology, which allows the information to be sent via wireless connection, the orders are printed out in real-time in the kitchen of each environment.

The iPAQs also facilitate payment. The information is sent directly to the cashier, allowing the checks to be closed when customers ask for it. In addition, a mobile printer connected to the handheld via Bluetooth, reads credit cards—and the waiter himself runs the card in the presence of the customer, eliminating the risk of cloning or fraud.

The change from paper to iPAQ provided a reduction of 90 percent in the costs caused by operational mistakes and 15 percent in payroll. The faster service increased the turnover by 20 percent.

"With the wireless POS solution, we also offer a more personalized service," says Barossi. ■