

Touch-Button, No More Scribble it down on a Wireless Handheld

by Casey A. Neel

"We had to bite the bullet and recognize that the touchscreen button approach won't work in a handheld. We need a new interface."

--Alex Malison, CEO, ASI

By bundling ASI's patent-ed Write-On Handheld software application with Toshiba's wireless Magnia Z310 server and Pocket PC e740 with integrated 802.11b wireless connectivity, Toshiba and ASI are setting the stage to revolutionize order—taking in full service restaurants with this solution. According to the folks at ASI, the touch-button approach used in other handheld systems—including their own previous design—won't cut it.

ASI and Toshiba Unveiled this "out of the box" collaboration at the recent FSTech Show in Orlando, FL. ASI and Toshiba introduced the only system that does not require restaurant workers to toggle and scroll around, looking for menu items to place the order. Restaurant staff can simply write down the order, just like they do with a pencil and a pad, and send it straight to the kitchen via Toshiba's wireless network. ASI also reports that their Write-On Handheld is currently the only one that manages large menus (over 60 item, including drinks, full bar, wines, etc.)—while having no problem with messy handwriting. "The technical difference is that we have

written a program that uses handwriting recognition. We're not trying to use a dumb client, like a browser. We actually designed a specific program to make the order-entry more efficient," said Malison.

Everyone else has done what ASI and Toshiba were thinking of doing themselves—developing a touchscreen with the idea of adapting it to a handheld. "So how can we do that without rewriting the whole thing? The screen is so small," he said. "IBM came out with a bulky handheld. Microsoft has what they call 'Terminal Services.' Basically it's a software layer that lets you run a virtual computer and put it on a handheld. But you can't even see the thing. There's no comparison to forcing the operator to scroll around and simply scribbling it down," Malison said.

A new thing had to happen, and there were a number of factors. It had to be able to recognize small print characters, and use a Pocket PC operating system. "The approach was basically using abbreviations for the items on the menu. "It becomes the quickest way to get to an item." Coca Cola would be CC, and so on. "If you look at the scribbles that the waiters put on their pads now, they're used to doing that now." Madison said.

The only place you see handhelds right now are environ-

ments where you have 20-30 items—where the menu is very simple. It's easy to squeeze those items onto a small screen and make it functional. "By taking this approach, they'll sell it as 'we have the exact same thing as on a touchscreen system.' But what they don't tell you is that you can't fit all your products on the small screen," Madison said.

Tom Krutman, Krutman Electronics said that "the handheld is terrific and easy to use, but it's a totally new concept, so training is really key. The better you are, and the more you train the servers and managers, the better the install will be. The system was setup and tested in our offices for two weeks, and we spent about three days training their staff, and making them practice, but it was worth it."

According to Dick Roberts, POS Professionals, Inc., "In the past, conventional wisdom dictated that handhelds were only suitable for 'special' environments, such as stadiums, outdoor patios, and other situations where there was a large distance between the customer and the fixed POS station and food preparation areas. This conventional wisdom was based on handheld technology being too big, expensive, unreliable, and very hard to use. No longer is that the case. The new generation of handhelds are smaller, cheaper and more reliable," he said.