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Hand-held computers link wait staff to kitchen

By **DANA HEDGPETH**
The Washington Post

Hand-held organizers with specialized software are being used by restaurant managers to quicken service.

Action Systems Inc., a computer software company in Silver Spring, Md., has sold its system to 15 restaurants across the country for \$20,000 to \$30,000. Typically, a waiter would take down a food order with pen and paper and walk to a computer at a waiter station and punch in the order to electronically send it back to the kitchen.

ASI's paperless system not only speeds up the ordering process but lets chefs update the daily specials from their computer and beam it right to the hand-held device. No more writing the "catch of the day" on a chalkboard at the hostess stand.

"It takes 10 seconds now to update the menus," said Ian Morrison, 28, chef at the Royal Mile Pub. The Wheaton, Md., pub started using it in May.

He sat at his computer updating the daily special one recent afternoon, typing Smithfield ham with an English cheddar sauce or cedar-plank salmon

and mustard mashed potatoes. "It's that easy."

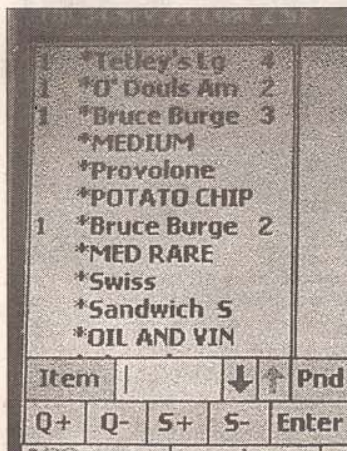
ASI, founded in 1987, last year made \$2 million in revenues and earned a net profit of 8 percent.

"It prevents waiters from having to do double-entry," CEO Alexander Malison said of writing down orders on paper, then putting them in the computer. "They can just do it by single-entry."

ASI said its hand-held computers can hold up to 7,500 items and recognize a person's handwriting without the need to learn special writing tech-

niques.

Ron Paul, president of Technomics Inc., a Chicago-based consulting firm that follows restaurant trends, said some restaurant owners may find the hand-helds too expensive, compared with a paper pad and pencil. Details on orders can also be difficult to record. For example, he said, "telling the cook to make eggs over easy, the bacon crispy and hold the dressing on the side of a salad" is hard to write down in the small space of a hand-held device, even if it does have pop-up screens, as ASI's devices do.



The Washington Post/TOM ALLEN

Specialized software speeds the transfer of diners' meal orders.