

Monday
NOVEMBER 18, 2002
50¢

Star Tribune

NEWSPAPER OF THE TWIN CITIES

Metro
Edition

B *

www.startribune.com

Handhelds deliver efficiency for restaurants

By Dana Hedgpeth
Washington Post

Ann Marie Diogo held a small, black computer as she quickly scribbled an order for a table of customers in the Royal Mile Pub in Washington, D.C.

Within moments, the kitchen received their order for fish and chips, a cheeseburger and two Cokes — without Diogo ever taking a step away from the table.

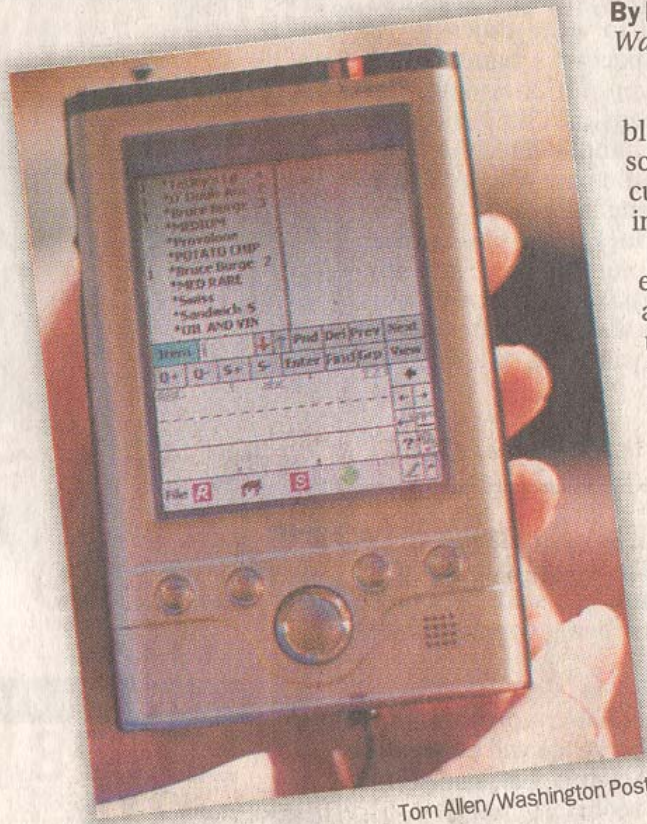
“It’s a lot more convenient,” said Diogo, 37, who has been a waitress at the Wheaton, Md., pub for five years. “Now it would be hard to move back to pen and paper.”

The computer — essentially a handheld organizer

with specialized software — is one of the latest technologies being used by restaurant managers to quicken service. The Royal Mile Pub started using the system, which includes computers for the chef and handheld devices for waiters, in May. It costs \$20,000 to \$30,000.

Action Systems Inc. (ASI), a computer software company in Silver Spring, Md., designed Royal Mile Pub’s system and has sold it to 14 other restaurants across the country. 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.

HANDHELD continues on D9:
— *Eases menu updates.*



Tom Allen/Washington Post

Some restaurants have begun using handheld systems as a convenient, efficient way to process food orders.

HANDHELD from D10

With handhelds, 'it takes 10 seconds' to update menus

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 handheld 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, the Royal Mile Pub's chef. 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."

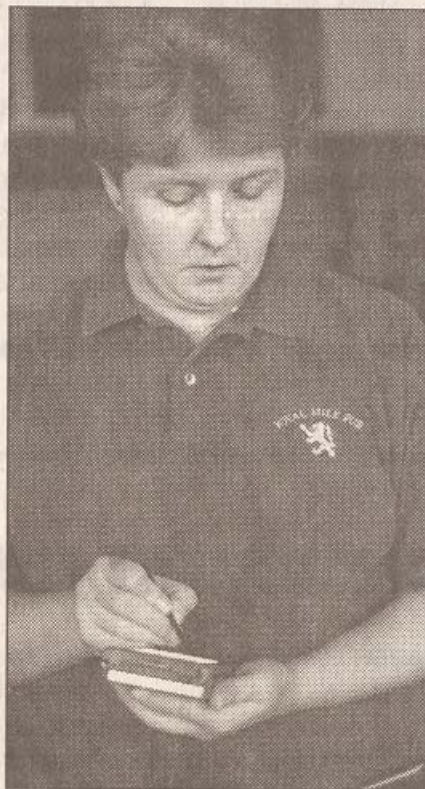
ASI, founded in 1987, last year made \$2 million in revenue and earned a net profit of 8 percent. CEO Alexander Malison, who is an electrical engineer by training, said he and

others thought of developing the handheld device for restaurants to help them cut costs and save time.

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

Restaurant owners and analysts said the technology is likely to be used in more restaurants in the next few years as businesses try to improve their profit margins and service levels.

Although ASI isn't the only company making the software, industry experts said it is one of the few that has improved the software and made it nearly glitch-free. ASI said its handheld computers can hold up to 7,500 items and recognize a person's handwriting without



Tom Allen/Associated Press

Ann Marie Diogo, who used a handheld device to take an order last month, said the paperless system is "a lot more convenient. Now it would be hard to move back to pen and paper." The Royal Mile Pub, Diogo's employer, started using the system in May.

the need to learn special writing techniques.

"The problem with them has been reliability," said Ron Paul, president of Technomics Inc., a Chicago-based consulting firm that follows restaurant trends. "It's like cell phones with dead spots."

Also, Paul said, some restaurant owners may find the handhelds too expensive compared with a paper pad and pencil. Details on orders also can 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 handheld device, even if it does have pop-up screens, as ASI's devices do.

The handheld technology of companies such as ASI does have benefits.

"It does allow you to keep the help on the floor, and anything that can improve customer satisfaction, a restaurant owner will want to use," Paul said.