Palmable, pocketable POS devices are maneuvering ever nearer to the mainstream, some developers and users proclaim

By Mitch Irsfeld

Computerized point-of-sale systems have delivered cost savings and hidden profits for decades, but tableside service always has been a process unto itself that seemed immune to the productivity gains realized through automation. That is changing in some situations, however, thanks to continuing refinements in handheld computer devices.

A smattering of mobile systems have been available for foodservice applications for nearly 20 years, but in many cases their potential never was realized fully. That was especially true in conventional full-service operations where handhelds were sometimes even thought to slow down the order-taking process.

Today some of the operators willing to trade in their pad and pencils for a new generation of wireless handheld POS devices are finding those elusive savings and profits.

Handheld POS systems are said to eliminate much of the legwork and delays involved in using a traditional POS system with fixed terminals. Rather than taking an order by hand, a server outfitted with a wireless handheld takes the order directly on the system, eliminating the time required to walk to a fixed POS station to punch in the order.

Sending orders directly to the kitchen from the table also can eliminate backups at the POS terminals, where two or more servers may be waiting to use the system. And return trips to the table also can b e eliminated if the system indicates a particular item is no longer available.

Handhelds, if properly accessorized, also can expedite check settlement by printing out checks right at the table.

With the advent of the newer lightweight units that mimic the way a traditional POS terminal operates, servers can be trained and made comfortable with the devices much faster, making them much less intrusive than earlier generations of remote-ordering systems. Some early handhelds required users to memorize combinations of numeric keys or preparation cues or constantly to refer to a cheat sheet of instructions to input orders.

The key difference with the newer systems is the user interface and the flexibility of configuration. While they all operate as part of an existing POS system, the ergonomics of wireless handheld devices requires a different approach for inputting and accessing information than that of their larger-screened, fixed-station counterparts.

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At first glance several of the new handhelds seem to be cut from the same cloth. Three POS makers, Ameranth Wireless Inc., Micros Systems Inc. and Action Systems Inc., or ASI, have rolled out Pocket PC-based wireless handheld POS systems. All are based on Microsoft's wireless Pocket PC standard, which is implemented in only a handful of devices.

The strengthened units from Symbol Technologies seem to be the favorite platform for foodservice applications, but since Pocket PC is a standard operating system, the software can be deployed on lower-cost consumer units from vendors like Compaq/Hewlett-Packard and Casio. But that's where the similarities end.

Micros, with its RES 3000 Mobile Micros, chose to port its entire touchscreen POS application into a handheld environment. Ameranth, on the other hand, elected to rewrite the user interface for its 21st Century Restaurant system to make it easier to manipulate on the handheld display. Ameranth also chose to develop communications middleware and translation software that enables its wireless system to operate with other vendors' POS servers.

And ASI took perhaps the most radical route in developing its ASI Handheld system by designing its user interface around the Pocket PC handwriting recognition capability, allowing servers to use their traditional handwritten abbreviations to enter orders.

"The only way that servers are going to feel comfortable taking orders at tableside is if you let them do what they do now, the pencil-and-pad approach," said Alex Malison, chief executive of ASI. "When you're tableside, it's a different environment. You are in front of the customer, trying to answer questions, making eye contact and offering suggestions, so the user interface needs to be as close as possible to what they are currently using. If you look at what they write, they are using abbreviations, which is what our system does."

Ed Rothenberg, Micros vice president of restaurant

*(See **ARTICLE,** page 38)*

Servers have answer to physical plant challenges, better service in the palms of their hands

Handheld point-of-sale devices are more than time savers for Todd Dukes, owner of Argus Food and Spirits in Madison, Wis. He said the wireless units made so much sense for his operation that they drove him to install a complete POS system with back-office-management capabilities.

Dukes' problem was the physical layout of his 130-seat bar and restaurant, which is located in a historic building near the Capitol Square. The kitchen is located downstairs in the back of the building, while the bar and main seating area are upstairs. The outside patio is on the first level in the front of the building.

The restaurant's most profitable daypart is lunch, but the government and financial workers who frequent Argus Food and Spirits are typically on a 30-minute lunch break.

"Our customers would come in and sit down, and it was taking 12 to 15 minutes to get them their orders," Dukes explained. "We're located in the oldest commercial building in Madison, built in 1847, so we have little to work with and can't change things."

While a standard POS system with fixed stations would have provided other benefits on the management and control side, they would not have significantly sped up the ordering and delivery process.

"In order to make it work the old way, we'd need so much staff that we couldn't turn a profit," Dukes said. "Now we are able to cut back the staff to where it should be, and we are still faster."

Dukes had reseller Bi-State Cash Register Corp. install the API POS and ASI Handheld system from Action Systems Inc., and provided 10 of his servers with the mobile devices. Alex Malison, chief executive of ASI, said Dukes was offered no special pricing consideration as an early adopter, but he added that ASI did send out a representative to verify that all components were installed correctly.

"After just two weeks in operation, we're down to between six and nine minutes per ticket, and we're not even proficient at it yet," Dukes claimed. "We've been able to eliminate the time running and table stacking, where the waiter goes from one table to the next and then another before running all three orders downstairs."

Sending orders directly to kitchen with the handheld units also has smoothed the flow of orders coming into the kitchen, Dukes said.

"A server would take other servers' tickets and drop them in the kitchen, so that would drop five to six tickets in the kitchen all at once," Dukes said. "Now that each table gets sent automatically, it distributes the workload, and it makes us even faster in the kitchen. Suddenly, the little details improve — the food looks better, the plates look better."

With the handheld units in the mix, Dukes saw the time was right to invest in a full POS system, and largely because of the handhelds, he expects the system to pay for itself in two years.

Dukes noted that he is not the only beneficiary.

"The servers are all very excited about it because it takes a lot of the management out of their job, so they can focus on the customer and increase their sales and tips," he said.