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HILDA M. PEREZ/ORLANDO SENTINEL

He's a fan. Rob Beres, a server at Del Frisco's on Lee Road in Orlando, says his hand-held notepad is efficient, giving him more time with customers.

Order of the day

Restaurant servers get a helping hand-held

By JERRY W. JACKSON
SENTINEL STAFF-WRITER

As fast as server Rob Beres writes down an order for a steak dinner at Del Frisco's in Orlando, the details are zapped to the kitchen electronically.

The days of pencil and paper for restaurant servers have been fading for years, and now the latest gadget, a hand-held wireless system, is speeding up the process.

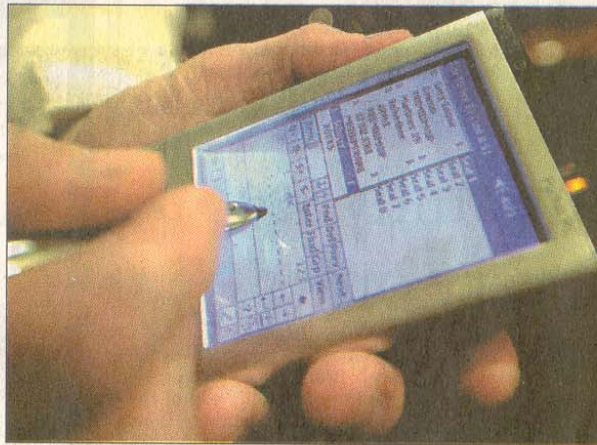
The high-tech notepad benefits customers, servers and the restaurant, said Beres, who expects the paperless trend to sweep through the industry in the coming years.

"I can take on more, I'm more organized, and you don't miss anything in the order," said Beres, 34. "You're eliminating more chances of error, and that increases the guest perception of enjoyment."

Happier customers, he said, translate to better tips.

For the past six months, servers at Del Frisco's on Lee Road have been using four Write-On Handheld units, made by Action Systems Inc. of Silver Spring, Md.

While a number of wireless "point-of-sale" systems are in use throughout the restaurant indus-



PEN IS MIGHTIER THAN PAPER

*How the electronic hand-held device wins the race**

Time to take a drink order for a table of four:

- Hand-held: 30 seconds.
- Paper: 30 seconds.

Time to get order to bar:

- Hand-held: Instantaneous.
- Paper: 1 minute.

Time to take meal order for table of four:

- Hand-held: 3 minutes 30 seconds.
- Paper: 3 minutes.

Time to get meal order to kitchen:

- Hand-held: Instantaneous.
- Paper: 1 minute.

Total elapsed time for combined orders start to finish:

- Hand-held: 4 minutes.
- Paper: 5 minutes, 30 seconds.

Time-savings for average 30 table restaurant: 45 minutes.

*Estimates vary based on complexity of orders, experience of server, distance from tables to bar and kitchen. In case of software glitch, paper wins.

SOURCE: Sentinel research

try, particularly in high-end restaurants, industry experts say ASI has overcome some of the earlier software problems that made similar systems unreliable.

"The new generation of hand-helds is smaller, cheaper and more reliable," said Dick Roberts, marketing director for POS Professionals Inc., a Longwood-based restaurant point-of-sale company that distributes the ASI system.

As a result, Roberts said, the hand-held units are no longer solely for "special" environments such as stadiums and outdoor patios and other venues where there is a large distance between the order taker and the kitchen.

They can be employed in any restaurant setting, although because of their cost, they are likely to be used mostly in high-end restaurants until the prices come down with more widespread production and use.

So far, ASI has sold the system to about a dozen restaurants throughout the country.

The hand-held system means no more walking to the bar or the kitchen to turn in a written order, no smudges, ripped pages, lost orders or downtime waiting in line to submit an order.

"We seat a lot of people, 100 to

PLEASE SEE **HAND-HELD, H2**

Managers can instantly see every detail of every order

HAND-HELD FROM HI

150 at one time, and this has really speeded things up," said John Walker, co-owner of the Cinema Cafe in Virginia Beach, Va.

While there are about a half-dozen hand-held systems on the market now, Walker said, the newer ASI system's software works with other hand-held units, such as Palm and Toshiba brands, which helps hold down costs.

"The price is coming down, and the systems are getting faster," Walker said.

The devices, which cost \$800 to \$1,000 per unit plus a small fee for the software, save money for restaurants by providing oversight for management.

Every detail — from which orders are for what table, to when the orders were sent to the kitchen — is instantly available to the on-duty manager.

"I carry one myself," Del Frisco's general manager Sabrina Chandliss said. She clicks onto the "manager's" section of the hand-held screen with a special password. "We can see what's going on, minute by minute."

Everything on the check

Restaurants also save money, she said, by having greater control over what is served to guests.

The electronic system, Chandliss said, reduces the chances that an expensive bottle of wine, for example, might be uncorked for customers and never recorded on the order, or never paid for.

Such "off-the-check" items have been an ongoing industry concern and are reduced, or eliminated entirely, through the

electronic system.

"Servers can't get anything out of the kitchen without a charge," Chandliss said.

Roberts, a former IBM employee who has been in the point-of-sale business for years, said the ASI system is particularly "user friendly" in comparison to older systems.

While other hand-held systems typically employ a "touch-button" approach, that can make them more cumbersome and less flexible. The ASI system has software that allows servers to write in freehand, allowing for nuances such as "medium-well" for a steak order, just as with a paper order.

System wins converts

Simone Sarracino, a server at Stack's Restaurant in Menlo Park, Calif., where hand-holds have been used since the breakfast-lunch eatery debuted in October, said the system can be "a bit tricky to learn at first," but wins converts fast. "Change is difficult, but everyone loves it now," said Sarracino, 32.

The system uses the Windows operating system, and has a split screen, with menu items on the right and the individual order on the left.

Using a stylus, the server writes the order in code on the left, such as FC for fruit crepe. When fruit crepe pops up on the menu, the item is "highlighted" to the order side of the screen.

Other instructions can be added, such as NP, for "no potatoes" or AF, for "add fruit." Once complete, the server taps a large S on the bottom of the screen to send it to the kitchen.

"It's very fast," Sarracino said.

"Technology is coming full

sail into the industry," said Joseph Bonaccorse, president of the International Guild of Hospitality and Restaurant Managers, based in Orlando. "But not everyone is going to go for this particular technology."

Use expected to grow

Although costs are falling, the price is still too high for many restaurants, and there is always going to be "the old school," Bonaccorse said, "who prefer to wipe their fingers on their apron, lick the pencil and write it down."

Bonaccorse estimates that while perhaps 30 percent to 40 percent of all restaurants have gone to some type of computer point-of-sale system in recent years, only a tiny fraction have digital pad and pens.

But he said he expects they will spread, as prices come down and restaurants see that they can increase their productivity with them.

While many restaurants have gone to central point-of-sale computers for order taking in the past seven or eight years, reducing or eliminating some of the pad and pencil work, such systems still are generally slower than hand-held systems.

Del Frisco's in Orlando, for example, went to a computer point-of-sale system three years ago, but if one server is using the touch-screen computer station to file an order, other servers must wait their turn.

"Plus, that was a two-step process," Beres said. The digital pad and pen is tops, he said.

"It just makes my job easier," Beres said.

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