

Fast Casual Restaurants Build Relationships with Customers through Technology

From the moment you walk in the door of most fast casual restaurants, it's clear that you are not entering a quick service environment. Whether the restaurant has a roaring fireplace, a thematic mural, or warmly colored decor, there's no doubt the restaurant wants the customer to feel comfortable hanging around for a while. Although the food service is quick, the eating experience can be leisurely, especially for businesspeople who work remotely while telecommuting or on the road. The fast casual genre provides a comfortable alternative to an office that just so happens to be in the business of selling sandwiches, coffee and pastries.

To aid in that experience, fast casual restaurants looked to technology as a way to increase dwell times. Many incorporated televisions and wifi internet access in hopes that the technology would increase customer's time in the restaurant. While this new strategy has been successful, it hasn't forged deeper relationships with their customers. Uncontrolled content on the televisions allowed for advertising of competitors in their dining rooms and wifi increased dwell times but sales are not always impacted by the one cup of coffee customers.



Beyond the traditional digital menuboards, technology can be used within the restaurant segment to increase order accuracy, build relationships, capture knowledge and create more of a relationship with the consumer.

Personalized Ordering Made Easy

Fast casual restaurants frequently feature complex menus from which customers place equally intricate orders—extra mayo on this, hold the croutons on that. Even when diners plan to hang around awhile, they still want to get their food quickly, and, of course, they want the order to be right.

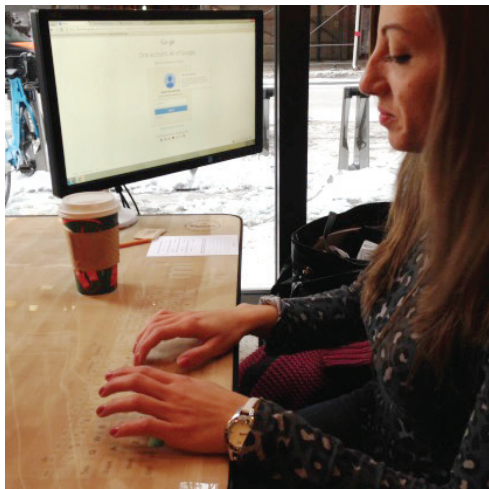
Self-service kiosks move lines along swiftly, but even more importantly, they help ensure accuracy even with the most involved orders. It doesn't matter if there's a lot of background noise or a demanding customer vying for the cashier's attention—the kiosk gets the order right, in clear print, every single time.

Kiosks also make it easy to offer additional food and beverage suggestions at the point of sale—a red wine that pairs well with a barbecue bacon cheeseburger or a salad that complements cream of tomato soup. Customers receive a genuinely helpful recommendation while restaurants have an opportunity to sell an additional item. Lastly, kiosks give the opportunity to capture metrics and buying patterns to help market much more strategically to their customers.

A Mobile Office, Minus the Laptop

Cafés and coffee shops are no longer populated solely by the stereotypical tortured writer. Roughly 13.4 million people work outside a traditional office these days, according to the U.S. Census American Community Survey. Many remote workers find fast casual restaurants to be an approachable alternative to a home office or a reliable WiFi-enabled bastion while they're on the road.

However, anyone who's tried to gather a group of people with laptops around a café table knows it's tough to make everything fit, especially when you add cups of soda and bowls of soup to the mix. Technology innovations streamline the mobile office by integrating computers and displays into tables—either in the tabletop or a wall beside it.



The Importance of Connections

When properly used, technology is a tool that helps fast casual restaurants connect and intensify relationships with their customers. In its various forms, technology helps an already welcoming environment become even more inviting. The connections built through these technologies will go a long way toward establishing long-lasting relationships between fast casual restaurants and their customers—creating an office away from the office and a home away from home.

A solution from NEC called miSEAT solves these problems. This is a fully developed work station that includes a NEC LCD display, an easy-to clean touch “tablecloth” with an embedded keyboard and touchpad, an induction charging station for mobile devices, as well as a Near Field Communications (NFC) reader all integrated into existing restaurant tables. This solution allows customers to log into applications like Google docs, collaborate with others, display presentations and use other cloud enabled technologies they can access through the Internet. Even with brand specific applications, customers can place orders from the table so they don’t have to give up their seat. Plus guests with kids can entertain them with preloaded games. Restaurants can also incorporate their branding onto the tables, as well as do monthly and quarterly promotional marketing.



Sharing Community Bonds

Many fast casual restaurants deeply root themselves within their communities by sponsoring youth sports teams and partnering for school or nonprofit fundraisers. Often all of this good work goes on in the background, but digital signage provides a conduit for sharing this commitment with the public.

Restaurants can, for example, run footage from a local festival or a championship Little League game and they can let patrons know that 20 percent of their check that night will go to support an area charity. Guests waiting to order will not only appreciate having something to look at to reduce waiting time but will embrace that dedication to community while being inspired to participate in related promotions.



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