

February 2011

5 Ways to Upgrade with Technology

By: Josh Bob



Foodservice is not known for its technology early adopters; heck, it took more than a decade for OpenTable to get any hold in the industry. Confronted with a new high-tech idea, the first thing most restaurant owners want to know is: *Who else is using it?*

That doesn't mean the industry can't be changed. Here are five ways that technology is shifting the way restaurants can interact with customers.

1. Better Ordering

Customers read the menu, choose a dish, tell the server: That's how ordering works right now, and it's hard to imagine it getting much simpler. Yet there are so many ways that the process could be improved, and these companies are leading the charge:

1. [MenuPad](#): An iPad-based menu in which guests can see pictures of the dishes, read reviews about each, and look up nutritional information before ordering.
2. [Exit41](#), [GetQuik](#), [Olo](#) (formerly GoMobo): Users order food online, then pick it up (or have it delivered). How long before they are preordering meals in exchange for 20 percent off the check?
3. [SmartCellar](#): See wine lists, reviews and availability on an iPad right at the table. Who needs a sommelier?

2. More Efficient Bill Settlement

Think about how many times we've all been ready to leave, only to sit at the table either waiting for the server to bring the bill, or waiting for them to return with it. Now imagine that never had to happen again, thanks to these programs:

1. [Lecere](#): Tableside order entry and payment processing speed up the entire experience—worth a fortune in an industry where turning over tables 10 percent faster is a huge achievement.

2. [TabbedOut](#): Customers who are ready to leave can see their tab at any time, close it out and pay right from their table, using their cell phones.
3. [TableTopMedia](#): A combination of MenuPad and Lecere, TTM offers guests the ability to browse menu items, view specials and pay at the table.

3. Improved Communications

Restaurants have long used the ubiquitous comment card to obtain feedback from customers; more recently some have been including a survey request at the bottom of guest checks. The effectiveness of these campaigns varies from “not very” to “not at all,” which is why many restaurants are starting to turn to new companies like [FourSquare](#), [Gowalla](#) and these startups:

1. [Textaurant](#): One of a number of companies trying to solve the problem of waiting list management at restaurants. This technology eliminates the ugly pagers and instead sends a text when a table is nearly ready. Customers can join the queue from anywhere (mobile phone or computer).
2. [SurveyontheSpot](#): Instead of asking you to fill out the survey later, businesses can offer instant surveys and obtain feedback much more quickly.
3. [SaveMyTable](#), [VillageVines](#): While OpenTable owns the U.S. reservation market, some smaller upstarts are taking them on, with various special features.
4. [GoodEatsForMe](#): Social analytics for restaurants, allowing managers to see (in real-time) who their customers are and what they’re saying about the service, food and atmosphere.

4. More Dynamic Online Presence

Why should guests care about your website? If your site hasn’t been changed since 2002 and features an animated .gif border, they probably shouldn’t. But if your site makes it easier for them to find information, make a reservation, get directions or even place an order, it’s probably worth taking notice. And if there’s a useful mobile component, all the better!

1. [SinglePlatform](#): This offering allows restaurants to manage their complete digital presence in one place. Websites can include menus, specials and events, and information can be converted to mobile-optimized size and social media pages.
2. [Chompstack](#): A hosted platform for creating and managing mobile websites.

5. Greener Practices

When Kermit the Frog said, “It’s not easy being green,” he was ahead of his time. These companies make it just a bit easier:

1. [Vegawatt](#): Allows restaurants to use their waste oil to generate electricity and hot water.
2. [EcoMovement](#): Green consulting for businesses, including restaurants. Green isn’t easy, so get help!
3. [KangoGift](#): Why send a gift card when you can simply text someone their gift and let them pick it up by showing their phone?_

—By Josh Bob, the founder and c.e.o. of [Textaurant](#), recently selected as one of the first recipients of the [500 StartupsTwilioFund](#). Learn more at [Textaurant.com](#).

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