

# Techtonics

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GROUND BREAKING TECHNOLOGY

## Kitchen Display Systems

Restaurant operators are of two minds when it comes to the kitchen. Ask an operator what makes her restaurant unique and invariably she will respond that it is the menu items, but ask about the state of kitchen operations and more likely than not she'll shudder with disgust.

Today, efforts to improve speed and efficiency in the kitchen tend to revolve around design, equipment and most of all training. Even as foodservice operators have focused on improving efficiency through the use of information technology systems in other aspects of the operation, by and large kitchens run as they always have—with kitchen line workers reading printed or hand written chits.

Restaurant operators are finally beginning to place a higher priority on bringing technology into the kitchen to help drive speed, efficiency and accuracy. According to the recent Techtonics survey of kitchen technology, 41% of the restaurants polled report that technology is the "primary" focus for improving kitchen speed, efficiency and accuracy.

There have been a few structural and technological hurdles that have made it difficult for restaurants to get technology into the kitchen. Space limitations and the harshness of the environment has always proved to be a deterrent. However, as more and more restaurants have moved to non-graphical kitchen management systems, those barriers are already beginning to fall. Kitchen printers and bump bars are bow rugged enough to withstand the rigors of the kitchen environment.

A bigger challenge has been getting the right information flowing through the kitchen. The recent, and ongoing wave of point

of sale (POS) replacement, however, has helped significantly to improve the flow of information into the kitchen.

The biggest challenge and the greatest opportunity lies with the two-way flow of information out of an emerging generation of kitchen display systems. Unlike the earlier wave of systems that focused solely on helping kitchen workers take care of orders, intelligent KDS will be able to route information back to servers, managers and other frontline personnel.

The goal, experts note, is to help servers be proactive and interactive with guests. Rather than spending time in the kitchen checking on order, servers will be able to offer guests real and useful information. ("Your steak will be ready in seven minutes, can I get you another beer while you are waiting?") Just as importantly, the two-way flow of information will also provide far more accurate wait time estimates for smoother table management.

The advantages don't stop there. If a KDS can be tied into the POS, why not have the same data carry into wireless pagers, or the valet system? It's not too hard to imagine a pager that will accurately count down time, based on feedback from a KDS as well as other data from the POS, (cappuccino served, credit card swiped).

Perhaps the most important element, however, will be the ability to put together reports and alerts for the kitchen line employees. As food prep employment grows in the industry, the need for better reporting and control will only increase. In fact, The National Restaurant Association predicts that food prep positions will grow more than 20% over the next decade.

By most accounts, the next generation of kitchen display systems are already in the works and will be implemented within the next six months to a year. While true integration with paging, valet and other systems may be further off, already restaurants seem prepared to bring the same level of technology sophistication that exists at the point of sale and back office to the kitchen. ■

### Techtonic Bullets

- The NRA predicts employment for food-prep workers will grow 20.2% and will be the fastest growing sector of the industry over the next 10 years.
- In the 2005 Restaurant Industry Technology Study, 45.7% of respondents indicated that they use a kitchen display system.
- According to leading technology vendors, a new generation of kitchen display systems will be available in the next six to twelve months.

### Restaurant Operations Efficiency

