WIRELESS POS TECHNOLOGY

Electronic Menu Systems Have Finally Arrived

by Jeremy Rock

We are all aware that technology is changing at a fast pace and that, like it or not, we all have to adapt to the new way of life. One only has to take a look at the changes in cell phones and other wireless devices to realize the impact that this is having on the way we live and conduct business. It seems as though the general public is finally getting used to operating computerized technology as many of the day-to-day functions are being automated. Most people don't go to banks for cash any more. They either use an ATM or an electronic debit or credit card. People have access to e-mail and are familiar with surfing the Web. Sure, there is an older generation who may have difficulty adapting to some of the technology, but you would be surprised how many of them are quite comfortable with most of the computerized technology available on the market today. It is not surprising that hotels are starting to look at ways to integrate technology into their rooms' design to accommodate the impending change in the way we live.

About a year ago, InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG) began an initiative to design and develop a model for their new Holiday Inn prototype hotel. The concept was to include new and innovative technology and style into the overall design of their hotels, while trying to maintain the rich heritage of the Holiday Inn brand. The introduction of the new technology was meant to not only provide guests with the latest technology but also increase the hotel's overall productivity.

As part of the new technology initiative, the IHG applied technology department worked with Mark Snyder (SVP brand management, Holiday Inn Hotels & Resorts), Ameranth and Intel Corporation to develop the next generation of wireless point-of-sale (POS) technology for their new prototype Holiday Inn hotel. Ameranth already had experience in developing their 21st Century Hotel® wireless POS software which provided functionality for wireless handheld technologies. They were also already partnered with UniFocus who,

among other things, specialized in providing electronic guest surveys that could be deployed utilizing wireless technology. Guests would be given the ability to order restaurant menu items directly through an electronic medium, while also allowing them the ability to access other information of value. Initially this additional information was focused on information about the hotel. However, it quickly became obvious that by allowing guest's access to the Internet, they would have access to all sorts of information and services. What emerged was an innovative wireless electronic menu system called E-menu.

Ameranth Technologies CEO Keith McNally said, "The possibilities for the use of the product are endless." In a nutshell, the concept is to place a tablet PC in an ergonomically designed stand at every table in the restaurant. The PC would provide customers with an electronic menu of food and beverage offerings in the establishment and contain pictures of the various dishes, as well as a description of the ingredients that are used to make up the menu item. For those patrons who would like to have wine with their meal, the system would recommend wines to go with their meal selection. In addition, the menu could provide information on a particular wine and whether it is available.

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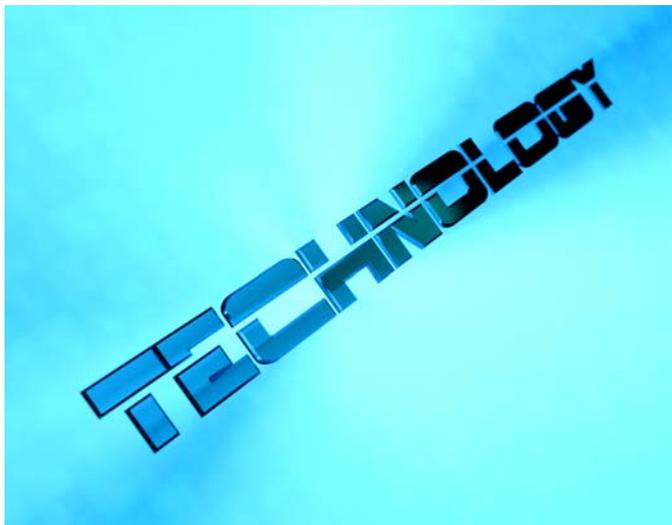
For those customers who are concerned about their diet, the application has the ability to provide the complete nutritional breakdown of the meal, along with an estimate of the calories and fat content. In fact, if you are on a diet such as Atkins, South Beach or Weight Watchers, the menu can suggest possibilities to closely match a particular diet. Customers can download the information and have it printed to take with them in hard copy. Alternatively they can e-mail the information to themselves.

UniFocus CEO Mark Heymann said, "The other features of the system take the concept of an Internet café to a whole new level."

One of the key components of the overall application is the guest feedback feature that was developed by UniFocus. Heymann said, "Traditionally the problem with guest surveys has been that by the time the manager gets to see the results of the survey, the guest has long since departed the property. As such, they cannot take immediate action to address a bad guest experience. The problem is particularly exacerbated in restaurants, where customers may not be affiliated with or staying in the hotels. As such, you are unable to have the opportunity to rectify or address the situation."

With the UniFocus application the guest can fill in the survey while they are at the restaurant. The re-sults of the survey can be conveyed to the manager immediately via a page or other form of instant messaging. Then, the manager has an opportunity to address the situation prior to the customer leaving and can turn a potentially lost client into a repeat customer.

In addition to the guest feedback application, UniFocus has also developed an employee performance evaluation assessment that ties into the system. The application shortens the internal evaluations by cross-referencing the electronic information obtained from the system.

"Holiday Inn® Hotels & Resorts is a showpiece of what technology can do for the customer, employee and the entire hotel organization," said Jon Stine, global industry manager for retail-consumer package goods, Intel Corporation. "From the backend to the registration desk, Intel® technology is at the heart of this new hotel experience. Through strategic teamwork with world-class companies like Holiday Inn Hotels & Resorts and Ameranth, Intel is driving solutions that are transforming the future of the hospitality industry powered by Intel Xeon™ processor-based servers, that analyze and manage information in real time, along with tablets and PDAs powered by Intel Centrino™ mobile technology and

E-menu System

Ability to offer the menu in multiple languages This benefits international guests who enjoy reading a menu in their own language.

Functionality in multiple currencies A guest from another country can see what the charges are going to be in their own currency.

Ability to increase the font size to accommodate people with vision problems This is convenient for people with poor vision or who simply left their corrective lenses at home.

Adjustments "on-the-fly" to accommodate menu changes If the chef wants to advertise the daily special or if the restaurant runs short of an item, the menu can be updated immediately to reflect the changes.

Automatically changing to reflect the time of day and meal period Often, customers who arrive during the late morning or early evening are not sure if they can still order a specific item. The menu can be set to reflect the correct meal-times and as such only display the items that are available at that time.

Access to "e-newspapers" as well as access to e-mail This feature is especially targeted toward business clientele who are on the go. They can check the news and their e-mail while they are waiting for their meal to arrive or while they are eating. In addition, it may help to alleviate that uncomfortable feeling people have when they dine alone.

Access to games and videos Families can keep children occupied while they wait for their food. This can also help to reduce potential disturbances in the dining room.

Check on future availability at the hotel and book reservations Hotels are always trying to advertise various features at the hotel in an effort to garner repeat business. This is an excellent way to promote the hotel for future business.

Ability to purchase airline tickets and call local cabs Corporate travelers can connect to airline carriers to purchase their tickets from the comfort of their dining room chair. In fact, if they are staying in an airport hotel, there is the potential to tie directly into the airline's system and obtain their boarding pass. Local cab companies would also have a tie into the application so that guests could request a cab when needed.

Concierge feature The system would also have a concierge feature which would allow customers to look-up local attractions. For example, should the weather be bad, a family could find an indoor activity rather than going to the zoo.

Place the room service menu online. Basically the hotel guest can access the hotel's Web site and order room service through the online menu.

Intel XScale® technology that provide guests with an enhanced and innovative hotel experience."

On Jan. 12, 2004 IHG opened the doors to the Holiday Inn Gwinnett Center in Duluth, Ga., just north of Atlanta. The hotel is the prototype for the next-generation hotel and was designed to test their new customer enhancements and technological innovations. Mark Snyder said, "With this hotel we believe Holiday Inn has arrived at the perfect convergence of technology and brand authenticity that will define the hotel experience of the future."

The hotel was also selected as the first hotel to install the new E-menu application. Holiday Inn plans to monitor and gauge customer feedback to the electronic menu system to determine if they will continue to install the system in their other hotels.

The opening of the hotel coincided with the announcement by InterContinental Hotels that they will be installing high-speed Internet access in all of the Holiday Inns by the end of 2004 and will be providing this service free of charge to their guests.

Jeff Welch, the general manager of the hotel, said, "[We are] very excited about the new product and look forward to hearing the feedback of the customers over the course of the next few months." Welch said initially the E-menu devices would attract patrons who oth-

erwise would not frequent a restaurant that is located in a hotel. He expects additional foot traffic from customers who were not staying at the hotel, which would also help offset the initial cost of the system. In addition, he expects to market the key attributes of the hotel to customers who would ordi-

narily not be aware of these features. These include banquet and meeting room facilities, guestrooms and the new technology that is installed in the rooms. In addition, he would highlight the fitness center, pool and restaurant facilities.

He mentioned that while the system would eventually be interfaced to the POS, it would initially be installed as a standalone application. This was being done to tweak the system in its initial installation stage. In anticipation of this the restaurant would still be staffed with adequate wait staff who would be able to assist customers with their orders. Initially, the hotel planned to install a dozen motion tablet PCs powered by Intel Centrino mobile technology. However this number could be increased, based on demand. The E-menu application would reside on an Intel

Xeon processor-based server that is located in the back of house computer room. Welch said that he could see the system eventually tying into an inventory management and online electronic purchasing application if they were implemented.

You don't have to have an imagination to

> The application has the ability to provide the complete nutritional breakdown of the meal, along with an estimate of the calories and fat content.

see the overall benefits of an all-encompassing system that provides access to so much information. The system could eventually be interfaced to most of the major hotel systems including the voice over IP-based communications systems. By tying an application such as this to the voice over IP system, guests would be able to access a multitude of features and services not previously available from the confines of the guestroom.

Keith McNally was right when he said, "The uses for this application go beyond that of the restaurant."

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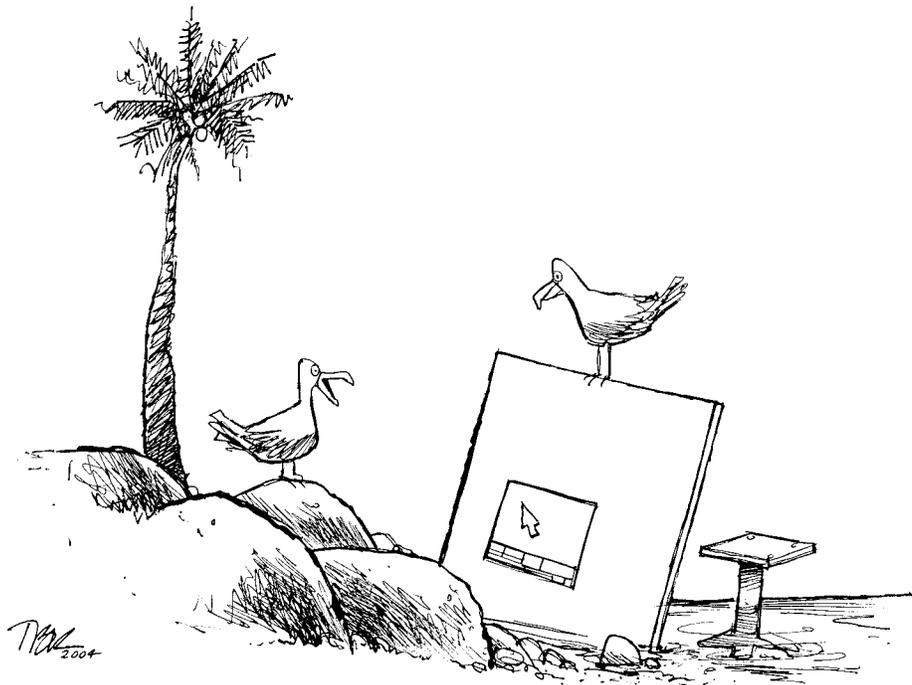
"Well, well! What do you know? It's one of those newfangled e-menu tables we've been hearing so much about. Want to play a little blackjack before we order or should we just go ahead with the appetizers?"