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Delivering a Better Burger

An Austin, Texas-based restaurant chain sees an immediate improvement in order times and guest satisfaction scores after deploying LRS' Table Tracker.

By Richard Slawsky | Contributing writer, FastCasual.com

MIGHTY FINE BURGERS FRIES SHAKES

The players

Long Range Systems (LRS) is a leading global provider of on-site paging, guest management, business intelligence and market research tools. The company's hardware and software solutions are used in a variety of settings, including the hospitality, medical, retail and automotive industries. Specifically for fast casual restaurateurs, LRS developed Table Tracker: the fast casual food-delivery system that streamlines operations and improves customer satisfaction. Table Tracker helps food runners deliver food faster, instead of wandering around the restaurant looking for guests.

Mighty Fine Burgers, Fries & Shakes is a counter-service fast casual restaurant with four locations and a food truck in the Austin area. As a winner of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, Mighty Fine Burgers strives for excellence in both food and service. Its mission is to guarantee that all guests are delighted from the minute they walk in the door until the time they leave. The company's philosophy is based on seven key business drivers: speed of service, food quality, Texas hospitality, cleanliness, team members, accuracy and value of the entire experience. Any proposals to change operations are evaluated against these key business goals to determine if they compromise or support them.

The challenge

As a counter-service restaurant, Mighty Fine Burgers operated under a system in which guests would place their orders and then wait for their names to be called. Unfortunately, the combination of the name shouting and the loud music in the restaurants created a noise and stress level that was drawing complaints from customers. Rather than being able to sit down and relax after placing their orders, guests were waiting in an already-congested high-traffic area and listening for their names to be called.

"We're so high-volume, when we start calling out names we're not only calling them out one after the other rapidly, those guests have already begun their conversations," said Gini Quiroz, director of team member engagement with MFB operator K&N Management.

"Guests were having to return to the counter because they weren't sure if their name had been called," Quiroz said. "They found it necessary to focus on the name calling instead of simply just enjoying the wait. Your experience of dining out shouldn't begin once you get your food; it should begin once you walk in."

In addition, because it takes a different amount of time to prepare a shake than a burger, guests often would have to listen for their names twice: once for a shake and once for a burger. The confusion meant that food quality wasn't what it should have been because guests weren't getting their meals as quickly as possible.

Restaurant management knew the system needed to be improved. Any change to restaurant procedures, though, needed to be viewed through the lens of the company's key business drivers.

"When we change a process or implement something new, we ask ourselves, 'How is it affecting things that are supposed to be driving our business?'" Quiroz said. "When we make a decision, is it something that is positively affecting our key business drivers? If it's not, are we focused on the right things?"

The solution

To improve ambiance and overall guest satisfaction, Mighty Fine Burgers decided to implement LRS' Table Tracker after hearing about the system from another fast casual operator.

Restaurants incorporating the Table Tracker system mount RFID tags underneath tables in the dining room to identify the location of each table. When a guest places an order, the cashier gives him or her a Table Tracker — a device about the size of a typical restaurant pager — and a timer is started for that order.

As the guest places the Table Tracker on a chosen table, the device reads the location and sends that information to a touchscreen display behind the counter. When the order is ready, a runner checks the screen and knows exactly where the food should be delivered, ensuring guests receive their food as quickly as possible.
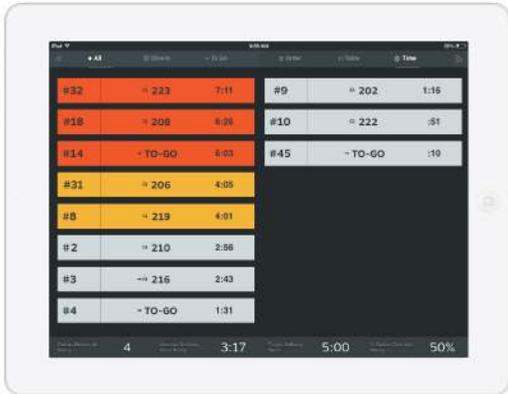
And if guests sit somewhere other than a dining room table, the Table Tracker functions as an ordinary pager to alert them that their orders are ready.

To maximize the effectiveness of Table Tracker, Mighty Fine Burgers created a new position in its restaurants, dubbed The Lobby. Because guests no longer have to return to the counter to pick up their food, the main focus of the person working in The Lobby is to expedite the food and deliver it to the guests' tables as quickly as possible.

"The servers are able to greet the guest and hand the food directly to them, which we see as an opportunity to have more face-to-face time with our guests," Quiroz said. "We find that having that extra touchpoint increases our level of Texas hospitality within our dining room and gives us a bit more presence out there."

The results

The restaurant was able to see measurable results immediately upon installing Table Tracker, shaving more than a minute off guests' wait times. For a restaurant serving more than 750 burgers a day, average wait times fell to three to four minutes from four to five minutes previously, more on par with a quick-service restaurant than a typical fast casual restaurant.

The system also provided specific analytics about order times. Prior to Table Tracker, orders were manually counted and timed, making data from
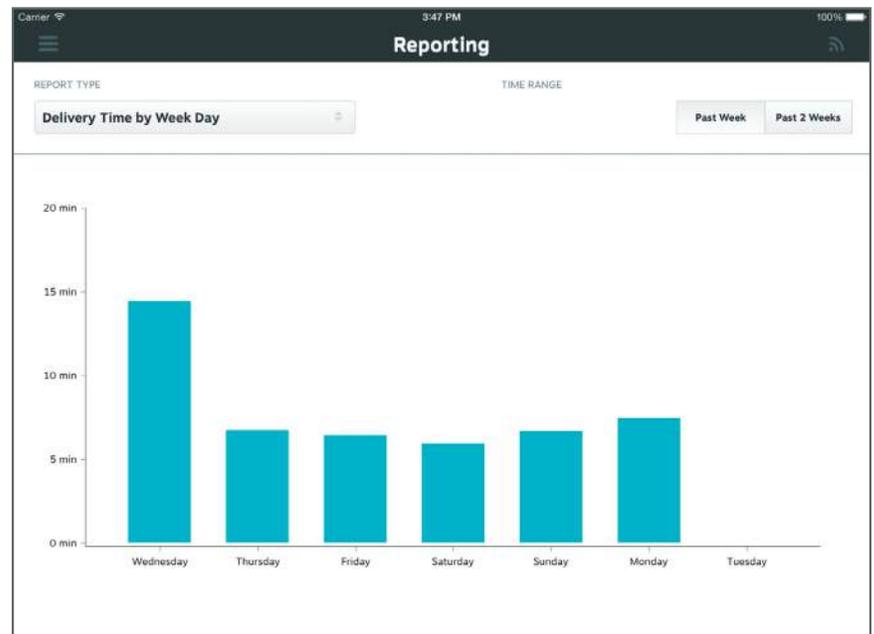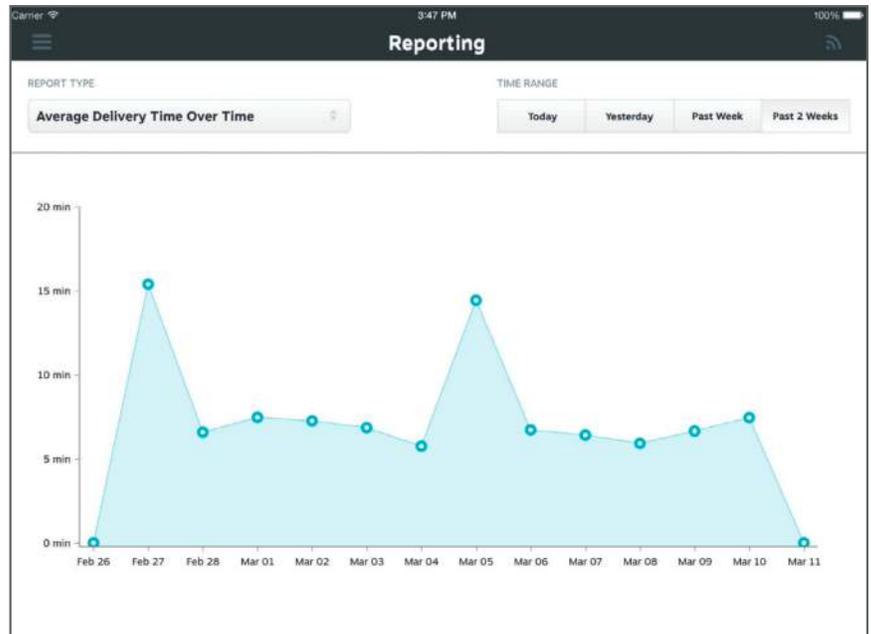
the day's food orders more of an educated guess. And because times were calculated based on when an order was complete rather than when it was received by the guest, those times likely weren't a true measure of how long it took for that guest to receive his or her food.

In addition, matching Table Tracker with the new position in The Lobby also helped the kitchen staff become more efficient and accurate when putting together orders. Kitchen staff were able to focus more on meal preparation, fielding questions to The Lobby person and decreasing errors.

The restaurant also saw a significant difference in customer satisfaction after installing Table Tracker. Instead of complaining about the loud noise, customers were able to enjoy the high-energy atmosphere that Mighty Fine Burgers had sought to create.

"People are no longer complaining about the noise, waiting for their meal or their food becoming cold," Quiroz said. "And that's a direct result of bringing in the Table Tracker."

Incorporating Table Tracker not only helped MFB improve its ambiance and environment, it also generated measurable improvements in terms of speed of service, hospitality, accuracy and quality.

"We were reminded that just because we were doing really well, it didn't mean that we couldn't do better," Quiroz said. "We didn't realize we were

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going to improve our speed of service that much; we just wanted to improve atmosphere and the experience. While that improved quickly, we saw a turnaround in speed of service and we are more aware than ever that every minute matters."