SPONSORED BY:

LRS
Long Range Systems

Taking a Look at Table-Location Solutions

The fast casual restaurant landscape is becoming increasingly competitive. A table-location solution can help an operator get a jump on the competition.

By Richard Slawsky | FastCasual.com

TT **Table Tracker**
DELIVER FOOD FASTER

The fast casual model has seen tremendous growth over the last 15 years. According to data from Chicago-based research firm Euromonitor and cited by the Washington Post, the segment has grown by more than 550 percent since 1999, more than 10 times the restaurant industry as a whole. Top player Chipotle has seen its revenue quadruple over that time, with brands such as Panera Bread and Five Guys Burgers and Fries not far behind.

And the segment shows no signs of slowing down. Euromonitor research indicated that Americans spent upwards of $21 billion dining at fast casual restaurants in 2014.

But with that growth comes increasing competition, as new fast casual brands are popping up on nearly a daily basis. Some of those brands inevitably will fall by the wayside. Those operators who thrive, though, will be the ones who take advantage of every opportunity to gather as much information as possible to maximize the efficiency of their businesses.

A table-location solution can be a key part of that process. Still, not every solution is created equal.

"We've noticed that first and foremost, clients deploying a table location solution adopt the technology for the base utilitarian need, to deliver food faster," said Michelle Strong, chief marketing officer for Addison, Texas-based restaurant technology firm LRS.

"But after clients start using the tool, they see the value of other features like paging; for example, messaging customers that have yet to sit at a table, or notifying a to-go customer provides clients the flexibility needed when a device can both page and track," Strong said. "Plus, benefits like separating to-go versus dine-in orders and incorporating back-end analytics are important as well, along with being able to integrate the solution with other applications such as a point-of-sale system."

#20	⌂ 24	26:11	#21	→ ⌂ 11	26:11
#18	⌂ 24	26:11	#21	→ To-Go	26:11
#21	→ ⌂ 11	26:11	#21	→ ⌂ 11	26:11
#13	→ To-Go	26:11	#21	→ To-Go	26:11
#9	→ ⌂ 11	26:11	#21	→ ⌂ 11	26:11
#14	→ To-Go	26:11	#21	→ To-Go	26:11
#11	→ ⌂ 11	26:11	#21	→ ⌂ 11	26:11
#12	→ To-Go	26:11	#21	→ To-Go	26:11

| Orders Delivered Today | 3,000 | Average Delivery Time Today | 2:30 | Target Delivery Time | 3:30 | % Orders Goal Met Today | 80% |

Taking the dining room tour

Generally speaking, fast casual restaurants inhabit the space between fast food and casual dining. The environment is likely a bit more upscale than that of a fast-food restaurant, and the food is typically of a higher quality and takes a bit longer to prepare than that served in the typical burger-and-fries environment. In addition, ticket averages tend to be higher than those of most fast-food restaurants but not quite as high as in a casual-dining operation.

Still, customers place their orders at the counter, similar to the fast-food system. Although in the early days of fast casual customers waited for their numbers to be called, today the trend is for customers either to take a pager that is triggered when their order is ready for pickup or to take a number that can be mounted on a stand at the table. Counter staff then carry the food from the kitchen, searching for the proper table based on the number on those stands.

But such systems have limitations that can detract from the customer experience and cost the operator time and money. A paging system alone can be low-cost and efficient, but lead to crowding at the counter while customers wait for their orders. In addition, such a system puts the responsibility for delivering the food to the table on the guest, increasing the possibility of accidents.

With a system that relies on numbers mounted on a stand, food can become cold while staffers search the dining room for the proper table. If the customer forgets to place their number on the stand, their order can end up sitting on the counter until the customer is annoyed enough to inquire as to why they haven't received their food.

Such concerns have led operators to seek out more efficient ways of connecting customers with their food.

A more cutting-edge method of matching fast casual customers with their orders incorporates radio-frequency identification (RFID) technology as a means of locating tables. RFID uses radio-frequency magnetic fields to identify and track tags attached to objects. The tags contain electronically stored information that can be read by another device such as a handheld scanner, similar to the way logistics companies are managing inventory or retailers control shoplifting. The RFID scanning device doesn't have to "see" the tag; as long as it's in close proximity, the scanner can detect the location of the tag.

Long Range Systems, for example, leverages RFID technology in its Table Tracker, an RFID-based table-location system designed for restaurants that

"Operators can actually see how they are doing day after day, from shift to shift or from location to location. For example, they can see that there is a particular time of the day when the restaurant is underperforming and from there they can start to figure out why. They can then use that information to strengthen consistency across their brand."

— Michelle Strong, chief marketing officer, LRS

employ food runners to deliver orders to guests. When a guest places an order, the cashier gives him or her a Table Tracker, a device about the size of a traditional pager, and a timer is started for that order.

Restaurants incorporating the Table Tracker system mount RFID tags underneath tables in the dining room to identify the location of the table. When the guest places the Table Tracker on the chosen table, the device reads the location and sends that information to a touchscreen display in the expeditor area. When the order is ready, the runner checks the screen and knows exactly where the food should be delivered, ensuring guests receive their food as soon as possible. A manager can be notified if the food isn't delivered in a predetermined amount of time.

If the guest is somewhere other than a dining room table, the Table Tracker functions as an ordinary pager, alerting those who may have stepped away or are sitting in the to-go area.

Benefits of a system such as Table Tracker include speedier service and fresher food, which lead to more satisfied customers. That speedier service in turn leads to quicker table turnover, meaning operators can serve more guests in the same amount of time, resulting in increased revenue.

Accessing analytics

There's an old saying that is popular among management gurus: If you can't measure it, you can't manage it. Nowhere is that saying more true than in the restaurant industry.

While in the past operational issues such as food delivery times, guest turnover and table utilization were measured more by the manager's gut than
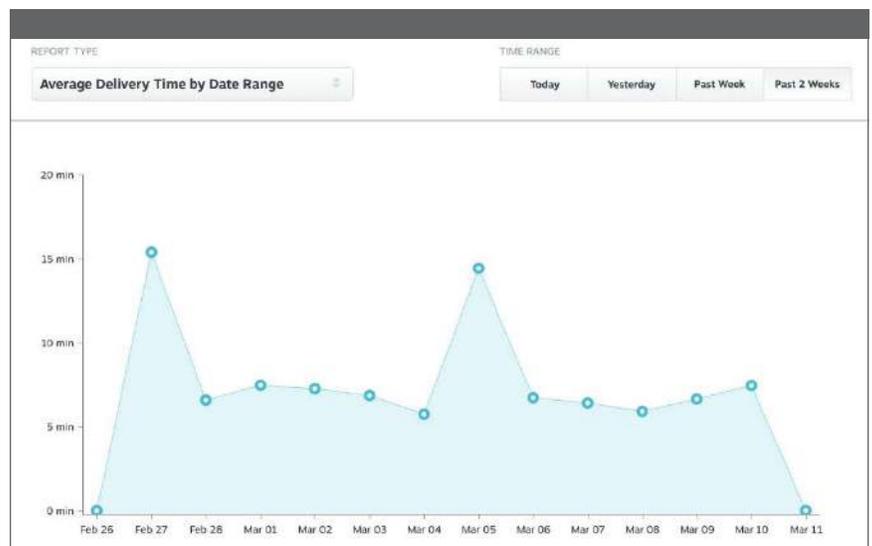
About the sponsor:

LRS is dedicated to developing technologies that help businesses provide a better customer experience. LRS integrates state-of-the-art messaging and tracking equipment with leading-edge software to streamline communications between guests and staff. Solutions include paging and messaging devices, tracking devices, guest management applications, and customer feedback tools; all aimed at giving businesses confidence that operations are running smoothly and guests are well cared for. For more information, visit www.lrsus.com.

by quantifiable information, a table-location solution such as Table Tracker can provide analytics that can be used to improve operations. Data can be accessed remotely via an online portal or in the restaurant via the application itself.

For example, information gleaned from the system may indicate that tables near the door aren't being used in winter months, indicating the need for some sort of barrier from the cold, or that two-tops aren't being used, indicating the need for more four-top tables.

"In some cases, there have been operators who have adjusted their floor layout based on that information, recognizing that they need more four-tops or two-tops or just need to move things around," Strong said.

For an individual unit, the system highlights orders exceeding a preset delivery goal allowing management to act quickly when the kitchen may need some assistance. Orders and reporting can separate dine-in performance from carryout, possibly indicating that staff tends to put carryout orders on the back burner in favor of in-store guests.

The solution also can be integrated with point-of-sale systems to measure determine that one particular menu item creates a logjam in the kitchen.

Since the Table Tracker measures ticket times throughout the day, managers can identify times when additional staff may be warranted. In addition, an operator might be able to determine that one shift is performing much better than another, indicating an issue with the staff or management on that particular shift. Such information can be used to determine the root cause of a problem, enabling the operator to solve it much more quickly.

And for multi-unit operators performance metrics can be aggregated across several locations, offering corporate and regional management better insight into their operations all from a single dashboard. For example, an operator can compare delivery times from one location to another to see if an issue is confined to one restaurant or is pervasive throughout the system, or confirm that a menu item that creates a problem in one location causes similar problems in every restaurant.

"Operators can actually see how they are doing day after day, from shift to shift or from location to location," Strong said. "For example, they can see that there is a particular time of the day when the restaurant is underperforming and from there they can start to figure out why. They can then use that information to strengthen consistency across their brand."