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Mix Well & Serve

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Store-level systems such as online ordering, self-service payment, kitchen displays, labor management, integrated ordering, and so on, can often mean the difference between leading and lagging behind the competition. But integrating new software with the POS system can be a significant hurdle to getting those systems in place.

While most every IT implementation hits some unexpected bumps, each experience teaches lessons about how to make integration go more smoothly. Step one in any POS integration process, then, should be to tap the collected wisdom of others. Hospitality Technology tapped the 20/20 hindsight of experienced operators to amass these essential integration tips:



1. Know Thy Vendor

Two-unit Chuck House has no IT staff, so when the Oklahoma-based operator added kitchen displays, confidence in its vendors was paramount. Cooperation among SoftTouch (www.softtouchPOS.com), reseller and integrator Cash Register Systems (www.crsokc.com), and back office software vendor Aspect Software (www.aspect-software.net) carried the fast casual operator over some hurdles in its Logic Controls (www.logiccontrols.com) kitchen display rollout. Chuck House had a previous relationship with SoftTouch and knew the VAR's reputation. "We felt we could work with them and we knew they would be there long term," says Jay Thurber, Chuck House's owner.

2. Match Platforms

As a Microsoft (www.microsoft.com) shop, 91-unit Italian-style eatery Buca di Beppo favors applications that use the same database and development platform. Such selection was less critical, however, when choosing a vendor for its online ordering system, because its chosen vendor, orderTalk (www.order-talk.com), hosts the solution. For Ruby Tuesday, platform is a top priority. "The reason we selected the Micros 3700 (www.micros.com) is because of its open architecture, which allows us lots of different ways to get into the database," says John Doyle, director of IT and restaurant systems. "It's a true ODBC [Open Database Connectivity], and we're able to insert any object - a table, various triggers, etc. The system interface module hooks directly into the core application engine," enabling the many seamless integrations the chain has deployed across its 950+ units.

For Wahoo's Fish Tacos, with more than 30 locations, staying within the Positouch (www.positouch.com) universe provided the comfort factor they needed to integrate the POS with back office functions including accounting, desktop management, process management, payroll, live profit and loss statements, inventory management and purchasing management. Wahoo's reseller, Custom Business Solutions (www.cbs-posi.com), developed an enterprise suite specifically for the Positouch platform called Northstar Enterprise Framework. As an early customer for the new application, Wahoo's has enjoyed the ability to help shape the software - while enduring the inevitable hiccups.

"When we started, Northstar was not in the picture and we expected to have to shop for a third party," says Mingo Lee, Wahoo's CEO.

3. Favor Pre-Integration

In order of preference, most operators favor new modules of their existing POS system, followed by a third party application that has already been pre-integrated with their POS platform and used by similar operations. Next comes a third-party application that has been integrated with other POS systems but not their own. Dead last are applications with no integration history by a vendor with little integration experience.

"We've done a few where we were the first on the [Micros] 3700, and the amount of work we put into it was almost beyond leading edge to bleeding edge," says Ruby Tuesday's Doyle. "You suffer every problem."

A strong vendor history can go a long way to mitigating the potential pitfalls. When Buca di Beppo decided to add online ordering, for example, its POS provider, Squirrel Systems (www.squirrelysystems.com), did not offer an online ordering module, but did offer a gateway application programming interface (API) for third party integration.

"We preferred integration with Squirrel, but we went with a company that did not; they had, however, done integration projects before," says Dan Cullen, senior director of IT for Buca. "We looked for someone who understands the technology and what's involved, how to get around connectivity issues."

4. Understand the Details

What methodology will the vendor use during the integration? What integration assistance does the POS vendor provide? Is ODBC or API or an interface module offered? Will data definitions require modification? What data will pass into the POS, and what needs to come back out?

Ruby Tuesday assigns its team of analysts to do feasibility studies of potential integrations, scrutinizing the vendor as well as the application.

5. Know How You Want the Integration to Work

This may sound like a no-brainer, but it can be hard to account for every detail and nuance at the white board stage. Buca's planned two- to three-month integration process stretched to four months because "there were some changes operationally in the way we wanted it to work," says

Cullen.

When Chuck House wanted to replace tickets with kitchen monitors to display orders, its POS provider, SoftTouch, offered a kitchen display integration that would support its new displays right out of the box. But following implementation, Chuck House discovered it wanted to change the way those orders displayed, allowing orders from multiple terminals to come onto each monitor in sequence. That alteration required significant work and coordination among the vendors.

"Until the pressure of going live with the system in the restaurant, you won't see every issue you have," says Thurber. "However pressed you are for time, the more study you put in before, and become familiar with the OS behind the POS system, the better you do. You have to know exactly what you want the system to do and be able to define it to the vendor."

6. Thoroughly Question References

"When you're provided a list of references, you might say, 'of course they're good, so why call?'" says Wahoo's Lee. "But you should call even if it's a solid reference and talk to people within the organization, asking them to tell you about the implementation and where the setbacks were. Speak to people at different levels and get to know about the guts. Talk to the IT people."

Even better is to develop and tap a network within the industry, enhancing the likelihood that someone within your organization has contacts at a restaurant already using the proposed software.

7. Document Everything

POS vendors should be able to provide documentation instructing third parties in how to link to their application. Whether integration is performed in-house, by the vendor, or through a joint effort, it's essential to create documentation around how that integration was executed to ease future projects and modifications.

8. Start Small

Get basic integration right before layering on the bells and whistles. A best practice is to set up the new modules with limited functionality, geographic coverage, menu items, etc., to ensure a solid foundational layer before adding to the complexity. Buca, for example, started with credit cards only for online ordering before considering coupons, gift cards, debit cards and the like, and without location-specific menus, or catering and group ordering, and began with five stores. The remainder will rollout in the first quarter, 2008.

"Start small and be methodical," advises Cullen. "The technology is one thing, but make sure the restaurant can operationally handle the outcome of the system."

When it comes to integration, forewarned is forearmed. Substantial research and planning enable operators to gain new store-level functionality while minimizing the hurdles in getting new software to talk to the POS.