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## RESTAURANT COMMUNICATIONS

*From wrist pagers to table management, innovations in communication are helping operators speed service and satisfy guests.*

### By Vicki Powers, Contributing Editor

Just like any relationship, restaurant communication is essential to maintaining a successful experience for the customers and employees. Technology plays a large part in helping to close the gaps for seamless service and empowering employees with realtime information. The latest trends in restaurant communication typically relate to wireless technology in a number of forms. These solutions, in place at restaurants such as Zaxby's, Fatz Café, and Brennan's of Houston , help cut costs, increase table turns, and improve the customer experience.

#### **Cutting costs**

Zaxby's, a fast-casual restaurant with 385 locations in 10 southeastern states, prides itself on cooking guests' food after it's ordered. While this provides customers with outstanding food quality, it takes time to prepare each order.

Two years ago, Zaxby's began testing HyperActive Bob, a predictive kitchen management system (a.k.a. robot) from Pennsylvania-based HyperActive Technologies ([www.hyperactivetechnologies.com](http://www.hyperactivetechnologies.com)) . Zaxby's believed the solution could help the restaurant achieve a shorter wait time for customers while still providing them with a freshly prepared meal. The difference is predictive technology, or the ability of a computer to predict the flow of food traffic based on an analysis of past and current events.

Cameras mounted on Zaxby's roof help HyperActive Bob predict what Zaxby's customers will order as soon as their car enters the parking lot. Bob sends those predictions to touch screens in the restaurant's kitchen that display when employees should start cooking and how much to cook.

“HyperActive Bob is a revolutionary product,” says Tripp Sessions, IT director, Zaxby's Franchising. “We can start preparing a customer's meal before they even get out of the car.”

HyperActive Bob is now installed in approximately 100 Zaxby's locations. Sessions says Bob helps the organization save on waste. In Zaxby's 11-store franchisee test, HyperActive Bob helped them save more than \$4,700 a year on waste alone. Zaxby's has even been able to take down the signs, “It's worth the wait,” inside the restaurant.

#### **Turning tables faster**

Brennan's of Houston, a fine dining establishment focused on southern hospitality, is beginning its fourth decade in the Houston area this year. Alex Brennan-Martin, president of Brennan's of Houston and related to the famed New Orleans restaurant family, relies on restaurant communication technology to move the restaurant from high tech to high touch.

“People crave good human contact in this e-mail/ATM world and using high tech allows us to be high touch and pamper our customers more,” Brennan-Martin relates. “It's one of the keys to return business

for us.”

The restaurant added GuestBridge's ([www.guestbridge.com](http://www.guestbridge.com)) Reserve, a reservation and guest management system, in early 2002. What most attracted Brennan-Martin to this restaurant-based software is its ability to take information out, manipulate it, and put it back in without any loss of information.

For table management, Brennan's of Houston assigns different time values to different sized tables for different meals. It conducted time/motion studies and added those values to the reservation system. This data provides solid information for wait list management to track how long customers have been at their table, how long others have been waiting, and enables the reservationist to quote accurate wait times.

“This is like our air traffic control software,” Brennan-Martin says. “As the restaurant gets full, you need good technology to manage the systems and avoid problems, delays, and hopefully crashes.”

Brennan's of Houston enjoys a number of benefits from this system. Brennan-Martin says it absolutely helps with customer retention, gets customers into chairs faster, and increases table turns.

### **Improving the customer experience**

Fatz Café, a South Carolina-based casual-dining chain with 34 locations, is testing wireless technology that connects customers with restaurant employees. This customer service software and hardware program by ESP Systems ([www.espsystems.net](http://www.espsystems.net)) creates a wireless bubble over the entire restaurant.

“It's important to make sure people in the restaurant understand that the guest is the reason for this — the focus is not on the technology,” says Steve Corson, vice president, HR and training at Café Enterprises, parent company of Fatz Café. “The system is there if the guest needs it.”

Fatz Café started testing ESP in October 2006, and it's currently in place in four South Carolina locations.

Servers and table bussers wear a watchlike device, which improves communication among all staff. This technology enables a hostess to view real-time table status on a monitor and page a server when new customers are seated. Customers simply page their servers when they need anything — such as drink refills or their check — and it vibrates the server's watch. The kitchen and bartender can page servers when their order is ready for pick up. Bussers can page a hostess that a table is ready for new guests.

“This technology really opened our eyes because it's a way to prevent guest dissatisfaction,” Corson relates. “It also helps servers increase table turns.”

Providing a supreme customer experience is another reason Brennan's of Houston relies on GuestBridge's Reserve. It tracks guest history and preferences that add a personal touch to interactions and communications with customers.

“We've proven to servers that their tips go up when they use this personalized customer information,”

Brennan-Martin adds. “The theory is that a new server, when armed with years of information about the customer in his hands, can easily take care of that guest.”

Servers are motivated to capture this information and return customer information to the restaurant. They get repeat clients in return.

Brennan's also added online reservations as an option for customers to make reservations at their leisure.

This has peaked at 19 percent and proved extremely effective. Some customers make their reservations exclusively online. Brennan-Martin believes customers are more likely to book reservations at a restaurant where they can be efficient, don't have to be placed on hold and can book at their convenience.

“With the advent of PDAs, I think online reservations will become even more the norm,” Brennan-Martin says.