PROFILE

Name: Cirra Systems, Chartwells and University of Utah
Location: Utah

CHALLENGE

How to speed up lines at busy university cafeteria.

SOLUTION

Cirra installed technology that dramatically expedited the ordering process by installing three kiosks where students can place a high volume of orders in record time and allowing one kiosk to serve orders to multiple smart kitchen printers (Epson's OmniLink-DT printers).

Grab And Go!

Smart Technology Speeds Up Lines At A Busy University Cafeteria

Chartwells is a recognized leader in contract foodservice management, managing dining environments at more than 270 colleges and universities nationwide. President and CEO of the company's higher education dining services, Steve Sweeney, has built the brand around Generation Z, which has replaced Millennials on college campuses. "With its extreme affinity for technology, Generation Z is described by thought leaders as 'over-connected, yet under-related," notes Sweeney. Chartwells dining programs are meant to bring students together inside social spaces to nourish and inspire. So it was not surprising when the company rolled out some cutting-edge technology in the University of Utah student cafeteria. Chuck Weaver is the director of catering there. He's an industry veteran, with over 25 years in higher education dining across the country, including Oklahoma, New Mexico, Louisiana and Texas.

Hot Spot

Weaver told us that classes let out at the same time, so the cafeteria experiences waves of students all at once. Approximately 1,500–1,700 students eat at the cafeteria every day, with the busiest time being between 11:45–1:00 pm. Within five to ten minutes, long lines form and there is limited time for everyone to be served. With multiple stations serving various food items, the lines created a bottleneck in the order-taking process. It was becoming very difficult to get orders into the kitchen fast enough to serve everyone expediently.

Last summer, the cafeteria was updating the look and feel of its food court, so it was a good time for technology upgrades. They decided to modernize the grill station (where they served burgers, fries and chicken sandwiches, etc.), since those foods
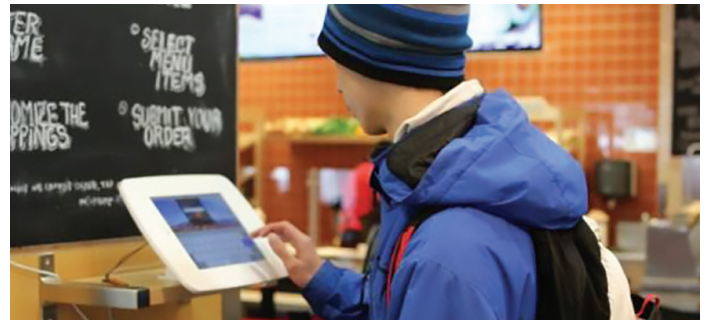
were easy to modify and seemed ideally suited for a self-service application.

Cool Tech

They decided to set up kiosks where students could place orders easily and efficiently, and devote the entire grill team to food production. This is where Cirra Systems, a company that designs a point-of-sale restaurant management system known as Tavlo, came into play. They installed technology that dramatically expedited the ordering process by installing three kiosks where students can place a high volume of orders in record time. Before the kiosks, only one person at a time ordered, slowing everything down. Within the first couple of weeks after installing the kiosks, about one and a half orders were queued per minute, and the grill station was doing 45 orders an hour—an impressive turn-around for a team of two. If a student knows the interface, they can enter their order in a matter of seconds, something Generation Z caught onto very quickly.

"It was very well received by the students, since that's how they shop and dine these days," commented Weaver. "It totally relieves the bottleneck. You'll see a gathering of people waiting for their order to be called. But the nice thing is there's no line, so customers are not deterred from coming in and ordering. After ordering, they have time to go pick up their napkins and condiments while they wait. The system is working out great."

How It Works

Since the Tavlo software is 100% cloud-based, it handle orders remotely on its own server. Instead of sending a print job to an in-house server or directly to the printer, it goes through Cirra Systems cloud, allowing one kiosk to serve orders to multiple smart kitchen printers (Epson's OmniLink-DT printers). In addition, if the cafeteria decides to add more food stations to the kiosk, Cirra Systems can do that remotely. A student can then order from multiple food stations at the same kiosk, and the software can send each order directly to the right kitchen printer / station.

Smart printers interacting with smart software makes the whole thing work. "The entire Epson OmniLink™ lineup is great, because with one kiosk we can send multiple orders to 'slave printers' which gives us so much flexibility, and they're so easy to work with," commented Jim Ngo, president of Cirra Systems. The Epson print server connects to the Internet, which means it can receive print jobs directly from Cirra System servers. Sending the order directly from the kiosk to the printer significantly cuts down on errors. The order sent is exactly what the student wants; there's no room for miscommunication between students and order takers. "Fortunately, Epson was there with the right product," said Ngo.

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The entire system was installed quickly. "We didn't have any downtime during the installation," noted Weaver. "It only took one day for them to install it. We offer other concepts, but the burger station was the easiest to do first since there was a column where we could situate the hardware," said Weaver. "We are looking into other applications for the future, and I'd like to see the self-serve concept rolled out in as many locations as we can."

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Fast and Easy

A major advantage of the Tavlo Cloud is that the on-premise equipment is light and inexpensive, made up of just three tablets and the Epson smart printer. Since configuration and maintenance is handled by Cirra Systems, installation and ongoing support is a breeze. One of the biggest technology complaints in food service is that systems are difficult to maintain, they frequently go down, and getting service back up and running takes too much time. Ngo had a vision to take the onus of maintenance issues away from restaurant owners and handle it for them. "The restaurant operator can sleep well at night," commented Ngo. "We're taking care of the maintenance, and anything else they may want changed in the system."

The customer seems to agree with this approach. "They were so easy to work with," he said. "Jim (Ngo) molded his services and system around our application. He didn't try to push some other product or agenda. It was easy and hassle-free. We are very pleased with the outcome."