

# is your technology skillfully stirred or randomly shaken?

by h. buff herr



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At 6:10 p.m. on a recent Friday evening, a POS technician showed up at one of midtown Manhattan's most popular after-work bars to install a measuring device called an oneagraph. The restaurant's manager called me at home and exclaimed, "The ##@!!\* POS guy is here to install some ##@!!\* box! I told him to get the ##@!!\* out of the bar—we're busy!" The POS vendor's dispatcher called me at home and fumed, "The XX%&!!\* restaurant manager threw my technician out of the XX%&!!\* bar! Doesn't he want to get his XX%&!!\* system fixed?"

## RETHINKING REALITY

Most foodservice technology is magic or mysterious to a restaurant staff focused on serving drinks and bar-menu items. And unless you're a bartender, stepping behind the bar during the Friday night rush is a capital offense. To the restaurateur, the POS vendor was totally out of sync with restaurant reality. But what is the reality? What if the eight-burner kept going out or the beverage-system speed gun repeatedly spewed flat ginger ale?

Times have changed. The restaurant has moved from the innkeeper who opened his home for occasional travelers to a sophisticated business doing millions of dollars in sales per location. The innkeeper may have answered only to his wife; today's restaurateur answers to his partners, investors, bankers, and landlord.

An entire universe of service infrastructure is hidden away from public view—obscure, complex, and often incomprehensible to the restaurateur. Point-of-sale (POS) workstations, servers, closed-circuit TV, DVR, modems, DSL, desktop publishing, on-line reservations, electronic ordering, LAN, WAN, aggregated telecommunications, satellite TV, multimedia, computer-controlled lighting, remote-system monitoring, entry and security systems, prox cards, bar-code readers, phones, intercoms, paging, wi-fi . . . and the list, including RFID, grows longer every day.

The bookkeeper, chef, general manager, and catering manager each need a computer. Every user in the restaurant checks e-mail. Questions arise: What paper is in which printer for the menu, for the spreadsheets, for the letterhead? Must every resource be 100 percent accessible and available 24/7?

Tech components are interfaced and must be built to both building and health codes. Each system has unique electrical requirements and specific wiring criteria for power and communications. The days of having the general contractor's electrician pull a few extra wires are long gone.

## SEEKING STABILITY

In the case of the restaurant referenced above, repeated computer crashes that seemed to originate in the bar and lock up the rest of the restaurant's POS network were confounding every solution. The electrical system had been modified to isolate the POS workstations from systems throughout the property, and power for the server already was being "washed."

On paper, everything should have worked. But the system still experienced crashes—in computerese, "random nonreproducible errors." Was it a walk-in's compressor kicking in, a TV piggybacked on a workstation outlet, or a dimmer bridged across a circuit bringing a workstation and, subsequently, the network to its knees?

On Saturday morning, the oneagraph was installed, and a full week's monitoring found that there were extreme peaks and valleys in the power supplied by the electrical utility itself. "Cleaning" the electricity became a possible solution to be weighed against acceptable levels of risk.

## TAKING ON TECHNOLOGY

What is the operational bottom line? No longer can you just smack the register if the cash drawer fails to open. And if the little modem dialing out to the credit-card clearance house fails to connect, the check remains open, the customer remains in his or her seat, the table does not turn over, and profits go down the electronic drainpipe.

Twenty-first-century restaurateurs must address the technological challenges necessary to operate at the level they require. They have to hire the right chef to run their kitchen, train waitstaff to expertly serve the food, assemble talented bartenders to pour perfect drinks, and run the front end with strong, personable managers. And they must embrace technology to enhance their success and improve the bottom line.