

How Fast Are You Going?

Digital dashboards provide insight into restaurant operations



by Greg Buzek

I have to admit when I look at the dashboard in my car, it's often because I am looking to see if something is wrong. The police officer is looking at me funny. How fast was I driving? Do I have enough gas to get me to where I am going? I am looking for exceptions, warning lights. Just as my car dashboard gives me an indication if something is wrong or confirmation that everything is OK, a new breed of digital dashboards is giving similar insight into restaurant operations.

By definition a digital dashboard is an application that brings business intelligence and decision support to the forefront of the people in an organization who can manage the exceptions that it shows. Although often used at a desktop location, new Web-based application design from companies such as Cuit, Posera, QSR Automation and Blue Cube (formally Radiant Systems' Enterprise Division) allows for this same intelligence to be accessed by new generations of Web pads and tablet PCs.

Essentially, a digital dashboard is part of a total portal solution for your management team. The digital dashboard can be configured to share whatever metrics the restaurant wants to make available to the person who is viewing the information. When used at the store level, this information often reflects sales tendencies by menu items, the effects of price changes on sales, particular notices regarding employees and cash drawer inaccuracies and sales margins. Each person who logs into the system gets to see data that is specifically configured for them. The digital dashboard allows restaurants to save on food and labor costs and in real time see the impact of a new promotion on the business. Most often, a digital dashboard is used to manage the exceptions of the business so that through specific alerts the team can take corrective action in an efficient manner.

The new generation of systems also allows for mobility of the restaurant managers. Rather than being relegated to the back office, managers are now able to roam the restaurant floor and work more actively with their employees and among the customers. Because the system is Web based, it can also be accessed by the manager offsite.

There are indeed many benefits that come from deploying a digital dashboard in a restaurant environment. However, there are also some

pretty strong prerequisites for getting the most out of these systems. Some of these include the following:

Clean Data Input One of the biggest challenges for restaurant IT operations today is the data disparity caused by so many different types of proprietary POS systems that still reside in many chains. It is not uncommon for a large chain to have 10 or more POS platforms in their stores. As such, restaurants have many challenges in getting consistent data in the same format from each location. To effectively use a digital dashboard at the store level, that store-level data needs to be easily transferred and assimilated into the overall corporate databases. The old adage of garbage in garbage out is certainly true here. Clean, solid data is the backbone of making the digital dashboard successful in turning the data into knowledge and that knowledge into actionable intelligence back at the store level.

Embracing Standards Related to clean data is a need to embrace standard tools and interfaces so that you have maximum flexibility in choosing vendors. You will need to leverage browsers, databases, data warehouses, XML technologies and likely some specific open interfaces to build the infrastructure to utilize the dashboards effectively.

Communications Level to the Store Finally, while low cost Internet lines in the form of DSL and cable connections are more prominent than ever, the last mile connectivity remains one of the most challenging aspects of any data transfer application for restaurants. Most restaurants today have a mixture of 56k dial-up, satellite, DSL, cable and frame relay in the same chain. This means that there are either multiple Web-based systems or the systems are designed based on consideration for the slowest connection possible. If you are considering a digital dashboard approach to multiple restaurants with different connections you may want to consider a company such as Cybera.net. Cybera.net manages all of the different last-mile connections and can help you create an optimized network to support the most effective digital dashboard utilization for your restaurants.

So if you want to know how fast you are going in your car, you need to check your dashboard. If you want to know how your restaurants are really doing and allow the store-level managers to optimize performance, a digital dashboard may be right for you.

It might just help you put the pedal to the medal.

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A digital dashboard is used to manage the exceptions of the business so that through specific alerts the team can take corrective action in an efficient manner. Sample courtesy of QSR Automation.

