

TECH IT UP

BRIAN STEEL UPDATES READERS ON THE LATEST TECHNOLOGY ADVANCEMENTS MAKING WAVES IN THE USA TO MAXIMISE THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE AND ENSURE VISITORS BECOME REGULARS.

IT'S A Friday night and you are fully booked for your standard four-course dinner for \$95 per person. Everyone has already paid, and because the demand was so high for the four window tables they ended up willingly bidding \$130 for the same meal.

Everyone has already ordered their food before they arrive, which means the chef has a pretty good idea when he is firing which dish. You know what each patron looks like, you know how much they normally spend and you know what their pre-dinner drink preference is.

Throughout the meal, diners will have real time access to their bill, and when they are ready to leave

they can pay any remaining charges on their phone and simply walk out at their leisure.

During service, you are able to track enjoyment and satisfaction through a real time, actionable intelligence algorithm that tracks the full spectrum of social media relating to your establishment. This in turn allows you to address an issue before the customer even leaves.

So here's the thing: all of this is not only possible, but is a summary of what's going on in the restaurant industry in the USA today. An industry with sales of USD\$709 billion (AUS\$ 968 billion), 14 million employees, and one million locations.



I recently attended the National Restaurant Association (NRA) conference in Chicago and the clear focus for food service were the challenges of technology, information and social media – that and the multi-generational idiosyncrasies that are ubiquitous across all industries.

In summary, technology must enrich the human interaction, not replace it, and its application should enhance convenience and choice while eliminating wait times (especially for the bill and payment). This in turn enhances loyalty and repeat business.

When technology is focused on customer experience, you can spend more time with the guest, but in a meaningful way, helping to gauge wants and needs. There are companies that can provide you with real time, actionable intelligence across all your venues. While providing at least some detail on every guest (including meal preferences, spending history, and any dietary foibles), the service also includes real time tracking of social media posts where any possible risk areas are immediately flagged to the restaurant manager with table number and guest name.

As well as being able to personalise service, the follow-on benefits include predictive marketing, trend analysis, and integrated loyalty. It also provides insight into the challenging arena of the individual subjective experience.

With word-of-mouth becoming the main influencer through social media and service becoming more challenging due to a rise in discerning customers, access to information becomes your best tool.

Speaking of information and surprising results, a recent USA survey indicated that the farewell is seven times more influential than the greeting. The high correlation between server attentiveness and friendliness indicated that customers equate both of these with service. Interestingly, relatively insignificant factors included the greeting, managers checking on satisfaction, and restroom condition. Food taste determined a mere 25 per cent of customer loyalty and only 17 per cent of diners looked at perceived value.

Now, some of these strategies may seem to be just a little too far across the line into social engineering, but they are an innovative way to combat the toughest and most abstract area of the hospitality industry: trying to please everyone, all of the time. The influence of unregulated review sites and continual advances in social media tools are increasing exponentially. Take the Periscope app that allows people to live stream their meal to all followers. There are many questions left begging there (for example, why?). But this is both high risk and free advertising, so have a contingency plan in place.

Today, information really is power, so you may as well grab some. 

Brian Steel has an MA in Gastronomy from Le Cordon Bleu. He is a food critic and writer and teaches molecular gastronomy. Visit www.undergroundgourmet.com.au.

