

THE **CATERER**

2023

TECHNOLOGY PROSPECTUS

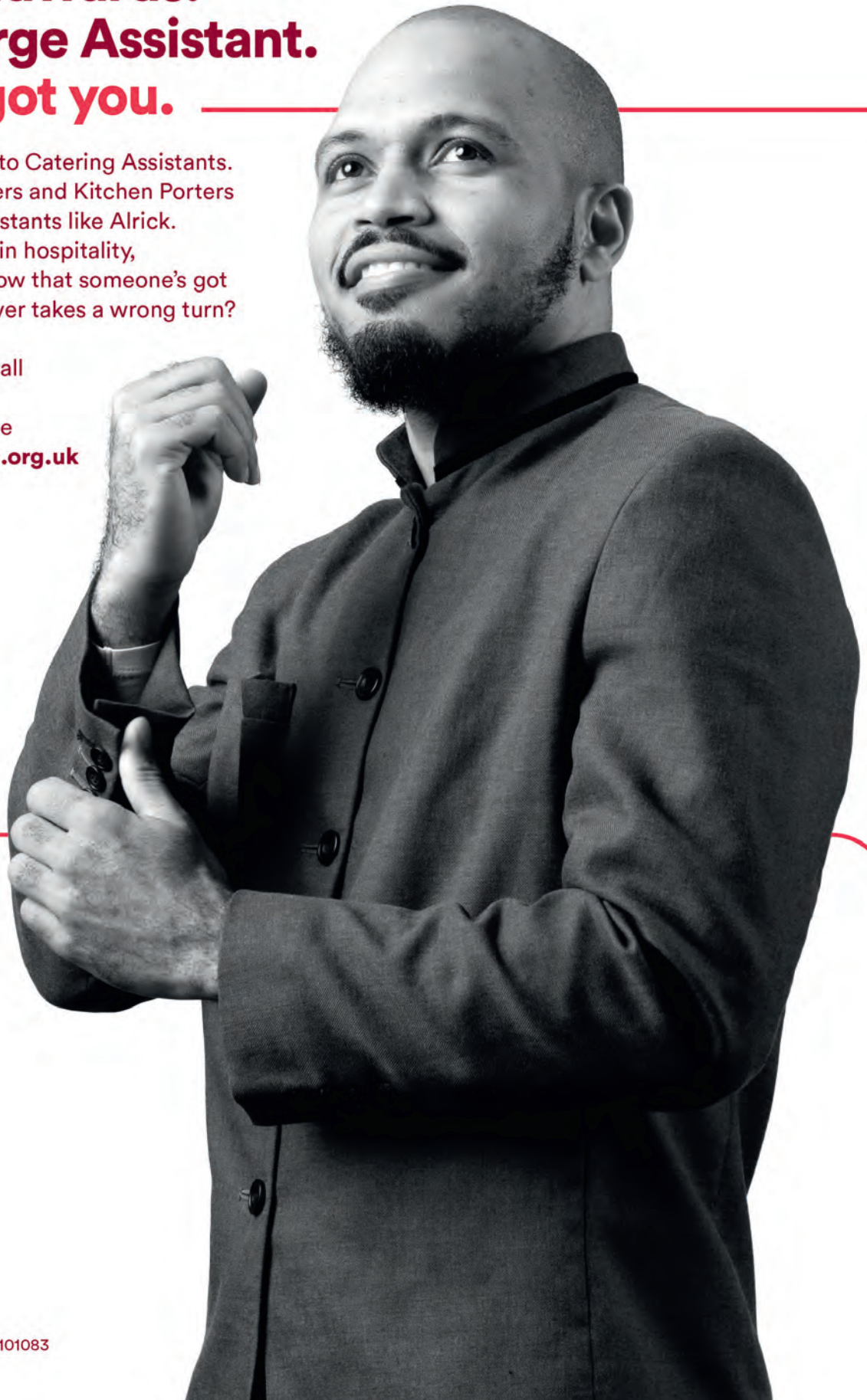
YOUR COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE FOR THE YEAR AHEAD



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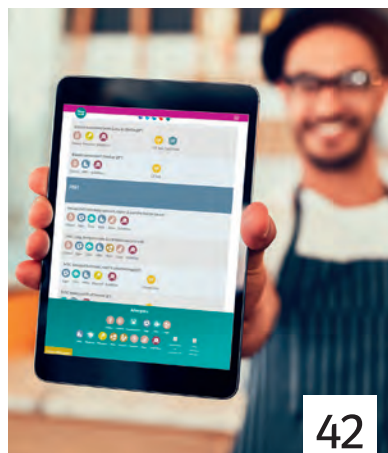
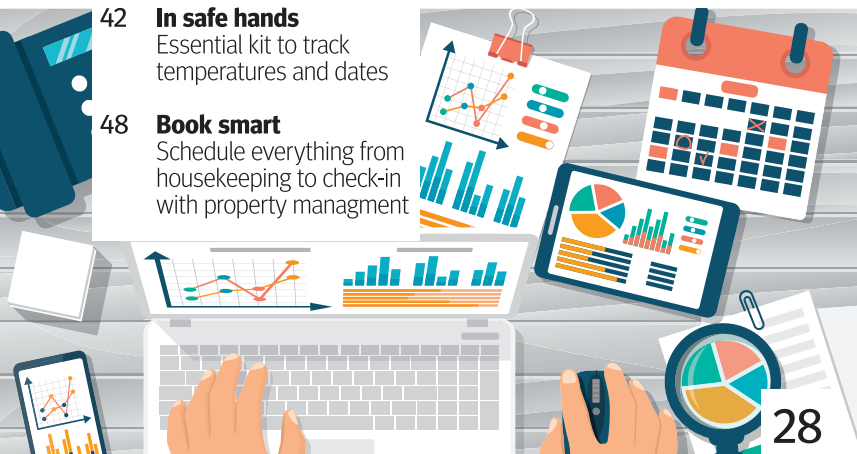
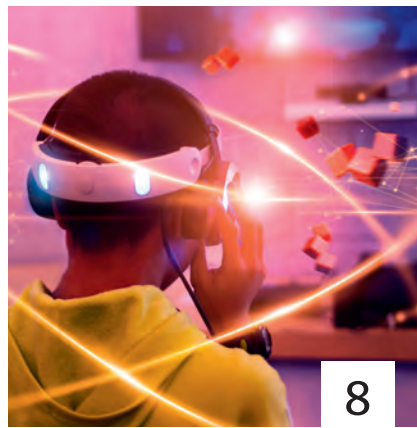
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WELCOME

Welcome to *The Caterer's* comprehensive round-up of all the latest technologies you need to drive your business forward over the next 12 months and beyond.

As the industry is still reeling from the pandemic and approaches 2023 with much trepidation, it can be all-too easy to let technology fall by the wayside with just so much to consider when running a hospitality business today. But technology continues to play a vital part in hospitality's recovery and having the right software and tools will help your business fight the battles hitting hospitality right now.

This year we look at using digital methods to improve guest experience, as well as solutions to manage costs, revenue and your workforce, as well as the all-important systems we all need to allow guests to pay. We also take a look into the future and ask how the metaverse or robotics might impact hospitality in the years to come.

Through insight, opinions, case studies and supplier showcases, this is your comprehensive guide to technology for the year ahead.



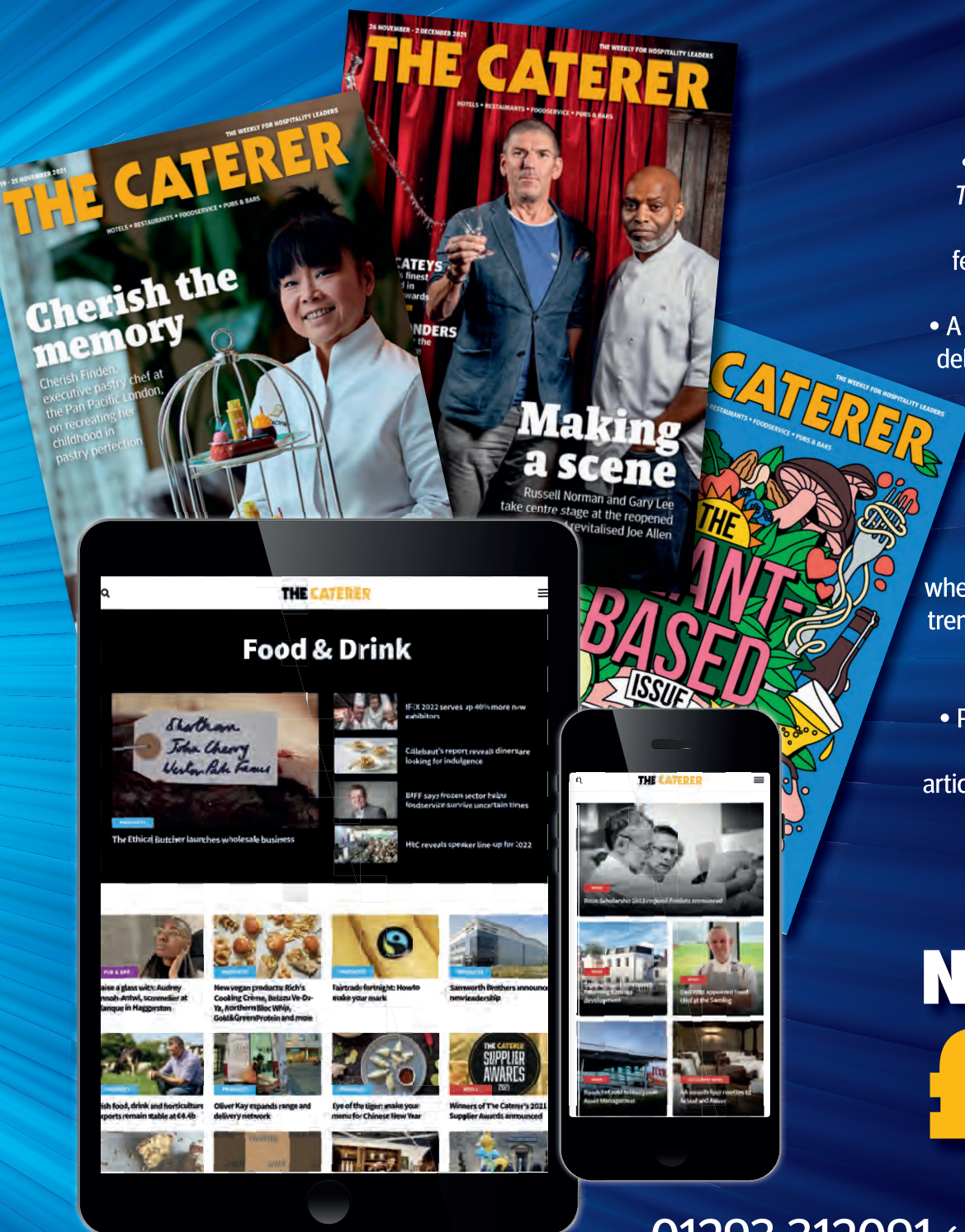
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THE BIG PICTURE

Technology is creeping into everyday hospitality, from check-in to robot receptionists, and it's about time too, says *Jane Pendlebury*, chief executive of HOSPA

“I saw a recent presentation that stated 69% of the surveyed respondents would prefer a digital check-in”

Technology remains a central piece of the jigsaw when it comes to guest satisfaction. In the same way it takes the whole team to ensure guests are happy, the whole team should also be involved in some (not all!) elements of technology selection. Often, it's a more junior member of the team who understands the pain points of guests more clearly – not senior management – and they should have the opportunity to have their voice heard.

Critical to an efficient operation, technology decisions should be considered and strategic. In these frenetic and fast-paced times, it is imperative not to lose sight of the big picture and to make sure the groundwork is completed before looking to solve a problem – especially when opting for off-the-shelf solutions. Unless completely specified prior to starting your technology journey, a quick selection will likely end in disappointment.

For the most part, thankfully, our guests have no idea about the complexity behind the process that enables the smooth transition of their profile from pre-reservation to during their stay on to check-out and then future communication – and nor should they. While guest-facing technology was pushed to the forefront during the pandemic, typically the answer to getting it right for the guest is by offering choice.

Not everyone wants to chat and not everybody wants to interact digitally. The same guest might want different things on different days, therefore, choice is paramount. There are always exceptions and while some budget brands rely almost exclusively on automation at the front desk, it would be fair

to say that the more indulgent the venue, the more choice the guest should have.

I saw a recent presentation that stated 69% of the surveyed respondents would prefer a digital check-in, with the same respondents indicating they would choose a physical key over a digital one. OK, the report was not entirely scientific and based on a 'fast and curious' set of questions, however, it does suggest that the guest is as unsure about their preferred journey as the industry is.

The systems we are so familiar with continue to see enhancements and are growing ever more capable and sophisticated. And finally hospitality seems to be taking bolder and faster steps towards full automation. From using clever, state-of-the-art tools to complete mundane back office tasks to using actual robots in the main reception, we are seeing the digital transformations that have been discussed for years. Will we really be holidaying in the Metaverse in the future? Part of me hopes not, but another part thinks it would be quite fun to escape to a warm beach to watch and 'feel' the sunset on a cold winter's afternoon in the UK.

My final comment is to remind everyone that technology should be driven by the market's needs: to solve a problem, to enhance the guest stay or improve efficiency. So often software is developed to solve problem A, B and C and then implemented as a solution to problem B, C and D, with a few tweaks which actually just add complication. Take time, if you can, to review your whole technology stack and work out how much is still relevant and which bits are just unnecessary hurdles that have embedded themselves into your 'normal'.

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Aligned with every hotel's mission of creating a meaningful 'guest experience as a service', FCS1 helps hoteliers enhance their guests' experience by automating and streamlining processes, empowering staff and providing hotel management with real-time information.

The FCS1 modules currently available cover a vast spectrum of hotel operations. From **cleaning** and **service delivery** to **guest complaints & incidents** and **facility maintenance**, this powerful piece of software connects the different departments for more efficient hotel management.

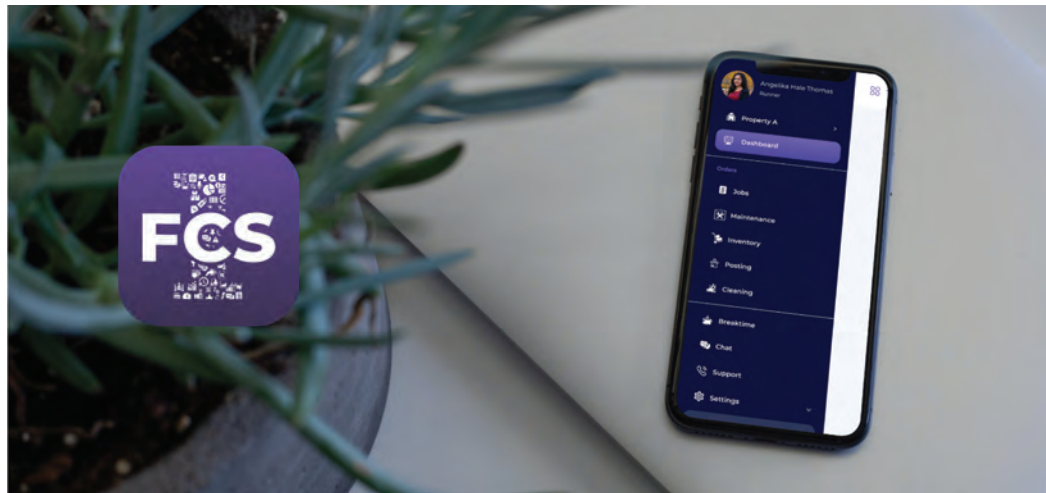
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In addition, FCS1 includes a guest-facing eRequest module that allows guests to directly make service or item requests by simply scanning a QR code, without contacting the front desk.

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Recognizing that every hotel is different, FCS1 is built on a Service-Oriented Architecture (SOA) with a modular product concept, allowing every property to effortlessly design a highly adapted solution unique to their needs. The possibilities are endless.



Available as both Cloud and On-Premise solutions, FCS1 uses docker containers, supporting quicker and stable deployment, thus saving hoteliers time and money. At a cloud level, FCS works with trusted cloud solution provider AWS for a secure and reliable service.

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FCS1 seamlessly integrates with a hotel's preferred PMS or third-party solution (via open API), allowing hotels to further elevate their guest experience to the next level. FCS1's mobile and web-based solutions will enable hotels to manage tasks and guest requests from anywhere.

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FCS1 has been created with the future in mind and is ready to help hotels adapt to situations that require flexible resources or contactless interactions. Know exactly what goes on in your hotel, organize your daily workflow, and make data-driven decisions with FCS1.

About the company



- Forefront of hospitality technology innovation with **4 decades** of global experience
- Extensive portfolio of integrated **hospitality operations management** solutions that automate and streamline daily processes
- Used by more than **2,000 hotels** in **56 countries**
- **16 offices** worldwide, covering most countries
- **24/7 support** available in any language
- **Open API** to integrate with third-party solutions to help hoteliers bring new technology into play to bring their guest experience to the next level



ACROSS THE METaverse

Check into virtual reality as hotels enter the metaverse. *Tom Knowles* looks at what digital venues can offer real customers in the future

In May hotel chain Millennium announced it was opening its fifth M Social hotel, its contemporary brand for millennials and creatives. There was just one key difference from its predecessors, however: this new resort wasn't real.

Millennium launched the world's first virtual hotel after paying an undisclosed sum for a piece of virtual real estate in Decentraland, a platform where users can log on as avatars and explore digital districts for shopping, fashion, arts and even gambling.

Spending money on computer-generated land in order to build a virtual hotel that people cannot stay in may sound odd, but Millennium is part of a wave of companies – from McDonald's to Coca-Cola, Nike and Gucci – that are investing in this new space, part of what is called the metaverse.

It may not have a set definition yet, but the metaverse has been creating a considerable amount of buzz in Silicon Valley and beyond, and is already presenting new avenues of business for the hospitality sector.

"The opportunities are huge," says Piers Zangana, director of Susa Comms, a PR company that is advising a number of hospitality

"The only way you're going to learn to do well out of these things is if you start doing it"

Piers Zangana

businesses on how to launch in the metaverse. "A lot of companies are already realising its value. Every brand will soon need to have some sort of visibility in this space."

In March, investment bank Citi issued a report saying the metaverse could have a digital population of as many as five billion people with an economy by 2030 of \$8t-\$13t (£6.4t-£10.3t). "We believe the metaverse is the next generation of the internet," Citi said.

ZUCKER PUNCH

But what actually is the metaverse? Although the term has existed in science fiction since



Piers Zangana



PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK/POPTIKA

the early 1990s, the word really shot to prominence in October last year thanks to Mark Zuckerberg. The 38-year-old multibillionaire announced he was changing the name of his company from Facebook to Meta to reflect the company's new ambition to build the technology and infrastructure necessary to create a functioning metaverse. Thousands of employees at the social media giant would be assigned to this new venture and billions of dollars poured into it, he said.

Although there are still some disputes about the finer points of what the metaverse actually is, tech executives broadly claim it will become the third iteration of the internet, or Web3, as some are calling it. First, there were fixed desktop computers, then society moved onto mostly using mobile, and now we are about to experience an embodied internet in which we will feel we are 'in' the websites and apps we are visiting rather than simply viewing them.

"It's the next generation of the internet – a more immersive, 3D experience," says Nick Clegg, Meta's president of global affairs. The former UK deputy prime minister wrote an essay on the metaverse in May: "Its defining quality will be a feeling of presence,

like you are right there with another person or in another place."

A key question still being determined is how we will access this immersive 3D universe. On one end of the spectrum there is the opportunity to don virtual reality goggles, such as the Oculus Quest headsets designed by Meta or the PlayStation VR by Sony. In this scenario, users will be able to appear as 3D digital avatars of themselves and visit various virtual worlds. They can meet friends, take work meetings, attend concerts, visit art galleries or night-clubs, go shopping and play games. Sometimes, those virtual moments may contribute to real world events. For example, someone might visit a virtual café, order a flat white and a sandwich, and then have that arrive at their actual house, delivered by a courier.

"We believe that the metaverse will eventually help us find new and enhanced ways to do all of our current activities, including commerce, entertainment and media, education and training, manufacturing and enterprise in general," Citi said in its report.

At the same time, the metaverse is also expected to seep into our physical world. Companies including Microsoft, Apple, Snap

and Meta are designing augmented reality technology, where digital images are overlaid on a real-world setting via gadgets such as smart glasses. This could allow someone to see giant virtual arrows on a street offering them directions to a restaurant, for example. Eventually, augmented reality is likely to evolve to the point where someone can conduct a conversation with a hologram of their best friend as if they are in the same room.

That's the idea, anyway. Experts say it will be several years, perhaps decades, before we have such rich experiences as perfect holograms. The metaverse is also made up of lots of technologies and trends that may change and adjust over time. Just as people making predictions about the internet in the 1990s couldn't have begun to see half the ways we use it now, no one really knows what the metaverse will offer to us in 10 or 20 years.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

However, just because the metaverse is still in its infancy, that does not mean businesses should not be looking for new opportunities, according to Zangana. "If you look at social media when it first came on the scene, people ▶

at restaurants were saying, ‘How is this going to work? If you can’t taste the food, what’s the point?’ But just like social media, the people who get on it early are going to do really well. The opportunity for brand presence perspective and brand awareness is massive.

“At the moment, people are just exploring what can and can’t work, but the only way you’re going to learn to do well out of these things is if you start doing it,” Zangana says.

One way in which companies are making themselves known to customers in the metaverse is through the growing number of platforms that give access to virtual worlds. Fashion brand Gucci has built an entire town on Roblox, an online platform where users can create their own games and digital worlds. The town features a virtual store where users can purchase digital clothes for their Roblox avatar with the platform’s own robux currency (it costs about £4.50 to buy 400 robux). In May last year a limited-edition sale of Gucci’s digital clothes, bags and jewellery on Roblox generated \$3.5m (£2.8m) in sales over two days.

Gucci is not the only fashion house getting involved in this space. In March a Metaverse Fashion Week was held in Decentraland with brands including Dolce & Gabbana and Estée Lauder, and *Vogue* covered the event. Users could buy digital items of clothing or beauty products that could then be Photoshopped onto an image of the person on social media or worn by the buyer’s avatar. These products are sold as NFTs (non-fungible tokens), which are essentially unique codes written on a shared digital ledger known as a blockchain, and act as certificates of ownership for physical or virtual assets. NFTs are normally bought with cryptocurrencies and enable people to show they are the true owner of a virtual item of clothing, even if other people copy that image, and therefore they are the only ones who can sell or trade the item in the future.

DIGITAL PROPERTY

Decentraland is one of several rapidly growing virtual world platforms that are not owned by large corporations such as Meta but are more or less self-governed. Other popular digital world platforms include Sandbox, Upland and Somnium Space, which can be accessed via a computer or virtual reality headsets.



This spread: M Social’s virtual hotel

Decentraland is generating the most amount of buzz due to the huge amounts of money changing hands to buy ‘land’ within this virtual space. It is divided into 90,000 parcels of land, each representing about 50 sq ft, all of which are bought as NFTs. The virtual blocks are bought with mana, Decentraland’s cryptocurrency, with one mana worth \$1.08 (85p) at present. In a sign of the burgeoning craze for digital real estate, plots in Decentraland cost about \$20 (£16) in 2017 and are now worth about \$11,000 (£8,760) each, while some plots have gone for as much as \$2.5m (£2m).

It is also here where Millennium has opened the world’s first virtual hotel – M Social Decentraland. Saurabh Prakash, group

senior vice-president for commercial at Millennium, says: “We looked at the data and saw an opportunity.” The company saw there were 800,000 registered users on Decentraland in December 2021, an increase of 3,300% from a year ago. “These data points really told us this is certainly a space that is exponentially growing,” Prakash says. “We said to ourselves if this is how things are going, we’ve got to be visionary and be pioneers and be the first to get into it. For us, the biggest reason we are in the metaverse is finding new customers.”

Once users arrive on the landing page of Decentraland, they can get a virtual tram for one stop to the M Social hotel. The hotel, a six-floor building covered in a giant ‘M’ and ‘D’, is designed to feel like a computer game, with a beast-like monster at the reception desk issuing speech bubble captions, as well as floating stairs and floors showcasing pictures and audio of the other four M Social branches in Auckland, Paris, New York and Singapore. Once a user has reached the top of the building, the beast from reception appears again to ask if they want a surprise, which will be granted once they have taken a screenshot and posted it on social media.

“That is how we connect the customer from the virtual world to the real world,” Prakash says. “Because as soon as the customer does that, our loyalty team will engage with the customer’s social media account and say, ‘Hey, you’ve just won 5,000 points. Here’s the promo code to use in the real world.’ So from a virtual world you get connected to the real world.”





“The metaverse is coming, one way or another”

Nick Clegg, Meta

BREAKING BANDWIDTH

At the moment, the graphics within Decentraland are relatively basic, but Prakash is confident that as computing improves, users could have a virtual reality experience of the company’s hotel in Paris or Singapore before booking a room in real life.

“Nothing is impossible. The big potential of this space is when we go into 6G, 7G, 10G. That’s when this kind of space will absolutely skyrocket,” Prakash says.

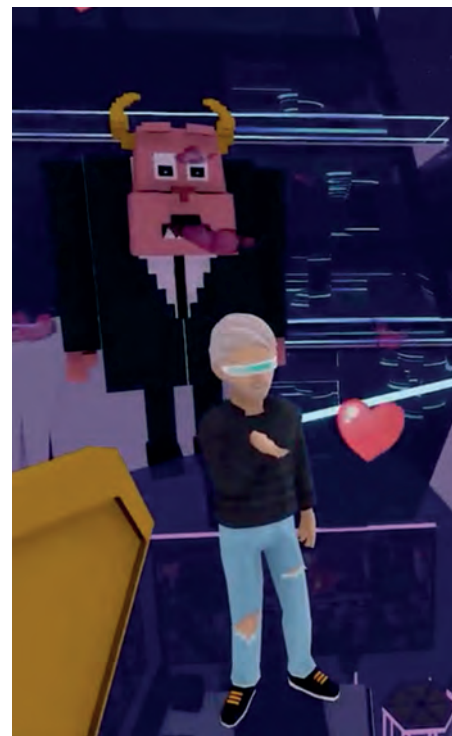
And it’s not just hotels looking at the metaverse for new customers. Bank JP Morgan has opened a digital branch in Sandbox, while in Decentraland users can find a Samsung virtual shop or a giant Coca-Cola can that can be entered to buy items such as a customised jacket for their avatars. McDonald’s has filed 10 patents around the intention of building a “virtual restaurant featuring actual and virtual goods”. Even Sotheby’s, the 277-year-old auction house, launched a digital replica of its London New Bond Street building to showcase its NFT art collection in Decentraland’s

Voltaire Art District. Meanwhile, on Roblox, Mexican fast-food chain Chipotle launched a virtual branch in April where users can play games to earn “Burrito Bucks”, which can then be exchanged for a code to buy real food.

Zangana says such examples demonstrate the wide range of experimentation that businesses are trying in the metaverse. “It’s very much in the early stages, with people trying to just gently find their feet and bring their customers and stakeholders on a little journey with them. From a hospitality perspective, there are direct sales opportunities, where companies sell directly through the metaverse, or there is a mixed-reality element, with a transaction done through the metaverse but with a real-life asset alongside it.”

Events groups are also likely to be watching the developing metaverse keenly. Multi-player gaming platforms such as Fortnite, owned by the US company Epic, have gradually moved from just a place to play shoot-em-ups to wide-ranging social spaces. This has included Fortnite hosting music concerts with the likes of pop star Ariana Grande and rapper Travis Scott. This can be a major branding event if conducted in collaboration with a real-world venue. For example, British band Easy Life played at a virtual replica of London’s O2 Arena within Fortnite in June last year.

Other hospitality companies have been bringing the metaverse into the real world. In California a burger restaurant named Bored & Hungry opened this year, themed around the Bored Ape Club, a hugely popular NFT art



collection of 101 digital images of a cartoon ape. Customers can get a free meal if they show they are a verified owner of a Bored Ape NFT.

In the UK, chef Adam Handling has plans to launch London’s first NFT cocktail menu at his Eve’s bar in Covent Garden, London. Users can choose from 13 NFTs inspired by the bar’s signature cocktails, where each come with digital recipe cards, a hand-painted illustration by London-based artist Zoe Zahava, and an undisclosed number of complimentary cocktails at the bar. The items will be sold on OpenSea, a marketplace for NFTs.

However, a spokeswoman for Adam Handling Restaurant Group says there is a delay in launching the NFT artworks. The spokeswoman did not give the reason, but a number of NFT projects from companies around the world have been paused after a drop in the value and size of the market. The average number of daily sales of NFTs fell sharply at the start of May, dropping from 225,000 in September 2021 to 19,000, according to data website NonFungible. Rising interest rates, a fall in the value of cryptocurrencies and concerns about the cost of living crisis have all resulted in a dampening of the hype and lower prices for NFTs. As ever, such volatility shows that businesses need to be careful about what investments they make in the metaverse and analyse what works for their company in the long term.

However, it is clear that when companies such as Meta and Apple are investing in building technology for the metaverse, this is not a trend that is going away.

“The metaverse is coming, one way or another,” Clegg says. “Different technologies will enable different levels of immersion that suit the individual and their environment... All this has the potential to unlock new opportunities and spark new ideas we haven’t yet imagined, and to have a huge positive impact, both socially and economically.”



SHIFT YOUR THINKING

Turning your staffing over to tech doesn't mean losing the human touch: in fact, it can offer better rotas and improved job satisfaction, says *Ben Walker*

There are signs that hospitality staffing shortages are easing. The Office for National Statistics recently recorded 158,000 vacancies from July to September 2022, compared to 173,000 vacancies in the previous three-month period.

Conor Shaw, chief executive of workforce management specialist Bizimply, says: "While vacancies still represent a huge challenge for the sector, the drop reflects our experience that some operators are using technology to manage their workforce a little better and maximise the benefits to the business of the available workforce."

An employer with a 10% vacancy rate needs their existing staff to be 10% more efficient. Every employee willing to work an extra shift will help to relieve the immediate challenge for employers, but it can no longer be just be a top-down relationship, says Shaw.

He adds: "Of course, employers need team members to be available at the busiest times, but equally, employees also need to know that they can fit work around other commitments."

DO IT YOURSELF

So how can technological and digital solutions help hospitality operators improve their HR processes across recruitment, onboarding, retention and beyond? Henry Seddon, managing director at Access Hospitality, says: "Workforce management (WFM) technology is widely used to co-ordinate the recruitment, onboarding and ongoing staff administration processes, ensuring that everything from posting a job advert to covering all shifts when a colleague is away runs as smoothly as possible. Offering a self-service portal has become increasingly commonplace."

Finding candidates is an expensive exercise. One way to reduce costs is for hospitality groups to reduce their reliance on third-party agencies and hire staff via their own channels. Ben Gabbitas, head of recruitment at Malmaison and Hotel du Vin Group, introduced an Applicant Tracking System (ATS) and e-recruitment customer relationship system (CRM) from Eploy, a software company based in Kidderminster. He re-vamped the group's careers

site, which is now a central hub for candidates who can search, apply and interact with the CRM from a smartphone, tablet or desktop.

Candidates can apply for roles using keywords, location and vacancy type, and upload their CVs. The system automatically matches candidates' skills and experience to vacancies. The hotel group uses a dashboard and analytics reports to understand status across the recruitment cycle.

"We aim to increase the number of candidates coming direct to us via the website," says Gabbitas. "Not having to rely on CVs coming into an individual's inbox is a huge step forward, as are the data we now have to measure progress."

Lucia shifts from manual

Lucia is a company with three Italian bar-restaurants in north Yorkshire. Operations manager Darioush Shahidi says: "Before, we were relying on our 200 team members to manually record their hours, which entailed a lot of chasing by managers. Now, after introducing Bizimply software, hours worked are captured easily and transferred automatically to payroll. Staff get paid accurately and our managers are spending more time front of house where they can add real value."

"We also have better visibility over our labour and sales data: we're scheduling to demand now, meaning we only have the staff we need, every shift. That's making a big difference to labour spend."

WARM WELCOME

Once new recruits have joined, getting the onboarding process right is important in making them want to stay. Janene Pretorius, chief people officer at the Ivy Collection, says: “Last year, our focus was on attracting candidates and ensuring a steady pipeline of talent. Now, we’re looking at how to hold on to our staff and develop their careers. Getting people past the 90-day mark is our main challenge.”

Simon Sykes, UK country manager at Quinix, a provider of AI-driven WFM solutions, says: “The onboarding process means taking time to get to know new employees: finding out what matters to them – career progression, shifts that fit around childcare, etc – and then regular check-ins to find out how they’re getting on.”

After that, it’s all about making them stay. The recruitment crisis has put the focus on the need to invest in the pay and conditions of key staff, such as general managers and head chefs, with pay increases and retention bonuses. This is already stretching wage budgets, so employers don’t always have the option to increase pay significantly for entry-level staff. So, there is a limit to how much businesses can increase wages, but operators can do their best to offer schedules that employees actually want to work. Other incentives might include on-demand or daily pay, profit sharing, and paying attention to the quality of the work itself and the work environment and culture.

Sykes says: “Retention isn’t impossible. The rising trend for more flexibility is understandably trickier to implement in customer-facing industries, but it can be done.”

In a jobs market that is currently working in their favour, frontline staff are no longer putting up with inflexible jobs, even amidst a growing cost of living crisis. A Quinix survey found that 66% of UK hospitality staff have considered quitting for new roles over the past 12 months and 76% are confident of finding another position quickly based on their skills.

FULLY FLEXIBLE

The gig economy model has been criticised for zero-hours contracts and a lack of employee benefits or job security, yet its flexibility – where staff choose when and how much to work and can cancel at short notice – is why many restaurant workers became taxi drivers.

Sykes says: “It’s unrealistic to think that a more traditional business could ‘go full gig economy’ overnight. However, if they’re using WFM solutions to look at schedules six months in advance, they might consider only booking 50% of the shift, then they could then let the other 50% be booked by other employees, therefore offering much more flexibility.”

In the US, Amazon and Starbucks are giving hourly wage workers greater flexibility by allowing them to cancel a shift 16 hours before it begins – making the role a more attractive option to parents, for example.

While this might seem counter-productive, with people cancelling shifts at such short notice, it’s certainly possible – with the right technology – to find people to fill that shift within an hour or so, says Sykes.



“The rising trend for more flexibility is understandably trickier to implement in customer-facing industries, but it can be done”

Simon Sykes, Quinix

In a different example, rotas at hotel group CitizenM are primarily generated by algorithms that choose who works when. Although this may not sound very democratic, Quinix claims it has led to a better and fairer distribution of morning versus night shifts, more consecutive days off and longer shifts; in short, more schedule security and more room for employees to plan their personal lives.

BLUE-SKY THINKING

For hotels operating with smaller teams, moving on-premise property management systems (PMS) to cloud-based systems is a priority. Once this is done, a range of labour-saving solutions are possible. While housekeepers and chefs cannot perform their tasks from home, other hotel employees can, at least some of the time. One obvious time-saving advantage of cloud-based systems is that staff can perform tasks, access data and generate reports from anywhere, at any time.

Modern technology can have a positive impact on quality of work; most people come into hospitality to brighten their customers’ days, not struggle with tedious admin and archaic operating systems. The Tawny hotel in Staffordshire recently installed a Guestline all-cloud operating platform. The Tawny’s manager Josh Chadwick says: “Our office manager previously used Opera and loved it but now, having used Guestline, she wished she’d always had Guestline. It’s so much easier and intuitive to use.”

FUTURE GAZING

A key benefit of WFM solutions is the ability to accurately forecast labour costs and schedules using artificial intelligence. Manorview, a group with eight hotels in Scotland, uses Rotaready software as much for staff scheduling as for cost management. It has saved the business 5% on wages, which amounts to a six-figure sum. Over the coming weeks Rotaready, an Access Company, will be integrated with Manorview’s two EOPS, or extended opportunity programs, and services providers, giving the group real-time revenue data and greater visibility and control over labour costs. This paves the way for intelligent sales prediction and demand forecasting.

In another example, Hickory’s Smokehouse, a group of 15 barbecue restaurants recently acquired by Greene King, has better deployed 146 hours every week and achieved a 652% return on investment from installing Rotaready.

In the US, Avery Ward, the third-generation owner and operator of Little Italy, a pizza restaurant in Groveport, Ohio, has deployed 5-Out, an AI-driven forecasting tool, which is linked to the restaurant’s existing Toast EPoS. He was encouraged to switch his home-designed labour scheduling to 7 Shifts, the most widely used scheduling software in the US.

The 5-Out platform automatically ingests data not only from internal sources (POS, labor, reservations, events) but also external sources (weather, traffic, events) to accurately predict upcoming sales down to the hour. This enables operators to efficiently plan their food purchasing and labour schedules.

5-Out has contributed to a significant reduction in Little Italy’s costs with cost of goods (COGS) sold down from 34.5% of sales to 28% over a six-month period, and labour coming down from 24% to 19.3%. Little Italy has saved £16,166 on COGS per month and £11,815 on labour since deploying the 5-Out software. Over one year, that’s a total saving of £335,772.

In the current inflationary environment, workforce management solutions have a key role to play in enabling operators to exercise more control of their costs as well as contributing to a better work/life experience for frontline staff and their managers.



STAY FLEXIBLE TO RETAIN YOUR GREAT EMPLOYEES

Your systems should work for your employees, not the other way round, says *Matt Scaife*

For Bakers + Baristas, the post-pandemic market has given us some breathing space following a period when the business expanded quickly. The right sites require discipline in terms of finding the right location, building loyalty with customers, and putting the right team in place.

One of the current challenges hospitality employers have in terms of staff retention is that the pandemic and its aftermath prompted some very good people to pause and think about what else they might like to do, while others have decided to start a career in hospitality.

Our jobs are more specialised than people outside the industry probably appreciate, and in that context, it's always been tricky to find really good people. We've found that we are employing more people with relatively complex expectations in terms of work/life balance, such as students, or those with family responsibilities.

“We have to be flexible when it comes to offering the right financial packages to meet the needs of team members”

An effective workforce management system such as the Bizimply system we use allows us manage labour more flexibly. It has clear advantages for the business, as well as advantages for team members who are increasingly looking to have more flexible working arrangements and a better work life balance.

One key benefit is that using this system speeds up the onboarding process. Those first couple of weeks in the business are critical, and the Bizimply system makes it much easier to make it as simple as possible for a new

joiner. The employee feels like they are getting on with the job instead of having to do two weeks of paperwork, while at the same time allowing companies to complete compliance requirements quickly.

Employers need to offer employees more flexible and more enjoyable working arrangements, along with all of the extras and wrap-around support that people require and deserve. We have to be flexible when it comes to offering the right financial packages to meet the needs of team members. In short, we need to be able to offer everything needed to get the best people and retain them.

In terms of managing all that, a workforce management system such as Bizimply becomes essential. While there are a number of systems that can manage different aspects, Bizimply is the only system that has the flexibility and depth of features for multi-site businesses to be able to roll out new sites and new employees quickly. It's second to none in terms of flexibility, nimbleness and breadth of functionality.

By Matt Scaife, partner with Causeway Capital and owner of coffee and cake specialist Bakers + Baristas. The business operates 60 fresh bakery and coffee outlets across the UK and Ireland and has c.500 team members

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FAQs? USE TXT



Messaging is now the default way of communicating with guests, so it pays to make the process as painless as possible. *Ben Walker* has some tips on top communication

In the pre-internet age, hotel employees and guests communicated by phone. They still do today, but the big difference now is that there is much less talking and a lot more texting.

“Very few individual hotel bookings are made by calls today,” explains hotel technology consultant John Burns. “Those who call usually have a specific query, such as they need a connecting room or an additional level of detail and support. What is common is that everyone who phones has already researched the hotel and the rates online so there are very few virgin callers.”

AUTOMATING BOOKING

For group reservations, there has been an increase in online services that cater for group bookings, but the bigger the group, the bigger the likelihood that there will be the need for a direct phone call.

“Hotels are working hard to automate the group booking process but it is still somewhat

broken. Customers start having a thousand questions related to a booking and it gets complicated. But there is a long and slow trend towards automation on the group side,” says Burns.

Striking the right balance between digital and human sales is important for maximising revenue, adds James Bland, director of research firm BVA BDRC: “In our study of the meetings and events market, we noted an increase in digital bookings, which was good news in a sector that had been lagging in technology.

“However, booking without talking to a salesperson meant that there were fewer opportunities to upsell. It is critical to look at your customer journey and learn where the personal touch is required and where it is not. One size won’t fit all.”

PRE-ARRIVAL

When guests make contact with a hotel – whether it’s via social media or the hotel’s website – that contact is key to capturing data, which

is vital to establishing a relationship. That’s why one of the biggest irritations of doing business with online travel agencies (OTAs) is that they keep guest data to themselves. This deprives hotels of the ability to market and upsell to an OTA guest prior to arrival, a particularly crucial time of anticipation for the guest and for the hotel to showcase extra services and amenities that can make the guest’s stay more enjoyable (and profitable to the hotel).

Some hotel technology providers have endeavoured to overcome this hurdle. SHR, for example, claims that hotels using its Maverick CRM (customer relationship management) system “know their OTA customers the same way they know their direct customers”.

Other tech providers have made it their mission to help hotels bring in more direct bookings. Roomzzz Aparthotels, a group with 10 properties across the UK, deployed Cendyn’s eLoyalty platform together with an Avvio booking engine that helped reduce OTA bookings

from 60% to 10% and sign up around 1,000 new members a month to the loyalty scheme.

Victoria Curley, group revenue and distribution manager at Roomzzz, says: “Through better understanding of our customers, we have been able to increase repeat bookings. Without a doubt, it’s made us more profitable.”

CHECKING IN

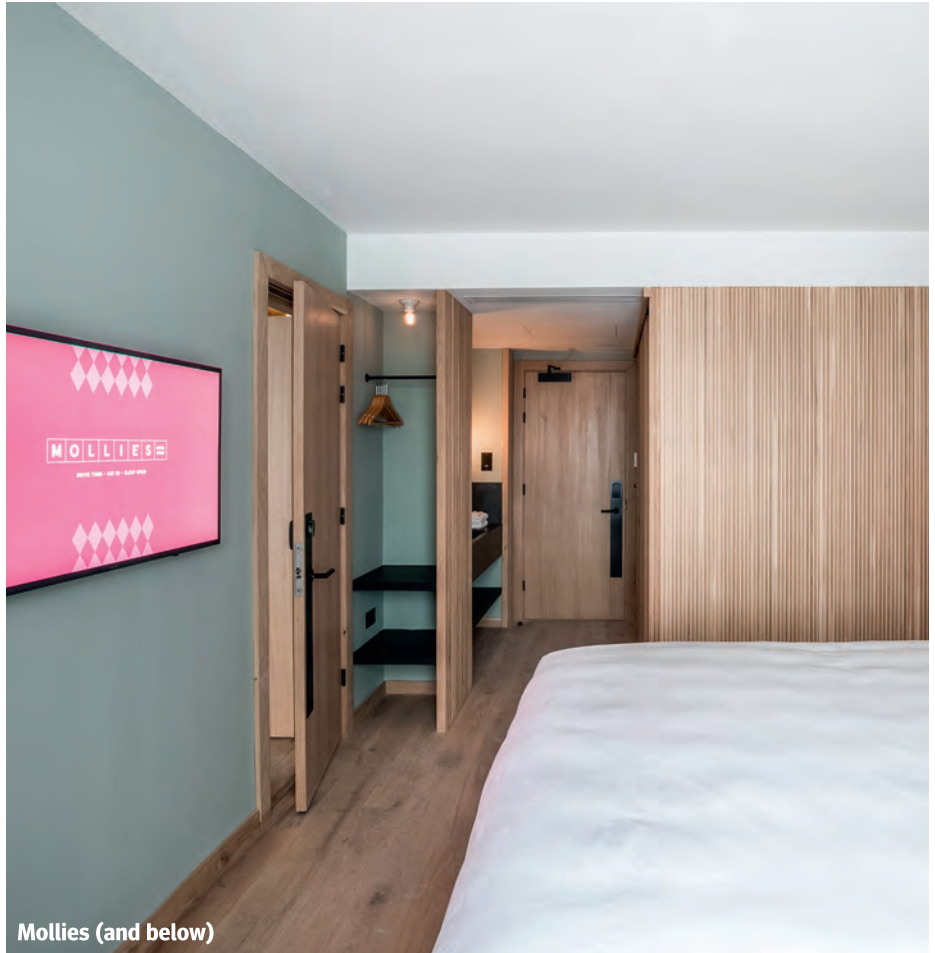
Moving from the booking stage to arrival, effective guest communication is equally about knowing when not to have a face-to-face encounter. Often, the last thing guests want after a tiring journey is to queue up and recite their personal details at the front desk, hence the popularity of contactless check-in.

In this respect, Mollie’s, the motel brand created by Soho House, has taken automation further than most, and won this year’s Catey Award for Best Use of Technology. Guests who have downloaded the Mollie’s app are recognised as soon as they arrive at the motel, automatically checked in, connected to the Wi-Fi, meaning they have their personal Netflix or Disney accounts instantly cast to the TV.

How is this possible? Having the phone number or email address of the guest would not be enough. It is the app that recognises when the guest is in the vicinity, then automatically runs through a series of criteria. Does the guest have a booking for today? Do we know her name? Is it past check-in time? When all criteria are met, the guest is checked in automatically, a digital key is assigned and she can go straight to her room.

Simon Kaye is vice-president of services and client delivery at Alliants, the customer experience technology specialists based in Southampton. He was involved in Mollie’s right from the start when the pilot site was still a Little Chef on the A420. He says: “There were quite a few stops and starts during the development of Mollie’s, not least due to the pandemic. But this meant that when it re-opened, Mollie’s was effectively a completely contactless operation where guests could do pretty much everything from their smartphones.”

Speaking at *The Caterer* Technology Summit



Mollies (and below)

“It is critical to look at your customer journey and learn where the personal touch is required and where it is not”

James Bland, BVA BDR

earlier this year, Mollie’s operations director Darren Sweetland said: “I think the pandemic shone a light on how we can be more efficient and I think it probably challenged a lot of us on the status quo when it comes to enabling tech. What can enable your customers to have a better experience? That’s paramount for us and it’s the starting point.”

Making it as easy as possible for guests to order and pay is another important element of the guest experience. According to IRIS, a provider of digital F&B ordering, guest directory and concierge solutions, 73% of travellers want to use their mobile device to order food and drink and pay. Contactless ordering results in 20% higher revenues, says IRIS.

Gleneagles, the Scottish luxury resort, recently adopted IRIS’s payment platform. Leo Plaster, Gleneagle’s digital product manager, comments: “F&B orders for guests are easier and it gives our team a stable solution. Additionally, guest feedback on the ordering process has been very good.”

DIAL ZERO

How do guests like to communicate during their stay? Needless to say, there are no fixed-line telephones in the bedrooms at Mollie’s. Guests are encouraged to communicate by text via the app or go to reception. But for some guests, picking up the phone by the bedside and dialling zero for reception will be the easiest and most convenient way to communicate. Different hotels will have different reasons for keeping, or removing, their fixed-line bedroom phones (see panel).



◀ When it comes to automated communications, there is no doubt that chatbots have found more favour than voicebots. In 2017 several brands, including Marriott and Best Western, piloted voice-activated virtual assistants in bedrooms, such as Amazon's Alexa or Apple's Siri. They found that most guests either unplugged the devices or complained about privacy concerns or about being suddenly woken up in the night because the appliance was activated by their snoring.

However, a voicebot on the front desk rather than in the bedroom may enjoy future success. Anette, a new AI-powered voicebot developed specifically for hospitality, can handle up to 60% of front desk calls with her natural-sounding voice, claims US firm Travel Outlook, freeing up staff to focus on current guests.

The use of automation for messaging is much more widespread and, here too, developers have sought to humanise the artificial. The chatbot at the Cosmopolitan in Las Vegas, for example, is imbued with a sassy personality. On arrival, guests receive the number for Rose, the digital concierge, who advertises her services as: "Resident mischief maker. If you're looking for trouble, I can hook you up with the best we have to offer."

Still, there has been a level of resistance to deploying automated communication tools in the hotel industry, especially in luxury settings. Here, the historic way to provide high-level service has been to increase the number of staff, which is no longer so easy. To solve this dilemma, brands such as Nobu Hospitality and Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts have implemented a blended messaging style that combines automation with a real human at the other end of the line. This allows guests to text requests in whichever channel (WhatsApp, FB Messenger, Snapchat, SMS etc) and language they prefer. FAQs are automatically answered, resulting in high guest satisfaction, while a hotel employee monitors and responds to more complex requests.

Marco Trecroce, chief information officer, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, says: "It's actually very conversational and once you've moved into the conversational, it completely

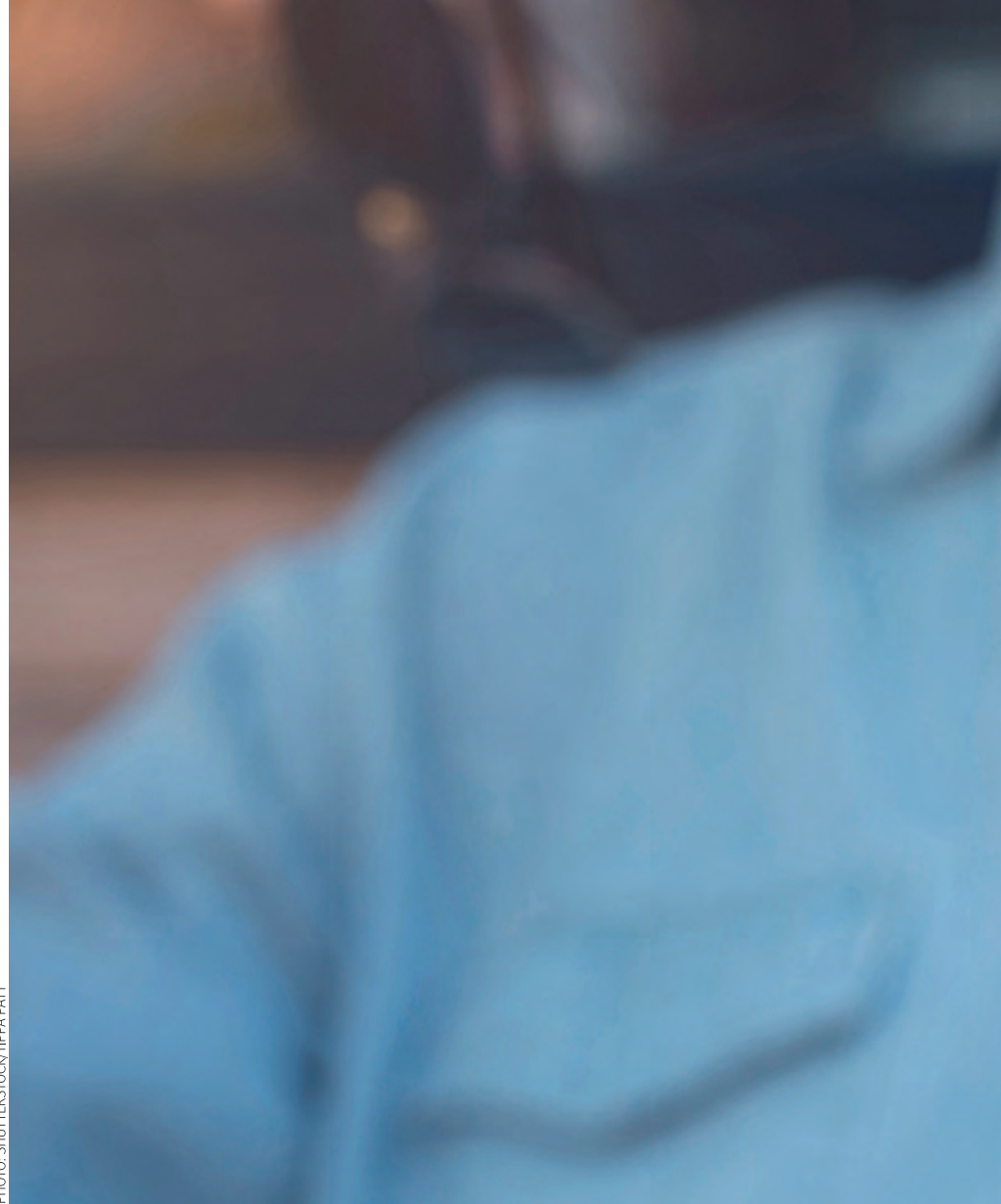


PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK/TIPPA PATT

“Done well, chatbots have a place in the most luxurious of properties”

Simon Kaye, Alliants

changes the dynamic and the interaction you have with the guests. The key is making a true connection and, once you have that, they stay very loyal to the brand.”

“Our guest satisfaction scores are substantially higher,” he continues. “I think messaging really has made a material difference: the ability to connect in your local language, the consistency around the world allowing you to travel



Is it time to hang up the bedroom phone?

Sagi Saltoun, managing director of Cardonet, says: “We have hotel clients at every service level and phones are a common topic of conversation. If a hotel already has the phones and systems in place, our advice is to keep them.”

It's a long time since phones in guest bedrooms were revenue generators, so their cost could be reduced by limiting the service to internal calls only, says Saltoun, cutting line rental costs and the need for call accounting software.

Hotels that still have rented ISDN channels and call charges that have not been re-negotiated in a long time need to move to SIP, as running over the internet will lower both rental and call charges.

For hotels that decide to remove bedroom phones, the maximum saving for a 200-bedroom hotel would be around £10,000 a year, Saltoun adds.

The main reasons for keeping bedroom phones include their usefulness in emergency situations, brand standards and guest expectations.

Brendon Granger, founder, Technology4Hotels, comments: “Ultimately, the guest room phone and the latest digital platforms should not be seen as mutually exclusive. Hospitality is about offering everyone a choice, and having a range of communication tools available will ensure all your guests are catered for and able to connect with you and your team.”



Darren Sweetland

and leverage the application and technology regardless of where you are. It emulates what we do today and everything in our conversations with our families and how our children communicate. It really is the way of the world.”

MESSAGE ME

Kaye at Alliants, which provides messaging platforms, says: “It is possible to write automated or templated responses to FAQs into the messaging software, making life easy for employees while still ensuring that the flow of communication sounds natural.”

Staff can even be trained to drop in the occasional deliberate mistake (“sorry I meant to say ...”), which helps dispel any doubts guests may have that they are dealing with a real person, and has proven to increase positive impression.

“Chatbots have got a bad name due to poor implementations, where they are not tuned properly and are not seamlessly integrated with staff. Done well, chatbots have a place in the most luxurious of properties,” says Kaye.

So, it appears there is a lot to be said for allowing guests to communicate in the way they prefer which, increasingly, is via their own smartphones. The digital-first approach adopted by Mollie’s has contributed to a 33% increase in average guest spend. Providing greater choice points to an initial expense, but the returns on investment can be significant.

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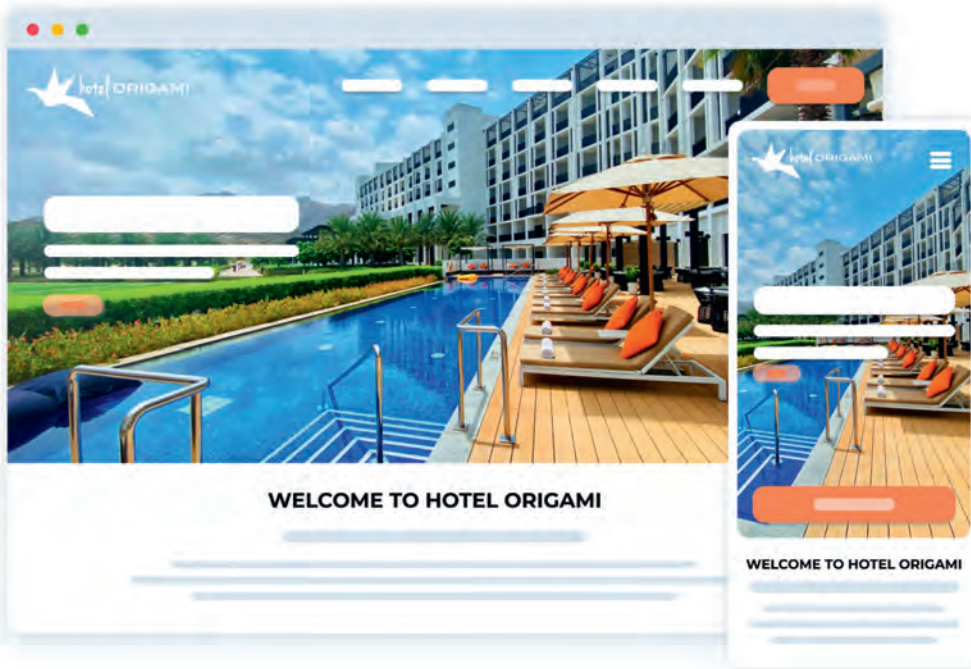
Cendyn's award-winning web design experts understand how to balance your brand's unique personality with a user-friendly website experience as well as brand-match your booking engine to provide a more efficient path into and through your booking funnel. Powered by Cendyn's purpose-built CMS, you can easily manage your content and scale the website as you grow, with enhanced flexibility around room configuration, rate adjustments, and booking widgets. We also offer multiple third-party integrations to keep your tech-stack connected.

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Driven by nearly 100 distinct targeting metrics, our website personalisation engine harnesses your own guest profile data to create a targeted guest experience with custom messaging that enhances conversion rates. The platform also makes it easy to include dynamic pricing and create flexible, multi-layered promotions based on multi-dimensional criteria, such as booking and stay, without the need for new rate plans.

CROSS-SELLING, MERCHANDISING, AND RETARGETING

Cendyn's website platform also allows you to increase conversions through urgency messaging, time-bound marketing taglines, and strike-through pricing directly on your site. Along with urgency, you can drive increased ancillary revenue and promote more quality bookings with dynamic add-ons and upgrades that are automatically triggered and personalised to each guest's interests. There are also trigger features to automatically retarget potential guests who have abandoned their



“At Cendyn, we live and breathe hospitality, and we know how to build vibrant, on-brand websites”

cart before completing a booking with a special offer to entice them back.

If your hotel is part of a larger collection or brand, we offer booking engine functionality that allows you to cross-sell to other properties when you don't have the availability the guest is searching for. Instead of losing the business, our booking engine can show your potential guest the best available rate for the same dates and locations at your other properties.

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THE RIGHT SOLUTION FOR EVERY PROPERTY

Whether you run an independent boutique hotel, a luxury collection, or a multi-property portfolio with different audiences and ADRs, we have the perfect solution for your unique needs. Best of all, every tier of our website design services includes full CMS, CPE, and integration functionality.

At Cendyn, we live and breathe hospitality, and we know how to build vibrant, on-brand websites that seamlessly blend striking design with optimal user engagement, allowing your brand to tell your unique story while guiding web visitors through your unique offerings and into the booking funnel. However, you don't have to take our word for it, below are a few recent success stories from Cendyn's website and booking engine customers.

- Beach Terrace, a luxurious 48-room hotel located in California, saw a **58% increase in total bookings and a 52% increase in website revenue YOY** after the launch of its new website and the integration of its web platform with the booking engine.
- Since converting to the new booking engine, a 125-room Laguna Beach, CA hotel **increased direct conversions by 35%, with direct revenue up by 82%.**

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43%

will pay more for greater convenience.

42%

will pay more for friendly, welcoming experiences.

65%

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Superb

The guest experience is more than what happens when someone enters your restaurant or bar. Today's guests want a seamless process from the first interaction with your reservation link to paying the bill. Think about the guest experience like this: People aren't just eating with you, they're staying with you.

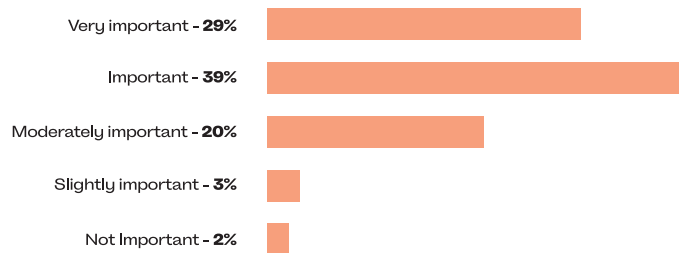
This is where personalisation comes in.

People aren't just eating with you, they're staying with you.

Today's guests want to be recognised, remembered from previous visits and greeted by name. They want to be seated according to their table preferences and offered recommendations based on their profile – with allergies and dietary restrictions already considered.



How important is personalised service and experience to guests when dining out?



They want to be seated according to their table preferences and offered recommendations based on their profile – with allergies and dietary restrictions already considered.

As the industry grows more competitive, restaurants need new ways to remain seen. Tracking data to figure out what diners want is a major player in that.

Superb's Guest Experience Management (GXM) platform makes room for magical experiences by bringing clarity to the things

that matter. Restaurants can deliver personal touches to every guest – even across different restaurants – through guest data.

The best part is that this data doesn't only apply to previous customers. Your guests want to be known from their first visit, and Superb makes that happen with guest profiles created during the reservation process.

Superb's all-in-one platform combines reservations, POS and payments in one solution, providing your staff with a new

way of working and reducing the time spent dealing with administrative tasks. That means you and your team will finally have the time (and resources) needed to focus on creating magical guest experiences.

Find out more



ALL HANDS ON TECH

Machines can take on the less attractive parts of a job – the endless prep or complicated order management – and free up staff for creativity and meaningful human interaction. *Glynn Davis* looks at the rise of the machines

Automation and robotics have been something of a gimmick in the hospitality industry, with some operators using mechanical arms and robotic waiters to add a dash of theatre to restaurants. But now the ongoing chronic shortage of employees and impressive advances in technology are driving some serious exploration of this area.

With automation defined as “the automatically controlled operation of an apparatus, process or system by mechanical or electronic devices that take the place of human labour”, it is fair to say this encompasses robots, self-service kiosks, smart fridges, vending machines and other labour-saving devices.

For Nick Liddle, commercial director of Vita Mojo, which works with the likes of Honest Burgers, Leon, Yo! and Nando’s, the fundamental theory is that any form of automation must add value to the overall customer experience and potentially free up employees to focus on more fulfilling activities.

This is applicable to both the front-of-house, where the likes of self-service kiosks not only empower customers but also make employees available to enhance other aspects of the experience. Back of house robots and smart kitchen management software can help chefs efficiently undertake repetitive cooking tasks.

Vita Mojo has found that its solution, which straddles all parts of a restaurant’s infrastructure, has been boosted by the pandemic and the resulting explosion in order and pay at

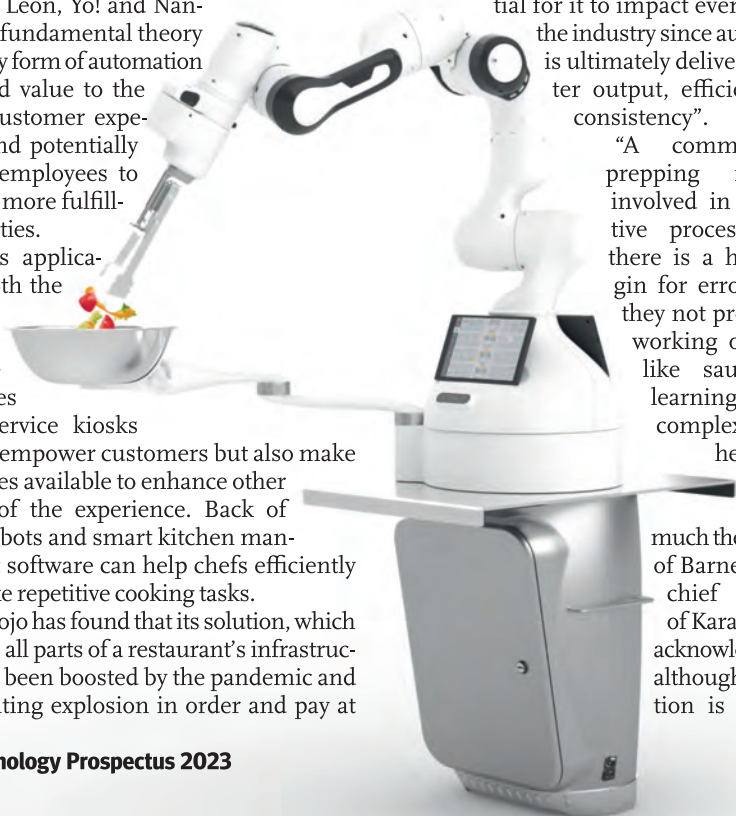
table, click and collect, and home delivery, which effectively added multiple channels to many restaurants’ models.

“We aggregate these orders, which is a form of automation, and involves taking orders from various channels and putting them into kitchen management software, where they are passed onto the relevant station. In places like Wagamama the process is even more automated as there are screens all over the kitchen displaying the cooking instructions for each order,” says Liddle.

Whereas the interest for automation was initially in quick-service restaurants, it has been broadening out into fast-casual sites, with the likes of Nando’s adopting such solutions. Liddle suggests there is also the potential for it to impact even more of the industry since automation is ultimately delivering “better output, efficiency and consistency”.

“A commis chef prepping food is involved in a repetitive process where there is a high margin for error. Would they not prefer to be working on things like sauces and learning more complex tasks?” he asks.

This is very much the thinking of Barney Wragg, chief executive of Karakuri, who acknowledges that although automation is currently



Dexai Robotics (and left)



“The robots move from the kitchen at the back of the restaurant to the front, carrying packaged meals for pick-up delivery couriers... they never drop anything”

Phil Neale,
Boparan Restaurant Group

used by the more mainstream brands, that this could soon change. Although high-end restaurants rely on the consistency of the dishes crossing the pass, there is also the need to retain creativity, a fact that has been recognised by Heston Blumenthal who is an adviser to Karakuri.

“Heston said that his style of cooking meant the chefs work prescriptively and scientifically, which took away some of the creativity. He has thought about how robots could fill the need for repeatability and accuracy while enabling chefs to do the more human stuff. We’ll see this happening in high-end restaurants, and frying [robots] are an obvious area to be automated, along with possibly prepping and plating,” says Wragg.

Karakuri has developed a frying robot that



PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK/GARAN JULIA

will be implemented in its first commercial kitchen in September. It has the capability to cook in a smarter way than has typically been undertaken by many restaurants, as it controls portioning more accurately, based on better forecasting and demand management.

The initial robot developed by Karakuri is Semblr, which assembles dishes from both hot and cold ingredients, and is stationed in the staff canteen of food technology company Ocado. Wragg predicts kitchens of the future will have a variety of robots and automated devices assisting chefs.

Robots cannot work alone though, as they need to be linked to kitchen processes such as stocktaking: “We realised it is complicated, and in order to gain the full benefits we need interoperability, so we designed Karakuri with connectivity into other systems like EPoS. We’ve made the interface as easy as possible.”

This move will aid the roll-out of the company’s solutions into large companies with complex incumbent systems and the first provider to have this ‘Robot Ready’ certification is Vita Mojo. To further drive adoption of the Karakuri technology Wragg says the business charges a monthly fee for each robot depending on usage: “It has to be priced at a level that makes sense. There is no point in replacing employees with something that is even more expensive.”

MACHINE LEARNING

US-based Dexai Robotics has also implemented a pay-as-you-go option (it calls it robotics-as-a-service) as it sets its sights on gaining a foothold in neighbourhood restaurants. Such a model makes it economically viable for independents to introduce such solutions.

The core Dexai product is Alfred the robotic sous chef that comprises an arm that can handle regular kitchen utensils as it assembles meals to specific recipes. These can encompass ▶



Semblr robot arm (and below)



◀ a wide range of categories, including soups, ramen, pasta and starters.

David Johnson, chief executive of Dexai Robotics, says: “Robots have come a long way from the days of massive, multimillion-dollar machines and complex, purpose-built installations. Not only is Alfred compact and easy to install, but also the cost scales with your business. And, while our operating model makes Alfred more accessible financially, our use of advanced artificial intelligence (AI) and computer vision make the robot highly adaptable. So, Alfred is able to work in practically any commercial kitchen and adapts to your existing menu, even if that changes seasonally.”

Mediterranean restaurant Bonapita in Boston has Alfred preparing salads and bowls once the ingredients have been initially entered into the device’s console along with the recipe instructions.

“With the AI capability there is a mass of learning. Every time it prepares a dish with a certain ingredient, it learns from that and can adjust processes slightly in the future and will therefore do things a little better,” says Johnson, adding that there is also the ability to share the knowledge that each robot learns with other Dexai devices through ongoing system updates.

He believes it is a “wonderful time” for computers and robotics in the kitchen because connected devices will likely proliferate and there is the opportunity for recipes to be encoded into various kitchen equipment. “There will be a big embrace of automation. We’re seeing the digitisation of the kitchen,” suggests Johnson.

ROBOT WAITERS

But it is not just the kitchen where the revolution is happening because front of house is also seeing great change. Phil Neale, marketing director at Boparan Restaurant Group, says the company has begun introducing service robots initially in its Slim Chickens brand. The Guildford and Cambridge Circus in London branches are the first to have

“A commis chef prepping food is involved in a repetitive process where there is a high margin for error. Would they prefer not to be working on things like sauces and learning more complex tasks?”

the robots, from manufacturer Pudu, introduced into their dining rooms.

“The role in Guildford is for the robots to move from the kitchen at the back of the restaurant to the front, carrying packaged meals for pick-up by delivery couriers. It saves colleagues having to run the 20 yards and frees up the team to serve customers in the restaurant. And the robots never drop anything,” he says.

At Cambridge Circus the focus has been more on delivering dishes to customers’ tables, which Neale says, adds to the customer experience as the robots can also do additional things like sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to celebrating guests. Customers can specifically request





to have a robot service them and at busy times they are deployed around the restaurant.

“They also have a digital screen on their fronts so there is an opportunity to use them for marketing. They can take orders but we’ve not set them up to do that. We could do a lot more with them, but we are seeing how it goes,” he says.

There is the potential for the robots to appear at other Boparan brands: “When we open new sites we will consider if the robots can help. If it’s a tight space we won’t do it and not at Cinnamon [Collection restaurants] but in the Sainsbury’s stores [where we have various restaurant brands] it could work.”

Other operators using robots for service include Gravity Southside at its restaurant within its experiential venue in South London, a number of outlets of the Chinese Buffet in the north of England, and in the Woking branch of tea room the Tea Terrace.

Chris Fung, co-founder of Lunch.Co and investor in hospitality technology, says care has to be taken with any such automation because it can sometimes appear to be the cool thing to do, but the economics might not stack up. He cites the branch of Ping Pong in London’s Waterloo, where a robot had been deployed to carry dirty dishes between the kitchen and dining room, but required a person to attend to it, thereby largely negating its value.

In addition, the CafeX robotic coffee bars in the US, where a robotic arm prepares the cof-

fee, appear to be more about theatre than hard finances – again, they still require a person to refill the device with fresh milk.

TALK IS CHEAP

One area where the financial benefits of automation are well proven is chatbots, which have been a feature in the retail sector for some years and increasingly used by a growing number of hotel companies.

Tiago Araujo, founder of HiJiffy, which provides chatbot solutions for the Staying Cool, Macdonald Hotels and Lake District Hotels chains, says its AI-powered solution can help automate the process of booking and handling customer queries by delivering immediate responses, thereby avoiding the negative experience of customers having to wait for an answer.

Most of its hotel clients use a hybrid

approach to chatbots rather than full automation, whereby more complex queries are passed onto a person. “The AI technology we see more and more in our lives every day is not designed to replace the human role in hospitality, but to allow the human to focus on different skills and different ways to bring value to the guests,” says Araujo.

While Liddle very much understands this balance, he believes too many restaurant groups are resistant to embracing any form of automation, which could put them at risk in the future: “There is a head in the sand approach and a wait for the old days to return.

“It’s the early days of automation in the hospitality sector and there is some push back from people who have had 20 or 30 years’ experience of running things the same way. But it is happening and it will soon be accepted.”

Self-service salad and intelligent fridges

On the edge of automation are smart fridges and vending machines that are finding their place in a growing number of locations as more shared office space appears and customer demand for high-quality fresh foods at all hours increases.

Neil Sebba, managing director of Tossed, introduced both devices into the business’ restaurant outlets, which he says has always been technology-led, with 20 self-service kiosks in its Baker Street outlet for instance.

The first vending machines are located in hospitals in West London and enable nursing staff to access fresh, healthy food through the night. “We’re looking at opportunities in corporates – with shared offices, travel hubs and leisure venues targeted where there is the desire for healthy food out-of-hours,” he explains.

The smart fridges are more suited to private offices and other such controlled environments as they require a contactless pre-authorized card to be used for payment and NFC tags on each food item will determine which products

have been removed from the fridge and the bill determined accordingly.

The units are all monitored in real-time thereby enabling better stock control and the introduction of promotions at certain times in order to clear stocks. “The data is fed into the back-end system so we can see all stock levels live, manage the fridge temperatures, receive alerts of any problems with products stuck, and automatically change prices for marketing purposes,” says Sebba.

He cites the enormous success of Farmer’s Fridge in the US with its smart vending machines and suggests there is big potential for the UK too, provided the historical perceptions of low-quality food dispensed from such devices can be overcome – helped by improvements in the technology.

Fung says the challenge is elevating the offer, with the help of intelligent fridges. “There will be a battle for vending machine space in offices and shopping centres as Covid-19 has meant the economics of offering full-service restaurants has changed,” he says.



WEATHER THE STORM

A revenue management system could be your back-up to carefully constructed pricing, or you can leave it to adjust your room prices automatically – either way, it’s a sound investment, says *Ben Walker*

Key trends during the post-pandemic recovery for UK branded hotels have been the leisure consumer’s willingness to spend and the ability to maximise rates.

Speaking at the Annual Hotel Conference in Manchester in October, Thomas Emanuel, senior director at STR, said: “Average rates have been very strong and come back aggressively. Compared to 2019, the premium in average rate is about £30, so that’s a big jump.” Even when adjusted for inflation, UK average daily rate has been ahead of 2019 levels since June.

Obviously, hotels have had to deal with soaring operating costs across the board, but the good news during the summer at least, was that rate growth enabled hotels to maintain their profit margins.

Technology vendors are keen to highlight the important role that revenue management systems (RMS) have played in enabling hoteliers to maximise rates.

Mike Chuma, vice-president of global marketing at IDEaS, says: “The recent quarterly results for brands like Choice, Hilton, Wyndham and Accor are worth reading as they link their recovery success to rate. Choice Hotels achieved a 4.5% increase in revenue per available room [revpar] and it use a white-labelled IDEaS RMS.”

Although labour costs have risen, particularly for housekeeping and F&B roles, hotels have cut back on payroll in areas such as accounting and sales and marketing, according to aggregated P&L data from HotStats.

So, with smaller teams being asked to do more, is there scope for tech systems like RMS to pick up even more of the slack? The short answer is yes and no. That’s because the efficacy of a profit optimisation strategy largely depends on the user’s understanding of what a RMS does and what it is for.

Richard Grosvenor is the director and

founder of UK-based consultancy RevenueRich. He started his career in central reservations for Forte Travelodge at the age of 16 and has held senior revenue management positions at several hotel companies, including Premier Inn, Macdonald Hotels & Resorts, Amaris Hospitality, and Menzies Hotels.

He says: “Technology supports our industry in many ways. An RMS is a tool that can help you manage price in as close to real time as possible, or can streamline how you work, whereas a self-check in kiosk, for example, is very much designed to take that process away from a human.”

“I have worked with organisations that accepted an RMS’s forecast and didn’t focus on action and activity that would stimulate interest and demand. The belief was that you plug in a piece of kit – particularly an RMS – and that’s it. You can just sit back and put your feet up. I experienced this first-hand in weekly meetings with comments such as: ‘Well, the system is forecasting this amount of revenue.’ This led to less activity, such as sales and marketing strategies, and over time the demand and forecasts declined, the teams would panic and say the RMS doesn’t work. We must remember an RMS is there to support our strategies; it will not find new business or interact with agents and guests.”

RMS’s often have forecasting and reporting capabilities and Grosvenor says that sometimes people are blindsided that these are the only benefits of having a RMS.

“A forecast is just that and subject to change for a multitude of reasons, but we still seem surprised when forecasts must be adjusted and don’t remain in line with budget targets,” he comments. “We have seen this in recent months when the Bank of England has been forced to revise its forecasts due to

“A hotel might put in pricing bands from £100 to £200 in £20 increments or leave the RMS to automatically go above and below those limits”

Richard Grosvenor, RevenueRich

unforeseen changes from UK government fiscal policy. Forecasts can change quickly and with little notice.”

In fact, the critical role of an RMS is to maximise revenue by managing price and inventory. The reporting and forecasting capabilities of an RMS are useful features but should not be the deciding factor if another RMS has superior pricing capability, advises Grosvenor.

Originally, the whole point of an RMS was to automate the drudgery of having to manually set prices, and this is still the case today.

Vendors are keen to promote their increasingly automated price-setting capabilities. Atomize, founded in Sweden in 2016, has a RMS with an ‘autopilot’ function. Hoteliers are encouraged to: “Sit back and relax. Switch on autopilot and let the system automatically update your rates per room type.”

Arnold Linares, who, until September, was group revenue and distribution manager for the Zetter Group, described his experience of using Pace Revenue’s RMS during the recovery: ▶



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“An investment in a RMS is rarely a wrong solution if you’ve got a skilled operator. I’ve heard of people breaking even in a really short space of time”

Jane Pendlebury, HOSPA

◀ “Within a few weeks of onboarding, we decided to switch on automated pricing. I really trust the engine. For example, Pace Revenue was running everything while I was on holiday recently and nobody needed to interfere at all. I’m finding that it rarely needs any oversight. As each week goes by, I check it less and less.”

Sarova Hotels is another group that deployed a Pace Revenue RMS during the post-pandemic recovery but is not quite ready to go fully automatic yet. Group revenue manager Jon Siberry says: “With our set-up, Pace has been making price changes of up to £20 but mostly between £5 and £10. The start of the summer was particularly strong for us.”

“The Pace recommendations are working well, although we still haven’t switched on full automation yet. We need to first make sure we have a culture in place to keep an eye on all the rates and that they are accurate. We’re gradually making the transition to new cloud-based technologies but, of course, it takes time.”

REMOTE WORKING

Other hotels have switched to take advantage of cloud-based integrated operating systems. The Tawny hotel is an innovative business that combines traditional hotel amenities with quirky accommodation, including wild-wood huts, treehouses, and romantic boat-houses stretching across 70 acres in rural Staffordshire. When it opened in July 2021, it quickly became apparent that its newly installed system wasn’t fit for purpose. It was

basic, lacked functionality and was difficult to build and upload rates. The support team were US-based which was impractical and caused delays when problems arose.

The hotel switched to a Guestline multi-function cloud solution, which has resulted in a 75% increase in direct bookings and a 15% increase in ADR. Rates are now easy to man-

age, set up and upload. The team can track and change rates accordingly, which not only saves time but helps them maximise revenue.

Furthermore, the Direct Booking Manager enables the team to set up and sell a range of packages online. Previously only sold over the phone, these revenue-generating packages are proving popular, especially with non-residents.

RMS’s can be as complex or as simple as a business wishes, Grosvenor points out, since their outputs are largely dependent on the inputs and parameters set by the revenue management team or commercial specialists.

“A hotel might put in pricing bands from £100 to £200 in £20 increments or leave the RMS to automatically go above and below those limits. Or the revenue manager could set high and low-price limits and let the RMS choose whatever price it wants within those limits. You might even split a typical year into four seasons or 12 seasons.”

“You can create simplicity or complexity and quite often the non-revenue management teams – a GM or operations director – might perceive it to be overly complicated. They might have a point. Quite often the complexity is designed by the revenue manage-



The Tawny hotel



PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK/KEN STOCKER



Richard Grosvenor

ment specialist to maximise revenue over the many demand periods. With this in mind it is important to ensure you have the right person or team that understands the complexities of each business,” says Grosvenor.

FALSE ECONOMY

Many revenue managers were made redundant or left the industry during the pandemic, and some hotels decided to stop paying for their RMS too. For many hotels, the automatic outputs from their RMS proved to be of little use so they reverted to making their own calculations and forecasts using Excel spreadsheets.

One independent London general manager who had stopped using the RMS for more than 18 months, said: “To be honest, revenue management is not at the forefront of my activity at the moment. I am concentrating on recruitment and building my team.”

Chuma at IDEaS has a slightly different perspective: “At the very outset of the pandemic, hoteliers had to adjust staffing and vendors made billing concessions to provide support. However, this was only for a very short period. While hotels with RMS based purely on historical data were affected by poor insights to leverage rate opportunities, a majority of the leading

RMS vendors acted incredibly swiftly to handle disruptions and add value.”

SPEND TO SAVE

Although the notion of a RMS working its magic in the background is an attractive one for short-staffed hotel teams, it only goes so far. Many aspects of revenue management are very much dependent on human input. A skilled or at least competent revenue manager needs to be in position to lead profit optimisation strategy and configure and monitor what the RMS is doing. In the end, RMS are dependent on their operators.

The use of RMS by independent hotels is not high. Around 25% use an on-the-shelf piece of revenue management software, while the rest use spreadsheets.

RMS are not cheap, but the return on investment can be rapid. “An investment in a RMS is rarely a wrong solution if you’ve got a skilled operator. I’ve heard of people breaking even in a really short space of time,” says Jane Pendlebury, chief executive of HOSPA, the hospitality professionals association. The deployment of a RMS normally leads to an increase in revpar of between 5% and 20%.

Many hoteliers delay investing in a RMS

until a time in the future when they are making more money. “It is like not buying good running shoes until you become a good runner,” comments Ravi Mehrotra, president and chief scientist at IDEaS.

Grosvenor adds: “To some in the industry, technology is still not understood well enough. There are owners and hospitality teams who do not buy into technology or do not understand the benefits they can bring. There are businesses across the UK and beyond that do not maximise their revenues because of this approach and miss potentially lucrative revenue growths every year.”

As most RMS are now cloud-based, hoteliers can choose one that integrates with their booking engine, channel manager, PMS and CRM for automatic data sharing. Some vendors offer software-as-a-service pricing instead of contracts, so there is the opportunity to try two or three RMS before deciding which is the best fit. There is also the option to outsource revenue management functions to a consultancy.

When it comes to the newest developments, there are now RMS that can update prices every two hours based on up-to-date PMS and competitor pricing data.

“That ability to understand the market and trends and update what it’s doing as frequently as possible – we’ll see that develop more in the coming years and it will be a really exciting time for revenue managers to use their skillset alongside some fantastic technology,” says Grosvenor.

Hoteliers are starting to adopt revenue management practices in other departments beyond rooms, like meeting and events, parking, and food and beverage. “The past few years have moved the industry forward more than any in the last 20 years,” comments Chuma. “The modern hotel considers revenue management a key commercial capability. We are more equipped now to handle uncertainty and systematic shifts. Forecasting and pricing capabilities have evolved dramatically.

REMOVING THE FOG FROM CLOUD COMPUTING

IdeaS outlines the benefits of working with cloud-hosted technology



Empowering revenue leaders with accurate forecasts and profitable pricing decisions they can trust has long been the mission of IDEA S, the world's leading provider of revenue management software and services.

The company's commitment to innovation began 20-plus years ago with IDEA S' move to the cloud – a trailblazing transition from high-cost, inflexible on-premise software. But what does cloud technology mean for hoteliers and revenue teams?

The cloud offers a more flexible approach, which allows businesses to respond in real-time from anywhere at any time, with the knowledge the system is secure. With greater agility from cloud-based systems, hotels are more efficient in making effective business decisions.

Whilst some may argue being built in the cloud (known as cloud-native) gives software solutions better reliability, this ignores the long-standing, continual evolution of some of the world's most robust software providers. In truth, there is no differentiation between the reliability or functionality available to cloud-native or migrated suppliers.

Companies existed before the cloud. For legacy companies, transitioning technology to the cloud is simply the latest step in a storied history of innovation. Those who have successfully made the switch show a deep understanding of how technology trends impact clients and their customers.

Some of today's biggest technology brands today, such as Adobe and Salesforce, are not

“Optimising profitability across every guest touchpoint is key as hotels fight against increasing operational costs”

cloud-native. Even Netflix migrated its entertainment distribution to the cloud having started life as a DVD mail-order business. Within hospitality, OracleSAP and Stripe sit alongside IDEA S as having migrated their decades of industry experience online in order to provide enhanced cloud-based solutions.

Operating in the cloud allows technology providers to better tailor solutions to meet the varied needs of today's customers. At IDEA S, there are three different ways of deploying its popular revenue management (RM) solutions:

- SaaS delivery: the typical delivery method, a web-based application with support, such as IDEA S G3.
- White labelled: products and systems are tailored to the needs of specific hotel groups' strategies and branding, used by brands such as Hilton, ChoiceMax, Wyndham and Accor.
- API based: a services-based delivery model where hotels plug a solution's API into their existing tech stack and shape their own front end.

Technology providers need to balance the ever-evolving technology landscape with stable and robust solutions. Cloud computing is an essential part of this, and no doubt there will be more innovation in the future.

For more than 30 years, IDEA S has proven its reliability and innovative approach to revenue management. A client retention rate of 98% highlights the industry's trust in IDEA S and the company's ability to adapt and support over 18,000 global hotels and resorts.

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HOW TO BUILD EFFICIENCY INTO YOUR TECH STACK

Smooth transactions don't just mean happy guests, they mean happy staff too, says *James Cannon*, sales and marketing director, Guestline



The acceleration and adoption of new technologies is widely regarded as one of the positive changes in hospitality during the last two years. Driven by both guest demand and operational necessity, the emergence of new platforms and solutions have enabled many operators across the hospitality industry to manage and fulfil bookings and safeguard revenues as well as automate back-office processes and streamline communication between departments.

From online check-in/check-out and payment solutions to revenue and channel management and the growth of direct bookings courtesy of Google's free booking links, you now have a host of technology at your disposal. At a time when operators face increased pressure from inflation and staff management, technology has a more critical role to play. That is all well and good but what should you as hospitality owners and operators consider when building and upgrading your tech stack, and what are the foundations to have in place to ensure you are getting the most from it?

The debate around the impact technology can have on the guest experience has certainly moved on in recent times. Both guests and operators have recognised the value it can add to the guest journey. That said, to get the most value out of any software it is important that not only do you do your research to ensure the technology you invest in is fit for purpose, but also that you

involve staff in the selection process: research, evaluation, onboarding and training. Remember they will be the members of your team that will be utilising your technology on a day-to-day basis so even before it is implemented take the time to canvas their opinion – find out where and what challenges and inefficiencies lie.

Ensuring your staff feel part of the process and where possible are being listened to, will not only ensure you are getting the right technology for your operational needs but also can pay dividends in terms of staff engagement. They are far more likely to engage with technology that meets a direct need and supports them in their job role. The end result can be a more loyal team and a greater return on investment in both your people and your technology.

Likewise ensure you are training staff across the board so they have a clear and current

“With the increasing pressure on staffing, hotels often need to quickly adapt their operational processes”



understanding of the technology you have in place and its capabilities. But it's not just about how to process daily tasks, such as check-in/out, invoicing, reporting, etc, but very much about the level of a system's configurability and the ability of your team to change these configurations easily in house.

With the increasing pressure on staffing, hotels often need to quickly adapt their operational processes, followed by system's re-configuration, which can be a blocker, if you need to wait weeks for your tech vendor to implement these changes for you. Hotel teams are often required to transfer across different departments and engage with guests at a moment's notice. Single login to all systems, whether that is PMS, Conference & Banqueting or Digital Registration, allows easy access to all functionalities and up-to-the-minute understanding of a department, whether that be from a live status report or knowledge of a guest's preferences. Staff then have the knowledge they need to manage the situation at hand quickly and efficiently.

The volume of data that is processed and distilled across departments on a daily basis is considerable. Whether that be from reception to housekeeping via the PMS, bookings, F&B orders, managing suppliers to check-in and check-out, CRM, revenue management and coordinating rates and inventory, to name just a few. The pressure to keep all the data transferring smoothly and in real time between different modules and apps is considerable. Give careful consideration to a technology provider that offers accessible, cloud-based solutions and has the integration capabilities to not only manage sharing and utilising data effectively from within, but also with a network of partners, so while changing one part of the tech stack, you can continue utilising the rest of it without compromising on quality, efficiency and guest experience.

Operational efficiency and cost look set to be the watch-words of the industry, but due diligence and investment in a technology partner that has the expertise, software and network to help manage both of those will pay dividends both for staffing and revenues in the short and long term.

For more information, please visit guestline.com





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FLEXIBLE FRIEND

As businesses grow and change, moving from pay at table to takeaway and click and collect, their electronic point of sale system becomes more complex. So it pays to invest in one system to control it all, says *Glynn Davis*

Hospitality has become increasingly multi-channel in recent years, which is leading to the need for a more flexible and tailored level of service delivered to customers. Integral to this is the electronic point of sale (EPOS) system that now sits at the heart of growing eco-systems within many food and drink businesses.

Peach Pubs, which operates 21 gastropubs around the UK and was recently acquired by Revolution Bars, is a typical example of this business change. Hamish Stoddart, managing director of Peach Pubs, says the company has had an EPOS solution from Access Hospitality since its first outlet and it has added other technology solutions as the group has expanded.

“Our EPOS is now integrated with Acteol CRM and Procure Wizard Purchase to Pay, both from Access Hospitality, and other applications they partner with to improve efficiency and visibility across all sites,” he says.

Certainly Covid-19 had a massive impact on the EPOS eco-system, which for Peach Pubs involved the launch of an app for paying at the table. “When cashless payments were enforced two years ago, there was a lot of discussion on whether we needed an app and if it would bring any long-term benefit. We decided they are here to stay and, with the right design, could add value for guests who prefer using apps. We chose Pepper as it integrated with our existing EPOS, was focused on loyalty and could be developed to feel brand-specific,” says Stoddart.

Although the app journey has not been a natural one for Peach, because Stoddart says it is a people-oriented service business, he acknowledges: “If people want to leave as soon as they’ve finished their meals, then that last 10 minutes of a visit can be the most difficult for an operator as guests have to wait patiently



“Operationally, we have three stations and fixed tills, but we don’t trade like that any more”

Ollie Vaulkhard,
Vaulkhard Group

to pay their bill. Payment by app enables them to finish their meal, view the bill, pay and go. We are looking at the reasons, incentives and mechanisms to encourage more people to download the app. We want to retain the personal touch, but hybrid use of the app provides them with more flexibility without spoiling their experience.”

ROOM SERVICE

James Anderson, sales manager at Hungrrr, is also an advocate of the use of such apps by hospitality companies. The white label Hungrrr app is part of an online ordering platform that integrates with the EPoS to deliver a seamless journey for companies to provide their customers with a route to order meals online. It represents an alternative to them tying-up with the large marketplaces and their high commissions.

As well as working with restaurants for home delivery and click and collect, Hungrrr has also been working with hotels that have a limited F&B offer to provide them with an order-to-room solution. It has also supplied an order-to-specific-plot for campsites.

“It can also be used by office blocks whereby we’d go to say five caterers nearby and then suggest to the office manager that they could have an app that could access the menu of all five,” says Anderson.

By linking the solution into the EPoS he says the journey is much more seamless for the customer and it also helps deliver a better reporting capability. Such link-ups involve integration and this is often the headache for hospitality companies as they seek to build-out their eco-systems around their EPoS.

Dominique Fernandes, head of operations at Mildreds, which operates six vegetarian restaurants in central London, says she has integrated various additions into a Lightspeed EPoS solution, including a scheduling system and order and pay solution Mr Yum: “When we research and buy other [add-on] things we make sure before we engage that it can be integrated easily with our EPoS. The EPoS holds the business together and all the other systems need to feed into it.”

PAYMENT ON THE MOVE

Ollie Vaulkhard, director at Newcastle-based Vaulkhard Group, which comprises 18 venues ▶

Supplier comment: **Hungrrr**

hungrrr

Alternative to the big delivery marketplaces

Hungrrr is offering up an alternative to the large marketplaces with its white label online ordering solution that integrates with more than 100 of the industry’s most successful EPoS solutions and industry-specific integrations, including Res Diary, Tiplar, Deliverect and the Fork.

The platform works as an extension of an operator’s own brand and its business activities, which is very different to the well-known marketplaces, and enables restaurants to manage the full journey of taking online orders. This particularly helps independent hospitality venues that can easily be lost in the big marketplaces where large brands take premium, sponsored spots at the top of listings and with high commissions.

Hungrrr allows customers to interact directly with hospitality businesses through numerous features on the platform, such as push notifications and built-in marketing tools that help build brand loyalty. When customers register through the white label Hungrrr app, businesses can access this personal data that allows the tailoring of these push notifications and marketing interactions.

More recently Hungrrr has introduced a number of last mile delivery solutions, involving various courier providers, which expands the scope of the business by empowering those organisations unable to source their own drivers. The company also differentiates its offer by charging a fixed amount per month for its service rather than a commission-based arrangement, over which the large marketplaces are often criticised.

www.hungrrr.co.uk



Castro’s, Vaulkhard Group



Peach Pubs

“The EPoS holds the business together and all the other systems need to feed into it”

Dominique Fernandes, Mildreds

◀ including night clubs and gastropubs, also recognises this as a challenge. He says any move he might make away from his existing long-term supplier to a more best-of-breed type approach would require integrations.

“Our existing supplier does wages, but it’s not perfect, and it does stock control, which is also not perfect. But to change would be a big step. The financial commitment to make the change would likely involve two systems running side by side for two years,” he suggests.

One aspect he would find advantageous from his current EPoS arrangement is for more flexibility with the link between the hardware and the software. “One day I’d like to have software for an iPad and not have to buy the hardware,” says Vaulkhard, adding that mobile EPoS would certainly be advantageous in his business today.

“Operationally, we have three stations and fixed tills, but we don’t trade like that any more. We’ve indoors, outdoors, silver service standards and beer gardens across our business. The fixed tills feel out of synch as things happen on the move now. We tend to have to work around the tills,” he explains.

The adoption of mobile PoS has certainly been of value to Dan Gore, owner of Jigger & Jar, located in the affluent Leeds suburb of Garforth, who says his busy, premium destination



Thai Time

cocktail bar offers table service using the Tabology Bar EPoS system.

“Our core customers are couples and groups of friends, and there’s a more relaxed atmosphere when people are sitting at tables rather than queuing at the bar. We wanted to show that you can offer restaurant-quality service in a cocktail bar setting, and because our drinks are made to order, it means we can control the flow of service,” he says.

Orders are taken on iPads by waiting staff at the table, and are sent to the team at the bar. “We were able to keep the existing iPads and terminals [from our previous solution], which was very helpful, and we were able to tweak the product pages, so they display the way we want them, rather than have to conform to a template”, says Gore.

Neil Sebba, managing director at Tossed, made the move to providing self-service ordering on tablets in Tossed outlets in 2016 with software from Vita Mojo and more recently



How to split the bill easily

For Mark Williams, co-owner of Thai Time, which comprises two restaurants, in Arundel, West Sussex, and Forest Row, East Sussex, ensuring that all his customers enjoy their meals at their optimum in terms of food freshness and quality is of paramount concern.

This has become ever more important since Covid pushed up the level of off-premise orders. Delivering on this objective has been one of the key benefits the business has enjoyed since switching to the Tabology Restaurant EPoS system, which has enabled it to better manage demand across the channels of eat-in and takeaway.

“We have a strong takeaway trade alongside our restaurant business, and customers need to book early to get a collection slot, especially at busy times,” he says. “We initially introduced the slot system during lockdown to manage social



PHOTOS: CARLO PALONI; SHUTTERSTOCK/FOAMFOTO

distancing, and it works well for us. When you're cooking and serving fresh food to a high standard, you can't have orders coming in willy-nilly, because everyone would want the most popular time slots. These are likely to be the times when the restaurant is also busy and the kitchen just doesn't have the capacity."

Tabology's EPoS solution manages the total process through the till – from the taking of a telephone order to the recording of the collection slot given to the customer and the kitchen knowing when the food needs to be ready. The payment side has also been enhanced, especially for younger customers wanting to split the bill in terms of just paying for what they've had, says Williams. He adds that with Tabology, restaurants can select just the items they want to take payment for, and if someone needs to leave early, the tab continues for others in the party.

payments provider Adyen. He says the architecture enables the business to achieve its primary objective of having the same ordering and paying experience regardless of whether the customer is in the restaurants, online or using the Tossed app: "We just want the menu in as many places as possible and to let the customer order."

The current consideration for Tossed with building out its EPoS eco-system is how it approaches loyalty and customer relationship management (CRM). "Vita Mojo has an amazing operating system for the customer journey [for ordering] but its loyalty system is basic and there is no CRM system. We're always having conversations around what's the incumbent building-out versus do we find somebody else whose solution we buy and build an application programming interface."

Sebba clearly recognises the value of building a stronger relationship with the customer through the data that can be accumulated

across its EPoS and other linked systems. It is for this reason that Anderson recommends clients focus on the Hungrrr app rather than ordering via a web page, which can help build a richer link. "The app gets most traction and enables companies to send notifications to customers' Instagram pages and Facebook and can incentivise customers with relevant coupons," he says.

For Stoddart the implementation of the Acteol CRM system is "one of the jigsaw pieces in providing total integration as it joins up with EPoS, apps and other solutions to manage the customer relationship".

"Our customer base is loyal and we are seeing a small increase in the number of covers compared to 2019, but that doesn't mean we can stand still. We are therefore working through the creation of much more targeted email and app marketing campaigns and, ultimately, I want that customer relationship to include information about our carbon footprint or the calorie count of a dish," he explains.

To this end Peach Pubs is segmenting its customer database very specifically and reacting to Google changes, email blockers and the various rules that internet providers implement. "Over the last couple of years our CRM has enabled us to send many more versions of similar emails that Acteol categorises by guest preferences," says Stoddart, who is seeing an improvement to email open and conversation rates.

Expect to see such tailored approaches being taken, across different channels, by a growing number of hospitality companies as they leverage increased value from their growing technology eco-systems.



Online ordering apps and websites



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IN SAFE HANDS

The perils of managing health and safety in a restaurant, whether that's food temperatures or allergens, don't leave room for doubt. *Katherine Price* looks at how to gain confidence in your systems

Despite the significant pressures facing the hospitality industry, the Food Standards Agency (FSA) concluded earlier this year that food standards in the UK had largely been maintained.

However, this positive message was not delivered without a degree of caution. The inaugural report, *Our Food: An Annual Review of Food Standards Across the UK*, said that while there had been no evidence of a drop in standards, it warned of challenges ahead.

Two of the main concerns were the delay in establishing full UK import controls for high-risk food and feed from the EU, and the fall in the number of inspections due to the resourcing issues faced by local authorities.

To ensure they are always inspection-ready whenever an environmental health officer (EHO) attends, general manager Ronan Hunter is overseeing a technological revolution at the historic Castle at Taunton hotel in Somerset. Five months ago, the business partnered with Food Safe System, an app to record the temperatures of all its fridges and freezers as well as delivery records, which the entire kitchen team can access on their phones.

"It's a bit of a safety net for us because if the EHO comes in and our head chef is off or I'm off or my operations manager is off, somebody else can log in and have all the stuff there," he explains.

"And even if your head chef is on holiday, they can take 30 seconds to log in and make sure it's being done... We sent over the names of all the fridges and our opening/closing procedures and they set it all up in the system for us. If we want to edit and change things we can

"If you can even take 10 minutes out of people's days, over the week that adds up"

Ronan Hunter, Castle at Taunton

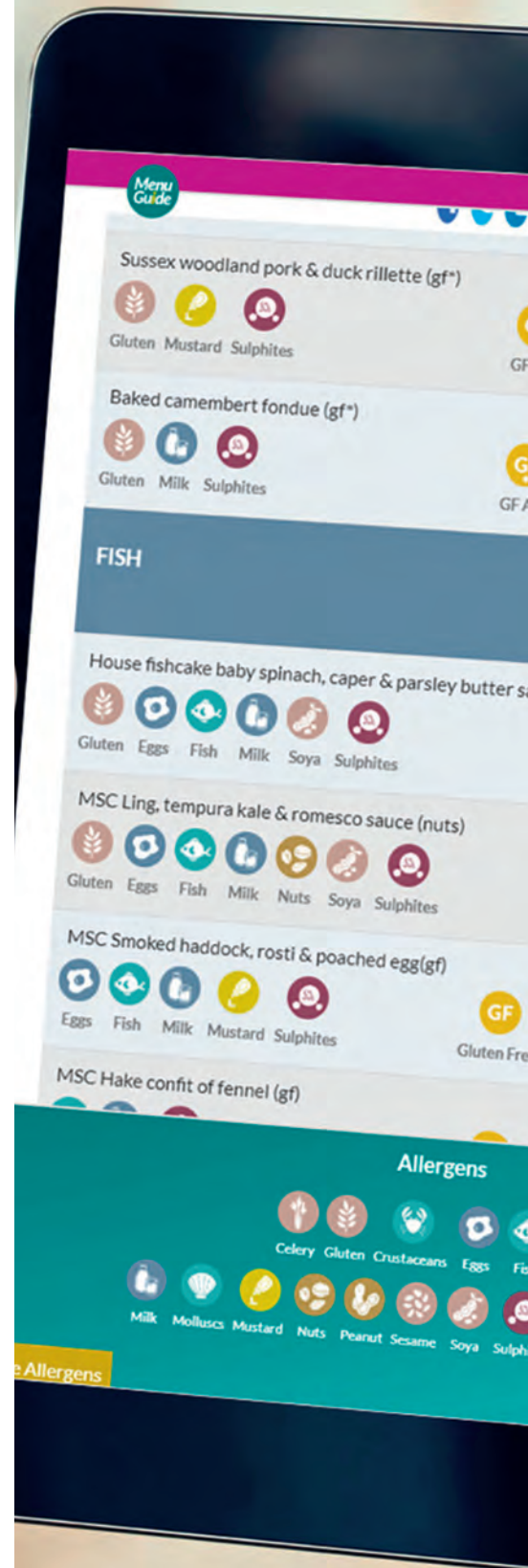
do so and it's fairly straightforward. It's a very user-friendly dashboard to look at."

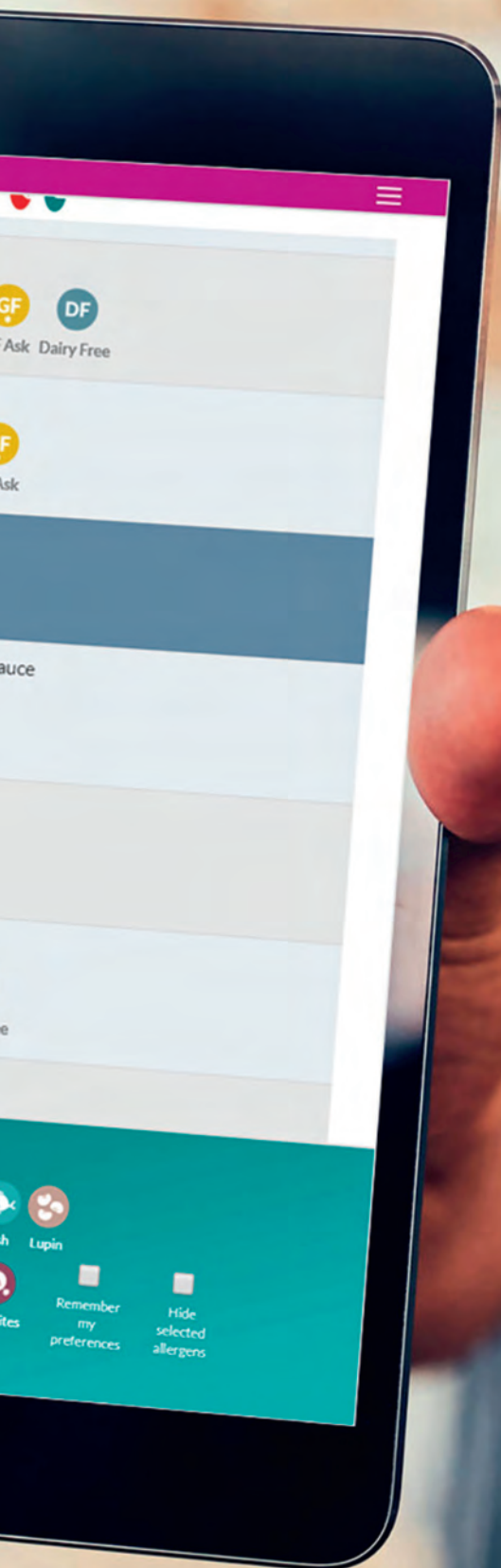
Now the records are all in one place, saving on paper and the team's valuable time—particularly important given the industry's staffing shortage, a problem the Castle hasn't been immune to.

"Everyone's trying to look at time savings because everyone's got staffing pressures—if you can even take 10 minutes out of people's days, over the week that adds up," says Hunter.

He acknowledges that for some of the kitchen team who have been working with paper records their entire careers it's been "a big change", and the younger generation have perhaps embraced it more quickly, but ultimately it has benefitted both the business and the team.

"We're trying to help our team's wellbeing, because doing a stocktake off sheets of paper is pretty grim and time-consuming," adds Hunter. "You want to make sure that





Andrei Lussmann

your teams can focus on the art of hospitality by taking away the bits that take them away [from] focusing on the guest. We're all about trying to make our team's life easier, because when their lives are easier, the guests get a better experience."

ERADICATING ERRORS

April Jackson, owner of Wood + Water restaurant and two bars in London's Brixton, uses hospitality checklist app Trail for data recording. She agrees it has helped guard against natural human error that can creep in. Her business has been using Trail for the last three months to record fridge and freezer temperatures, opening and closing procedures, and deep-clean processes.

"We've been using apps for quite a while, but particularly when I had two sites, it made it easier to keep on top of everyone, because I could just log in remotely and see if they'd done what needed to be done," she says.

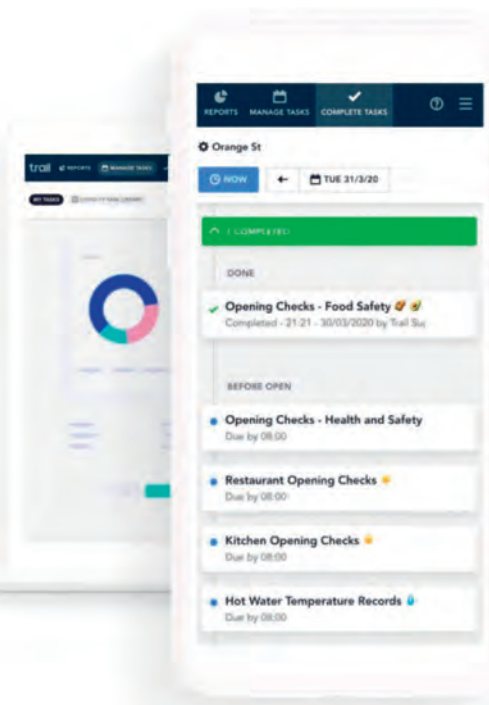
It also provides accountability because each member of staff has their own login, so it is clear who has done each task and signed it off.

The fact she can set reminder alerts on her phone, she says, has been particularly useful, as has moving from a previously device-based solution to a web and app-based solution.

"People are clearly more comfortable taking out their own phone rather than using something that's positioned in the kitchen," she explains.

ALLERGEN AWARE

Andrei Lussmann, managing director of Lussmanns Sustainable Kitchen, which has five restaurants in Hertfordshire, has been focusing on allergens and helped with the development of Menu Guide, which it now uses for allergen management across the



group. The system has also been used by Leicester City Football Club and Wimbledon.

Lussmann says allergens have been the biggest challenge for his business: “The whole process starts long before the customer even eats with you and you’re relying on third parties to provide you with information, therefore the opportunity for a mistake is varied and quite open from long before the restaurant gets involved,” he says.

“Staffing shortages and the logistics nightmare post-Covid and now the intense cost scrutiny involved with everything in the business has meant we are more challenged by the whole allergen matter than we were before. If costs are going up, your supplier is not able to provide you with consistent supply.”

Once suppliers may have substituted products or someone from the kitchen team may have popped to a local supermarket as a last resort, Lussmann says they must now ensure that if a product is not available, a substitute that hasn’t been audited cannot be delivered in its place. Only the specific product that has been agreed with a supplier can be delivered.

“We now have to educate the suppliers to not deliver it at any cost,” he says. “We’d rather the item is removed from the menu. It might be the brine or the black olive is covered in something else, but it means we would have to do a review of that product, audit it, investigate it. When that’s been achieved, we have to alert the team that that’s now changed to a new product and we have to update the system internally, whether it’s the order sheets, the pricing, and also the Menu Guide.”

The process at Lussmanns involves the group head chef noting the allergens and ingredients from each recipe. This information will be uploaded onto Menu Guide by a different person in the office who has a direct dial to the chef. The chef will then check that the information that has been uploaded is correct.

From this information, Menu Guide creates the allergen menu that guests can access

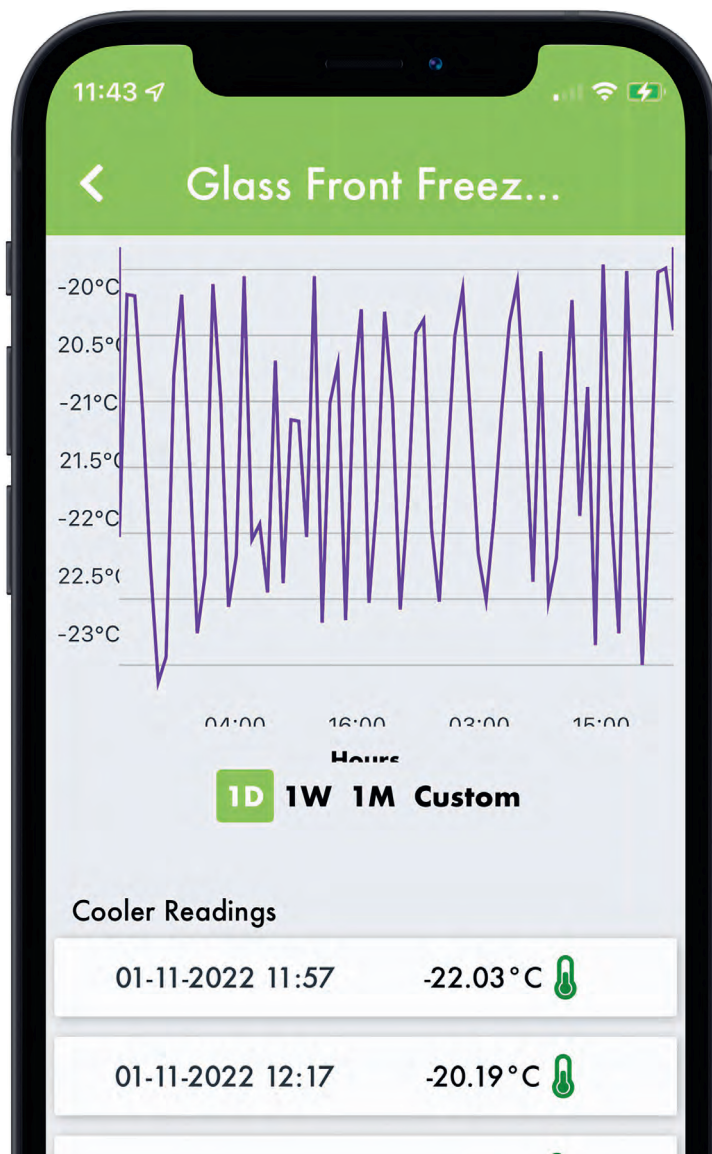
online by scanning a QR code or entering a link in their mobile browser, with no app downloads needed, which will not only alert guests to allergens present in a dish but offer a full run-down of all the ingredients. It also allows a customer to explore the menu in their own time and, as it’s accessed digitally rather than a printed menu, it will always be up to date.

“The minute you print a menu, it’s out of date, in my opinion,” says Lussmann. “Customers will usually do their own investigative work before they even get to the restaurant. We always advise people on the day to double-check [because] the platform may have updated.”

If a guest shows an interest in the allergen menu at any Lussmanns site, the restaurant manager will take control of the order and can provide an iPad with the Menu Guide information. The whole team is tested annually on allergen compliance before they are permitted to work on the restaurant floor.

But otherwise, staff are under strict instruction to not advise on allergens themselves – if they veer from that protocol, they are immediately placed on a final warning. Lussmann says with staff coming and going more quickly than they used to, it makes sense to rely on technology to take any possible mistakes out of the equation.





“Only one staff member has to be tired and give the wrong answer, and the outcome is not worth considering,” he says. “The only potential problem is that you have to rely on your suppliers to provide you with the right information and then you have to double-check it,” he adds. Lussmanns uses the Vela online ordering solution.

“You have to ensure the ingredients you’re ordering correspond with the audits you’ve done with that supplier. Ordering online is definitely a much more competent way of doing things. It just means that all you’ve got on a system is exactly what you’ve agreed in terms of allergens, product, items and ingredients, so they’re only ordering what’s agreed and you can’t order anything else because it’s not on the sheet,” he says.

In the UK, an estimated two million people are living with a diagnosed food allergy. A study by scientists from Imperial College London published in the *BMJ* in 2021 found that while there were fewer than 10 fatalities due to food per year in the UK and deaths had declined in the last 20 years, there was a three-fold increase in hospital admissions for food-induced anaphylaxis over the same time. Of the fatalities, 46% were due to peanuts or tree nuts such as almonds, cashews and walnuts,

“The minute you print a menu, it’s out of date, in my opinion”

Andrei Lussmann, Lussmanns Sustainable Kitchen

while cow’s milk was the most common cause of fatal allergic reactions in children.

The risks were highlighted in a court case earlier this year following the death of Celia Marsh in 2017 after eating a super veg vegan wrap from Pret a Manger. The yogurt dressing in the wrap was found to be contaminated with traces of milk protein stemming from a starch manufactured in a facility handling dairy products.

Coroner Maria Voisin concluded that the yogurt manufacturer had documentation warning of the risk of cross-contamination of the starch but said Pret a Manger had not been alerted to the risk, and that the yogurt was labelled as dairy free.

WINNING TRUST

The run-up to Christmas is another challenge with busy staff serving big tables, potentially with multiple allergens and intolerances, but Lussmann says he feels confident that the information being provided at his restaurants is correct based on the system the restaurants have in place and the fact the allergen menu is digital and therefore always up to date.

The data suggests that it’s good business, too. Sixty per cent of young adults with a food allergy or intolerance told an FSA survey in 2018 they avoided eating out because of their condition, but 59% said they tended to visit the same places, meaning potential repeat custom should you win the trust of a customer with allergies.

However, Jackson warns that, like all things, technology is only as good as the person operating it: “It’s reliant on you to set everything up. You still need the knowledge of what’s required to meet your health and safety standards,” she emphasises.

Lussmann agrees: “These things are only as good as the information you start off with. There has to be manual auditing from time to time to verify that what you’re doing makes sense... [but] it’s invariably better than a piece of paper on a clipboard that gets food on it, lost or thrown away.”

HOW LABELLING CAN SUPPORT CUSTOMER SAFETY AND BUSINESS REPUTATION

Natasha's Law means businesses need a foolproof system for labels



Food outlets and catering providers will be aware of the potential danger a slip-up in food labelling can pose to a customer's safety and a business' reputation thereafter. To help prevent future hazards, there have been significant improvements to labelling standards in the industry.

In October 2021, Natasha's Law was introduced which redesigned the law surrounding how food allergens are labelled on Pre-packaged for Direct Sale (PPDS) foods, giving customers with allergies assurance that the food they're buying is safe to eat. Given the two million allergy sufferers in the UK, the law is a vital move to help keep customers safe.

Of course, with new regulations come new challenges and considerations for industry workers as they strive to ensure 'best practices' are met and legal requirements are followed effectively. This will differ depending on the nature of the food outlet. For example, restaurants offering takeaways are now responsible for providing allergen information or dietary requirements at the point of delivery, as well as the point of purchase.

Food outlets offering consumers PPDS food that is made on-site and packaged by the business, such as grab-and-go sandwiches or meals, must follow the legislation brought in by Natasha's Law. This means that the name of the food must be clearly displayed, with a full list of all ingredients and any allergens must be highlighted – which could be bold or in another colour. Failure to follow such rules could result in substantial fines or even criminal charges.

“Quickly adjusting to food labelling standards will become more crucial as requirements increase”

Businesses need to consider how best to label effectively and simply to keep customers safe and avoid penalties. Rather than handwriting labels and running the risk of information rubbing off or being illegible, implementing a solution which provides accurate labelling information is wise as it can create durable labels for not only allergens, but ingredient lists, barcodes, branding and expiry dates too.

Brother's labelling solutions for PPDS foods allow food outlets and providers to produce high resolution and legible labels with use-by-dates, ingredients, prices, barcode and nutritional information. The range of solutions help businesses meet regulations, improve

labelling process and give customers more confidence in their choices.

Café Common Ground is one such business benefitting from Brother's labelling solutions, after it started offering takeaway PPDS food for the first time. Brother's TD-4520DN professional network desktop printer and free P-touch Editor software was the perfect solution for printing bespoke labels for ingredients and potential allergens as required by Natasha's Law. The solution provided the café with professional, compliant labels, that printed quickly and were easy to use.

Additionally, Brother's stock rotation solution offers complete flexibility and can be integrated into existing digital services or used as a standalone solution with additional battery packs and touchscreen display units available. It can also help eliminate errors, reduce label wastage, and cut food waste with more accurate use-by dates and times.

Quickly adjusting to food labelling standards will become more crucial as requirements increase. It is therefore essential that solutions feature flexible technology that can produce accurate, legible and cost-effective labels, to keep both customers and businesses safe.



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BOOK SMART

The latest property management systems could help you improve the guest experience and cut costs. *Ben Walker* looks at the options and benefits



In pre-internet times, property management systems (PMS) were all about taking bookings and allocating rooms and covers.

Although the first PMS appeared in the 1970s, most independent operators continued to use pen and paper for these tasks. Then came spreadsheets. Today, it would be hard to find a hospitality business that does not use some kind of management software.

In recent years, driven by the rise of cloud computing, the focus of interest in PMS technology has shifted away from reservations and towards the guest experience.

Luis De Souza, chief executive of NFS Technology, says: “We’ve recognised that guest experience is now so important that we are rethinking our role within the hotel space to be much more about F&B, loyalty, reward and communicating with the guest, rather than worrying about inventory management, which used to be our big occupation all those years ago.”

Most bookings now take place online, and increasing levels of automation mean there is less work for front office teams to do in this area. Today, the PMS performs reservations and front-office tasks as a given.

What has become increasingly important is that the PMS sits at the heart of an ecosystem of software integrations that provide a holistic view of guests and their preferences and real-

time business intelligence, as well as the automation of repetitive tasks.

Stewart Moss, managing director of High Level Software, says: “A good PMS should be able to take care of time-consuming jobs. For example, an EPoS system in the hotel bar and restaurant should be integrated with the main PMS, transferring automatically and in real-time. This means that staff are not required to re-key purchases into the main system at reception. Not only does this save staff valuable time, but it also reduces the risk of incorrectly inputting data.”

Moss adds that when guests make bookings via third-party sites such as Booking.com and Expedia, hoteliers do not get access to guest data. A good PMS can overcome this. Offering contactless check-in, for example, requires guests to enter an email address, which will allow the hotel to make direct contact and send personalised offers and promotions.

Lots of hotels and hotel groups are currently in the process of moving their on-premise hardware-based PMS to a next-generation cloud system. Kevin Edwards, business development director at Alliants, calls this “the next evolution in hospitality”.

He continues: “It’s almost certain that we’re going to see some fairly hard economic times in the next 24 months and, ultimately,

“An awful lot of work goes into choosing the right system”

Jane Pendlebury, HOSPA





PHOTO: PHOTOGRAPHY-LOUISE.CO.UK

Luis De Souza: it's about the guest experience

you're going to see that some hospitality owners will continue to invest in their technology platforms and their hotels. It will be those that don't that get left behind."

Choosing and transitioning to a new PMS requires planning and buy-in from all of those involved. "It's not an overnight decision," points out Jane Pendlebury, chief executive of HOSPA. "An awful lot of work goes into choosing the right system and then getting your old data into the new system. It's not a quick decision."

HELP TO BUY

As every hospitality business is different, the first step to buying a new PMS is to work out what you want, need and expect from a system, and then see which vendors most closely match your needs. Unlike franchisees or management companies, who are told which PMS to use, independent businesses are free to choose.

Richard Valtr, founder of cloud-based hospitality software provider Mews, says: "We frequently see independent hotels, with freedom and autonomy, being forgotten by some of the traditional PMS organisations, who are focussing on the larger hospitality groups."

Pendlebury warns businesses to choose systems carefully and not to get distracted by a system that offers too much. She says: "When

you look at a new system, there will be bells and whistles that you hadn't thought of, and it's really whether they are appropriate for your business, and if you had them would you actually make use of them? Have you got the staff to take advantage of them?"

RBH Hospitality Management works with around 45 UK hotels, including both international and independent brands. The group uses nine different PMS packages across its portfolio (Guestline and StayNTouch, plus those mandated by the Accor, IHG, Hilton, Marriott and Wyndham brands).

Vibhu Gaind, RBH's chief information officer, says this potential complexity is not a problem because the company has created an overarching business intelligence system.

"Being multibranded brings in different PMS platforms, but we as a management company know how to deal with that. We have a solution that lives above the PMS platforms that gives us in-depth analysis of our business regardless of which PMS is used at each hotel," he explains.

Around 60% of RBH's PMS platforms are already in the cloud, and the company aims to migrate the rest by the summer of 2023.

What do Gaind and RBH look for when choosing a new PMS? "First, easy onboarding," he says. "It should be a system for this

generation, intuitive and easy for the workforce to use, especially with the transient nature of hotel employees and colleagues. It needs to be a system we can literally onboard within a matter of hours rather than days."

In second place comes availability of data: ▶

The importance of F&B tech

With the whole booking process happening online, often via third parties, the actual hospitality experience – breakfast, bar, fine dining, casual dining – becomes a critical factor in terms of driving brand loyalty and repeat business.

Luis De Souza, chief executive of NFS Technology, highlights three areas where technology plays an important role.

First, brand websites and other booking platforms need to give customers all the visit information they require, such as menus, allergen information, wine pairings, etc. But according to De Souza, some platforms do not deal with customer pre-arrival as well as operators tend to, so the customer experience is a fragmented one.

He also says that the technology should precisely co-ordinate the seating of guests, order-taking and the associated kitchen activity. "If you fail here, the food arrives late, or you haven't got a very good way of telling how long people have been waiting. A lot of hotels and restaurants are missing a trick in this area," De Souza warns.

The third piece of tech relates to payment. "In the old days we didn't worry about that so much. We'd wait for a guest to put up their hand and flag a waiter down," he says. "Payment is quite important today. People are not so used to waiting, so why not have QR codes or another easy mechanism to scan and pay and leave?"



“near-instant information as and when we need it”, says Gaind, who adds that the third priority for PMS procurement is security.

At a time of rising energy costs and skills shortages, Gaind stresses the benefits of cloud-based systems over on-premise systems. “Cloud solutions eliminate the energy costs of having a stack of servers and the manpower required for day-to-day maintenance and back-up. By reducing our carbon footprint, we are doing the right thing by the environment, eliminating on-site hardware and providing a more stable solution,” he says.

THE BEST TIME TO CHANGE?

Changing a PMS is not like changing a domestic appliance. Hotels and restaurants are constantly taking bookings, so there is both historical and live data that needs to be transferred from the old to the new system.

So what is the best day to choose for switching over to a new PMS? Gaind says: “We like to stay away from weekends. We try to do it in the early part of the week. Tuesday is the preferred day, just so that you can go through the challenges that may arise on the other days of the week. On the live day we like to have a presence on site from us and the PMS provider for guidance and hand-holding.”

Ongoing staffing issues plus trading spikes make choosing the right time for a major IT overhaul a tricky decision. Gaind has had to exercise flexibility during his cloud migration programme. “We have a priority listing of hotels, but we need to have some flexibility because the summer months might be very busy for some hotels,” he says.

Previously, a hotelier might have paid between £42,000 and £84,000 for an on-premise PMS, plus annual maintenance costs. At around £4,200, the upfront costs for



Kevin Edwards: invest in tech or get left behind

a cloud-based PMS are significantly lower, and maintenance and upgrades take place automatically, as with Apple or Microsoft systems.

Software-as-a-service cloud PMS platforms tend to be priced on a monthly fee per room for the base model. However, the price can rise depending on the extra features that a hotel may wish to have, such as room upgrade and upselling capability, revenue add-ons, retail, and loyalty programme features.

Nick Kleynhans, marketing manager at Room Raccoon, says: “The cost of a cloud-based system is generally built to scale and depends on the size of the hotel’s operations, the functionality required, and the level of sup-



Property management systems: a quick checklist

Functionality

Most PMS software will perform the basic functions of hotel management, but does your business also need housekeeping and revenue management or upselling software? If so, it may be better to purchase a PMS that already includes these functions instead of having to integrate external software.

Usability

A clean, simple and easy-to-use PMS means quicker staff onboarding, happier employees and cost savings.

Mobility

Can your team perform tasks and access data from any device and any location?

Reliability

Read reviews and speak to current users to find out how reliable the PMS package is. Also check the software supplier’s background, stability of ownership, etc.

Security

Guest data needs to be protected with point-to-point encryption.



“Cloud solutions eliminate the energy costs of a stack of servers and the manpower required for daily maintenance and back-up”

Vibhu Gaiind, RBH

port required from the supplier. The implementation and training process can range from two to four weeks depending on the size and complexity of a hotel and its systems.”

The number of PMS vendors across the world is estimated to be somewhere between 700 and 1,300. The market is dominated by the global software giants, such as Oracle, Agilisys and Infor, although new vendors like Mews and Apaleo have enjoyed rapid growth in recent years. There are plenty of regional suppliers too. Software guide service Capterra identifies several UK-based vendors of PMS products, including Guest Service, Clock PMS, Hop, Elina and Caterbook.

As we have seen, a cloud-based PMS can now deliver an array of functions across the entire guest journey, including pre-arrival marketing, on-property messaging and post-departure surveys. In fact, it is increasingly common to talk about a technology platform, rather than a PMS.

A case in point is Mollie’s, the budget-luxe motel and diner brand, and the winner of this year’s Best Use of Technology Catey award.

Mollie’s uses a technology stack built on the Apaleo platform, which includes the services of various companies: Alliants for a self-service digital journey, SiteMinder for channel management, HotelAppz for customer relationship management, Adyen for payment automation, Nevaya for interactive TVs and WiFi infrastructure, and Tevalis for F&B outlet points of sale.

The true effectiveness of a PMS comes down to how well it connects all these systems together and allows data to be shared. An example from Mollie’s is that the housekeeping scheduling is seamlessly integrated with guest messaging so that as soon as a bedroom is ready, the guest receives a message.

Hotels typically require around nine different software systems to operate efficiently. This points towards a certain level of complexity (not least, managing several vendor relationships). However, the message from Apaleo is that selecting the desired products and functions from its platform is much like selecting apps on a smartphone.

Ulrich Pillau, chief executive and founder of Apaleo, says: “We make hotel technology as easy as using your iPhone. Any hotelier can select and put their own tech stack together. In reality the innovation is not coming from us, we just provide the scalable platform. The innovation and automation is driven by the apps that connect seamlessly to our platform.”

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

In terms of measurable successes, Mollie’s tech stack has contributed to the quicker opening of new sites, a 40% cut in technology operating costs, and increased guest satisfaction from reduced waiting times for check-in. The brand’s booking conversion rate has shot up by 120%, average spend has increased and the customer service team have saved more than five hours of work a week.

The consensus is that a modern cloud-based tech stack provides multiple benefits. Hotel operators who are still using outdated systems that are not properly integrated will therefore need to take action.

Kleynhans says: “There is undoubtedly a monetary return on investment from investing in a new PMS, and hotels can expect a marked improvement in sales and revenue thanks to tools like integrated revenue management and automated upsell.

“The systems also drive efficiency by reducing the time spent on front and back-office tasks through automation. This not only helps to reduce the risk of human error but also allows staff to focus on the guest experience. Keep in mind that enhancing guest satisfaction should lead to increased repeat guest stays and improved brand advocacy.”



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