# Creating Value with Table Tracking Systems

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The fast casual restaurant segment continues to outperform the restaurant industry as a whole, but operators of those restaurants are facing a challenge as new store openings ramp up competition.

Visits to fast casual restaurants have grown by 6 percent over the past five years, according to the Port Washington, New York-based industry research firm The NPD Group. At the same time, though, the number of fast casual units has grown at a compound annual growth rate of 7 percent, meaning diners have a constantly expanding list of options from which to choose.

The combination of continued popularity and ever-increasing competition have sparked a shift in the way fast casual operators serve their customers. One of the main ways is the food delivery process. Instead of taking a guest's order at the counter and having them wait by an order-pickup area until their food is ready, many restaurants are incorporating elements of the casual dining experience by delivering food to a guest's table.

And while doing so can enhance to guest experience, it brings with it a number of challenges. How does a restaurant ensure that incorporating the process improves the guest experience while at the same time adds value to the operation?

## Taking the dining room tour

A fast-casual restaurant is generally defined as one that does not offer full table service, but serves food of a higher quality than fast food restaurants, with fewer frozen or processed ingredients and an average per-person meal price between $8 and $15.

In their original iteration, fast-casual guests placed their order at the counter and were given a numbered receipt or a pager, returning to the counter to pick up their order when it was ready.

When operators began introducing table delivery as a way to differentiate themselves and improve the guest experience, it often involved giving a customer a numbered card to place in a stand at their table. When their order was ready, a food runner would walk around the dining room, searching for the number that matched the order they were tasked with delivering.

While that process worked reasonably well during slow periods, though, it could become a nightmare during a busy lunch rush. A food runner might make multiple circuits around the dining room searching for the proper number. In some cases the food would be cold upon arrival, and guests would become increasingly aggravated as they saw their lunch break slipping away.

Unless the restaurant had multiple runners on duty, orders could stack up in the kitchen window, creating a vicious cycle of cold food, unhappy guests and rising labor costs.

That's all changing with technology. Richardson, Texas-based Long Range Systems, for example, simplifies the order delivery process with its Table Tracker, a table-location system designed for restaurants that employ food runners to deliver orders to guests.

LRS is the company behind the restaurant pagers used to match customers with orders as mentioned above, and still commonly used to help manage waiting lines in full-service restaurants. The company has taken the pager concept a step further with the incorporation of radio-frequency identification (RFID) technology to identify and locate tags attached to objects. The tags contain electronically stored information that can be read by a scanner incorporated into a device such as a Table Tracker. The RFID scanning device doesn't have to "see" the tag; as long as it's in close proximity, the scanner can read the tag's programmed location, or table number in a restaurant environment.

When a guest places an order the cashier gives them a Table Tracker, a device about the size of a traditional restaurant pager, and a timer is started for that order.

When the guest places the Table Tracker on the chosen table, the device reads a unique tag mounted to the underside of that table and sends that information to a touchscreen display in the expeditor area. When the order is ready, the runner checks the screen and knows exactly where the food should be delivered, ensuring guests receive their food as soon as possible. If the guest has stepped away from the table or is standing in the to-go area, the Table Tracker functions as an ordinary pager.

## Improving operational efficiency

Thousands of LRS clients are reaping the benefits of the Table Tracker, including brands such as Burger Fi with more than 100 locations, Chicken Guy located at Planet Hollywood in Universal Studios Orlando, and the Tillamook Creamery Food Hall in Tillamook, Oregon.

One such client, Porto's Café and Bakery, a family owned retailer with five locations in Southern California. Owner Raul Porto prides himself on a bakery that invites customers into a friendly space with wonderful smells and an eyeful of treats when they enter the front door. Fresh pastries and hot coffee are apart of the Porto's Bakery and Café experience in their welcoming atmosphere.

When customers arrived at Porto's, managers could tell customers were immediately overwhelmed with either the sweet smells of pastries or the long lines. Implementing LRS' Table Tracker could help impact their delivery times and still maintain quick and happy service. Secondly, their wait staff wouldn't have to search for customers while serving

customers their orders. No longer would coffee and pastries become cold in the process. Alleviating everyone's frustration was the goal, Juan Rodriguez of Porto's said, "We were creating a unique atmosphere for our customer's however the experience was being damaged by delivery of the product." Porto's was in search of a solution that would enhance customer delivery and maintain product delivery rates.

When LRS and Porto's decided Table Tracker was the solution that would work best for their business, customer experience was at top of mind. Immediately, Porto's servers would stop the run around looking for customers. Table Tracker would identify customers by increasing productivity. Ending the frustration for their wait staff, they would not have to search for "hidden" customers, while fresh pastries and hot coffee were growing cold. Another benefit of increased productivity is time saved is time better spent elsewhere. Whether you're looking to cut costs, or reallocate staff to more important things, any way you slice it, a minute off every order adds up to significant savings.

Just like 1976 when Rosa Porto was selling cakes to her neighbors out of her home, customer satisfaction is at the heart of core values of Porto's Bakery & Café. At the end of the day, knowing their delivery metrics is important in maintaining a consistent, quality brand. Table Tracker's reporting on-site and online aggregated data provides store managers, and the Porto family the unique insight each needs.

Porto's saw an increase in customers from 1,000 orders a day at their Glendale, CA location to 1,500 orders a day. The initial result Porto's saw was saving a minimum of two-three minutes off of their serving time.

## Creating additional value

Although having the ability to deliver food to guests quickly is certainly a benefit of the Table Tracker solution, it's far from the only one. The list starts with increased revenue and continues with lower costs and a more efficient operation.

According to the NPD Group, nearly half of fast casual meals occurs at lunch. For a 50-seat restaurant with an $11 check average operating at capacity during a weekday lunch, assuming a 40-minute table turnover, that equates to serving 150 customers and generating $1,650 in revenue for the period between 11:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m.

Even trimming table turnover by 60 seconds through the use of a food delivery system such as the Table Tracker would allow that restaurant to serve three additional customers at lunch, increasing revenue by $42 a day, $210 a week or $10,920 a year.

Those figures don't include sales that could be gained during dinner and weekends. Additional savings could be gained via labor savings as runners become more efficient and fewer are needed.

And those are just the direct costs. Because the Table Tracker solution integrates with a restaurant's point-of-sale system, it can be used to flag orders that are running behind schedule. The Zinc Café's Secretan says it has been useful to look at the Table Tracker order status display and see which orders need to be prioritized.

"It's very handy to see at a glance which orders are green, yellow and red," said Secretan.

Getting orders to guests more quickly is also likely to reduce the number of customers dissatisfied with cold food. Eliminating the necessity of re-making five orders per day during weekday lunches, (at an assumed 30 percent food cost) means an additional $4,290 to the bottom line each year.

In addition, the quick stats and end-of-day reports the Table Tracker solution provides can help managers spot problem times and adjust staffing as necessary, further improving efficiency. Those reports are accessible both locally and via the Web, providing store managers, regional managers and owners the unique insight each needs. A more efficient operation will likely lead to increased customer satisfaction, which will in turn result in increased business. And fewer dissatisfied customers will lead to improved staff morale, resulting in lower turnover and additional cost savings.

## Adding up the benefits

There's no doubt that improved service and guest satisfaction thanks to more efficient order delivery can lead to a better dining experience. Greater staff productivity and improved morale help an operator run their restaurant more efficiently, allowing them to maximize both revenue and profitability.

Time saved is time better spent elsewhere. Whether an operator is looking to cut costs or reallocate staff to more important things, any way you slice it, a minute off every order adds up to significant savings. And Table Tracker can help provide those savings. LRS' team of experts works closely with each client to make Table Tracker an operational success.

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