Why Restaurant Kiosk Solutions are Driving Customer Satisfaction

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From gas stations and airline check-in terminals to grocery store checkouts and drugstore photo processing, self-service kiosks have become increasingly prevalent in modern life. In 2016, SOTI Enterprise Mobility Management found that 61% of retail customers preferred to use a kiosk instead of speaking to a sales associate. Restaurant owners are discovering that this trend applies to their industry as well, particularly among tech-oriented millennials. Self-service restaurant kiosks, especially in fast casual and quick service environments (QSRs), are on the rise.

Kiosks Don't Replace Workers, They Enhance Service Options

Some media reports have suggested that the increase in the number of restaurants experimenting with kiosk options is linked to the fact that several states, such as California and New York, have committed to raising the minimum wage over the next few years. Critics fear that kiosks are intended to combat these rising labor costs by reducing jobs. But that perception is inaccurate. For one thing, many restaurants have been trying out kiosks since well before talk of the latest wage increases. A 2011 study by the Digital Screenmedia Association indicated that 21% of QSRs were planning to deploy kiosks (up from 15% in 2007). So interest in the benefits of kiosks has been rising for years and is not a direct response to upcoming wage hikes.

It's also important to recognize that businesses using kiosks may actually need more employees, not fewer. Grocery stores with self-checkout lanes still need workers available to assist customers with the kiosks, and the same is true for restaurants. Employees are always needed to prepare, cook, and serve the food — in fact, kiosks can increase order volume to the point where additional kitchen staff is required to keep up with demand and fill orders promptly. For example, in 2014, Panera Bread launched Panera 2.0, a platform that includes mobile ordering and kiosks. Their sales subsequently increased by 6.2%, and the chain hired another 1,700 bakery staff employees in 2015.

The value kiosks have in a restaurant environment is not reducing the number of jobs, but improving customer service. Smart business owners will use a combination of employees and kiosk technology to increase customer satisfaction, drive customer engagement, and increase sales.

How Kiosks Improve Customer Experience

Restaurants are learning people will use self-service kiosks when available. By now, the majority of consumers are so accustomed to technology that they desire and even expect it in their daily activities. More than half of the respondents in a 2010 Hospitality Industry survey said they would be more likely to visit a QSR that offered self-service kiosks (up from 40% the previous year). At the Fenway Panera location that was the first to deploy the new platform, orders placed at the touchscreen kiosks account for 60% of their lunchtime transactions.

Kiosks enhance consumers' experiences — and benefit owners — in a variety of ways:

Wait time and lines are reduced

Patrons of fast casual and QSRs want to get in, get their food, and get out as quickly and efficiently as possible. Kiosks reduce time spent waiting in line at the counter by offering an alternative means of ordering. They keep things moving and increase throughput.

Table turnover is increased

When some orders are placed at kiosks, workers have more time to perform other tasks that improve the customer experience. They might be needed to assist with food prep in order to fulfill the higher volume of orders and serve customers faster. They could clear tables for new guests to use and keep the restaurant tidy. They can greet customers and provide assistance with the kiosks or answer questions as needed. The introduction of kiosks into a restaurant will help to redistribute labor, not replace it.

Customers can easily personalize their orders

Who doesn't love knowing they can get their food prepared exactly as they like it? Extra onions or no pickle? Provolone instead of cheddar? No problem! And with kiosks, people can feel more comfortable customizing their orders. Also, order accuracy is increased when the customer enters the information directly into the system rather than telling a cashier. Patrons can make sure the "no mayo" or "dressing on the side" request went through. Details such as the list of ingredients can also be made available at their fingertips to help them make more informed choices. Customers like having more control over the process, and fewer errors means higher satisfaction and more frequent visits.

In addition to order customization, order size can also increase when people don't feel the social pressure of a long line of other waiting customers. Without feeling hurried, customers can take a little more time to browse the menu. They might see additional options or items that go unnoticed if they're skimming the board to get an order in quickly.

Kiosks are great for upselling

Kiosks never forget to ask, "Would you like fries with that?" when they are programmed to do so. The software can be configured to promote meal combos or suggest additional sides, drinks, or dessert — whatever the manager would like to feature. Want to advertise your new "healthy substitutions" options, or your latest dessert creation? Just splash it across the start screen.

With consistent upselling, kiosks can encourage people to order more and average check sizes increase. When presented with suggestions and appealing visuals, customers will add that slice of pie to go with their turkey club sandwich, or put additional ingredients on their pizza.
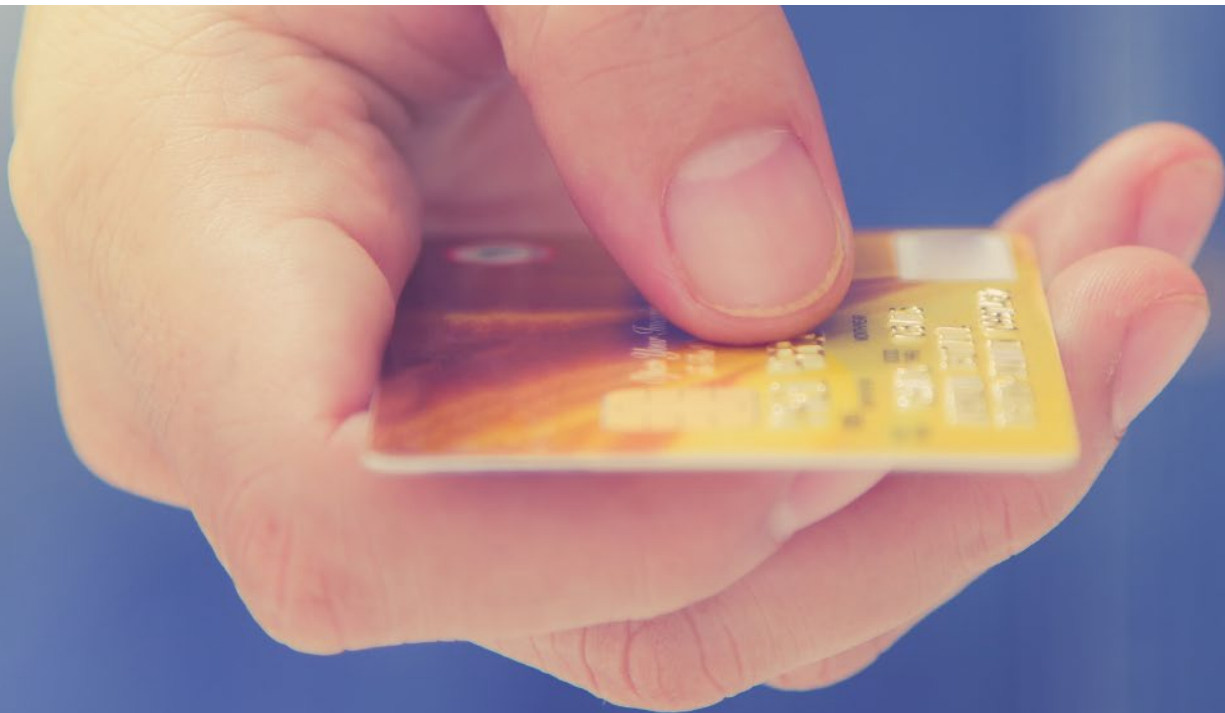
Full-service restaurants with tabletop tablets for ordering also report bigger average checks (and tips): Chili's dessert sales rose 20% after they introduced tablets in 2014, and Applebee's experienced similar gains in appetizer sales. Even movie theaters benefit: Cinemark's self-service concession kiosks have increased their food and drink sales even when ticket revenue dipped.

The same tendencies hold true for fast-casual and QSRs: kiosks sell more. The Wow Bao chain of Asian-fare QSRs in Chicago deployed kiosks in 2009 and discovered that "depending on the unit, the check average increased from 89 cents to $1.49 more at kiosks," which the company president attributed to upselling. Wow Bao received its return on the kiosk investment in eight months.

Multiple payment options are available

Customers appreciate flexibility in payment choices. Credit cards and gift cards can be used right at the kiosk when ordering. And customers can feel more secure about card payments because the card never leaves their sight or their control. Kiosks that cannot accept cash can instead create a receipt or voucher that can be taken to the counter for cash payment. Cash transactions often can be handled more efficiently by a person, so this again reinforces the continued need for service from employees as well as kiosks.

Kiosks Might Be Just What You Need

The restaurant industry is highly competitive, and owners and managers need to seek every advantage in order to stay on top and keep loyal customers coming back. Kiosks can help. They decrease the wait at the counter, make the ordering process error-free and more convenient, and free up employees to serve customers in different ways. Customers benefit from faster service, more control, and increased choices; restaurants benefit from greater table turnover and bigger check sizes.

Technology should always support your business. Kiosks do just that. They are a supplement or augmentation, not a replacement for people, and a tool that helps your existing staff do more with the overall goal of providing better service. And an increase in customer satisfaction will improve customer loyalty and boost success.

To get the most out of kiosk solutions, you need the right software. The user interface provided by your software solution should be easy for customers to use and logically take them through the ordering and payment process. You should be able to modify screens to feature specific products and to include all modifiers. You should also be able to make menu changes and upsell messages with ease. It's also important for the software to support reliable kiosk operation and to efficiently get orders to the kitchen so customers get the quick service they expect.

If you would like to learn more about how kiosks can benefit your restaurant and how to select the best technology to support your business goals, contact NCC.

About NCC

Since 1986, NCC has been delivering comprehensive software solutions to businesses in the hospitality and retail industries. Our software engineers combine years of experience in software development with a strong understanding of restaurant and retail operations to create products designed to work in a wide variety of environments.

Through a world-wide network of reseller partners, NCC has installed over 50,000 POS systems in more than 35 countries. NCC products are installed in wide range of retail and hospitality concepts including Table Service, Quick Service, Fast Casual, Bars, Night Clubs, Delis, Frozen Yogurt, Delivery and Concessions.