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# The Mobile Computing Revolution Invades Food and Beverage Control

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There is a revolution going on in the world of computing. Mobile computing devices are rapidly becoming the way people stay connected to both their friends and their businesses. According to a Pew Research Center study, as of January 2014, 90% of American adults have a cell phone and of those, 58% have smartphones.  More than 42% of American adults have tablet computers.  Beginning in early 2014, the business computing landscape changed and history was made as more time was spent on the Internet with mobile devices than with desktop PCs.  According to Gartner Inc., worldwide shipments of PCs in 2015 will be 268 million units, while shipments of tablets will be 324 million units. Cell phones take the prize of course with estimated shipments of nearly 2 billion units in 2015.

So what does this have to do with controlling food and beverage costs? Simply stated, mobile devices can play a significant role in food and beverage control systems. Not only are they a more efficient way to collect data, they are also widely accepted and familiar to the staff members who would be using them.  In this article, we will examine the best ways to use cell phones, tablets and scanners with these types of systems. Each of these mobile device types are good at some things and not so good at others. The trick is to use the right device for the right task.

**Mobile-amenable Tasks**

Mobile devices in general are not well suited for database maintenance tasks that may require entering significant amounts of alphanumeric data, or for tasks that would require more screen real estate such as entering raw materials, recipes, menu items and other database elements. This type of work is still best-suited to a desktop environment. Mobile devices are especially effective for certain types of data collection, for receiving messages, and for viewing reports.

While some are now offering this capability, not all F&B management systems provide access through mobile devices.  In addition, those that provide mobile computing access can be limited in terms of which types of tasks can be performed by what types of devices. Therefore, when considering the use of mobile devices, it is first necessary to either determine what devices are acceptable for what purposes with your existing system, or to determine the same for any system you may be considering. In some cases, the software provider will have specific equipment requirements and may even provide some of the equipment itself.  So let's begin our exploration of mobile devices in food and beverage management by defining which tasks are best suited to which devices.

**Smartphones**

Almost everyone has a smartphone.  They have three primary disadvantages.  Even with the more recent advent of smartphones with larger screens, the size of the screen restricts the type of work that can be done with the device. Other disadvantages are the size and flexibility of the keyboard and the lack of scanning capability.  Using the camera to scan barcodes is slow and drains the battery.  Given these disadvantages, smartphones are best used sending and receiving messages and viewing reports (assuming you don't mind scrolling around).  They are marginally useful for small data collection tasks, but nowhere near as strong as the other device options.

The messaging strength of smartphones could be used to receive important announcements or alerts from the system and allow the

recipient to respond from virtually anywhere.  For example, the food and beverage systems could take advantage of this capability by sending emails or text messages to managers for purchase order approvals.  Managers could simply click on the link to the purchase order, examine it, and approve or disapprove on the spot.  Other types of alerts could easily be handled the same way. The improved efficiency associated with this approach could have a substantial impact on the operation.  Since most people have their own smartphones, this data collection option is the least expensive of the choices available.

**Tablets**

Tablet computers are basically a paper replacement when it comes to food and beverage management systems. They are best suited for data collection and are typically used for inventory, receiving, transfers and requisitions.  They typically do not contain scanners and therefore are not as efficient as data collection devices specifically made for scanning. They can also become difficult to use in the case of the large amounts of items to inventory since the inventory forms could be dozens of pages long.  While flipping pages on a tablet may be more efficient than actual paper forms, there is still significant time spent locating items or adding items in the middle of a form.

Tablets also require a Wi-Fi or cell connection since they are not directly wired to the network. They are typically used as terminals, where a browser is used to connect to the host system. Since no data is actually stored on the tablet, losing connection could result in lost data. It is also difficult to have wireless access in places like walk-ins and freezers.  Tablets are more expensive than smart phones, but can typically be purchased for under $500 each.  Due to their lower cost it becomes possible to provide multiple outlets with tablets they can use to place requisitions and receive transfers. Smaller outlets could also use the tablets to take inventory.

**Scanners**

The most efficient way to take inventory and receive goods is with scanners.  Used for more than two decades by grocers, warehouses and retail operations, they typically reduce data collection time by 50% or more.  They are not well suited to displaying reports or receiving alerts.  It is important the scanners be ruggedized, sealed and capable of withstanding temperatures below freezing, since they would be used for freezer and cooler inventories.  Most scanners, cell phones and tablets cannot be used in freezers, since humidity inside the device condenses in the freezer and then turns into water when removed from the freezer, destroying the device. Scanners capable of freezer inventories typically cost between $1500 and $3000 each, not including the F&B software.

**Joining the Revolution**

Mobile computing may be the best thing that has ever happened to F&B management systems, but once again the buyer must beware.  Look for systems that have employed mobile devices for many years, not those who are just getting into it – for obvious reasons.  Choose systems that take advantage of all type of mobile devices to maximize your options.  Trade shows are a great place to get introduced to the technology and interview the sellers.  Finally, talk to their clients who use mobile devices to find out how they feel about it.  Once you've armed yourself with the knowledge, you're ready to take advantage of the mobile revolution.

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