The Move to Mobile Devices in F&B Management Systems

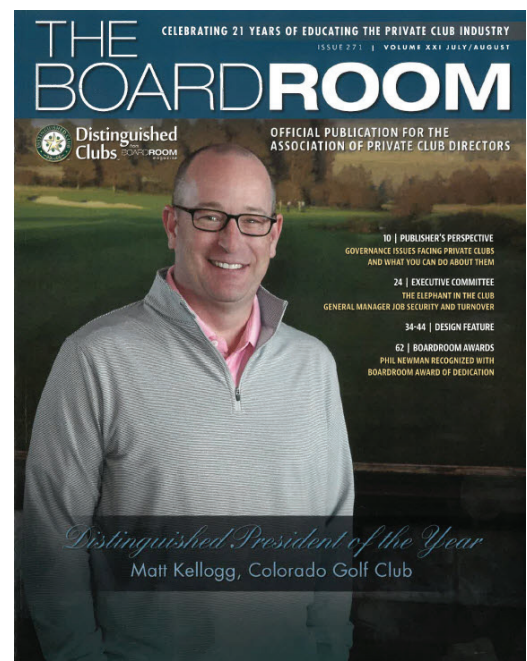Featured in the July/August 2017 issue of The Boardroom Magazine.

BY BILL SCHWARTZ

Major changes are happening in the world of computing. Desktop computer use is declining in favor of mobile devices such as pads and smartphones. Software developers are rushing to accommodate the desire to use mobile devices, but not all devices are good for all tasks. This is especially true for food and beverage tasks. Typical F&B tasks include procurement (ordering and receiving), inventory, requisitions, transfers and recipe development. Most of these tasks have traditionally been handled with paper forms, which in many cases can span multiple pages and contain numerous details for headers and line items. Small screens typical of smartphones are not capable of displaying the information that can more easily fit on desktop displays.

The use of fingers instead of a mouse means that software developers must make buttons larger and accommodate pop-up keyboards and numeric pads. While this may be necessary to accommodate the mobile revolution, people continue to use a mouse on desktop displays. Large buttons and pop-up keyboards are not helpful on these displays and reduce the usefulness of systems with large screens by displaying less data than would otherwise be possible.

All these issues should be considered when evaluating F&B systems. While it used to be possible to simply evaluate software for use on a desktop, it is now necessary to look at the software on mobile platforms as well to be sure it will meet current and future needs as the world moves away from desktop computing. In the case of pads and smartphones, it will be necessary to have good Wi-Fi coverage since these devices are not hardwired to your network. While cellular connections can be used instead of Wi-Fi, they are slower and typically more costly. It is also useful to note that Wi-Fi coverage is difficult in walk-ins and freezers if the doors are closed. Scanners typically do not require a network connection until the time comes to synchronize them with the host system.

Pads come in a variety of sizes, but all of them have larger displays than smartphones or scanners. Full-size pads are well-suited for form-based work such as inventory and receiving. They can display more items with more data per page and more closely represent the paper forms your staff is more familiar with. As a result, the learning curve is much less significant than it would be with a small form factor device. The primary drawback is the likelihood they cannot be used to scan, unless they are running an app specifically designed for the platform (Android or IOS). Most developers assume the pads will be used with a browser and must be connected to the host at all times.

Scanners are mobile devices with built-in bar code scanners. In some cases they do not require a Wi-Fi connection and can be synchronized with the host system at the end of the day. They are the fastest way to scan barcodes, since they give instant results. The drawback is their cost, which can reach into the $2000-$3000 range per device. Scanners are most useful for taking inventory and receiving goods, but can also be used effectively for requisitions and transfers.

Smartphones run apps specifically designed for either Android or IOS. These apps require constant communication with the host. Their cameras can be used to scan barcodes, although they are somewhat slower than scanners since they must send the code to the host in order to lookup the item and display it. Due to their limited screen size, they are also unable to display large amounts of data per screen which means they must use search and swipe functions extensively.

Not all F&B management software comes with mobility options, and when they do, the options may be very limited. Best practices mean you would be using a combination of platforms including desktops since different functions are best suited to each platform. When evaluating, see how many mobile options exist with the system and how close the mobile software looks and feels with respect to the desktop software in order to keep cross-training to a minimum. Keep in mind that your staff already loves using mobile devices, which makes it possible to improve your F&B control system and your staff's willingness to collect the required data at the same time. Isn't it nice when those things go hand-in-hand? Sorry – couldn't resist that.

About the author: Bill Schwartz is the founder and CEO of System Concepts, Inc. (SCI). Based in Scottsdale Arizona, SCI is a food and beverage procurement and inventory management consulting firm and the developer of the FOOD-TRAK System, which is widely used in club operations around the country. Bill can be reached at 480-951-8011 or bills@foodtrak.com.