

Death to the brand manual

Many caterers have seen new technologies creep into front of house but it's now starting to take hold in the kitchen too. *James England*, a director at Fourth Hospitality, explains why technology is signalling the death of the brand manual

There's a strong argument that Fido has been usurped as man's best friend. iPads and smartphones are now our ever-present companions, and you'd have to have been living under a rock not to have noticed the ever increasing numbers of people who appear to be dependent on this technology.

That same technology is increasingly making its way into the kitchen as restaurant companies use smartphones and tablet computers instead of paper to access a range of business critical information. One example is kitchen and menu management.

Such technology heralds the death knell for the back-of-house manual, as staff move away from tatty, outdated tomes, which often cost a fortune to print and usually sit on a shelf gathering dust. Instead, to make things easier in the kitchen, staff are using laptops, tablets and smartphones to access brand information.

Similar to products like the Amazon Kindle, kitchen software such as Fourth Hospitality's StarChef Light, could see more of those big, weighty menu manuals being consigned to the recycling bin.

Such guides serve as a restaurant or hotel's 'bible', including a plethora of information that instructs staff how to prepare dishes, what they should contain, and how they should be presented, and sometimes other brand-related issues such as staff uniforms, table, bar and restaurant presentation and standards.

All of this is critical to ensuring consistency especially when a business has many sites. The trouble is that physical manuals tend to become outdated quickly – no sooner are they printed than a menu item is changed or modified. However, thanks to gadgets such as the iPad and software like StarChef Light, staff can easily access real time information in the kitchen or the restaurant.

Rather than the restaurant or menu or brand manual dying, it is simply evolving. It's a natural

switch to a more user-friendly, real-time format.

The ability to access all core recipe, costings and nutritional information in real-time has a range of benefits for restaurants and chains. It enables groups to have complete control over their operation – head chefs and general managers can easily check that the latest agreed recipe standards are being met and maintained. While the benefits are clear, there are some considerations for companies thinking of making the step from paper to digital with chef and kitchen software.

- Firstly, the technology must be flexible so that it can be configured to a group's way of working. It's pointless if half of the features aren't used or aren't relevant for a kitchen operation – technology isn't one size fits all.

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- It's important to find technology that is easy to use and quick to learn. New people join restaurant businesses all the time so software that requires a doctorate in astrophysics is not going to work.
- Software delivered over the web, referred to as software-as-a-service, or cloud computing, is to be recommended as this offers a lower cost of entry, instant access to the latest versions and reduced maintenance costs.

- The software needs to be scalable, so it can grow with a business and doesn't become outdated.
- Finally, the system needs to be kept up-to-date by maintaining product entries and prices on a regular basis. This saves companies a lot of time in the future. Whatever way you look at it, chefs, kitchen staff and restaurant managers are increasingly using laptops, tablets and

smartphones in favour of physical paper, documents and manuals to run restaurant businesses – resulting in information being more easily retrieved and apportioned, errors eradicated and analysis carried out.

So with that in mind, it's worth saying goodbye to your tatty tomes in favour of the latest technology. After all, it's now 2012 and about time that man's new best friend made its way into the kitchen. ●

