

# SERVICE ON-DEMAND: RESORT GUESTS CAN GET IT ALL

*Personal-ordering applications give guests the ability to order services while recreating in various areas of the resort.*

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When one thinks of a resort, what probably comes to mind are terms such as upscale, luxurious and pampering. The general perception is that guests expect to be waited on hand and foot, with attentive service staff at their beck and call just waiting to find ways to impress and respond to their every whim. As a result, the adoption of computers and information technology within the resort industry has been somewhat hindered in many aspects of the guest service encounter. In fact, the notion of introducing self-service devices may seem contradictory, counterintuitive or just plain wrong. With this thinking, many would agree that self-service technologies could compromise the overall value proposition to the guest. However, recent advances in technology and the growing technology sophistication of today's traveler create opportunities for resort operators to re-evaluate the concept of service and how it is delivered and provide reasons to challenge the prevailing views of service as "personal ministrations" and "servitude."<sup>1</sup>

The trick, of course, is to use information technology (IT) to provide the best features of craft production (i.e., personalized service and convenience) and mass production (i.e., consistency and standardization)<sup>2</sup> — to find the balance between

the procedural elements and the convivial aspects of the service encounter.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the emphasis should be placed on improving the quality of the interaction between the guest and the waitstaff by finding ways to provide friendlier and more personalized service in a timely, efficient and uniform manner. We are not proposing to remove people from the service. Instead, we are suggesting changing the roles the people play in the service exchange.

Long ago, the service literature forecasted the importance of applying IT to all phases of the customer life cycle to improve customer service and create opportunities for even greater personalization and "high touch."<sup>4</sup> Perhaps if the resort industry recasts its views of technology and focuses on what it is capable of enabling, how it empowers guests, and the new service opportunities that arise, the benefits of computer-assisted or mediated transactions will become more readily visible. Guests welcome the introduction of such new technologies. They find them not only convenient, but chic and another indicator that resorts are keeping up with the times and working hard to address their needs for service and connectivity, wherever they are.

In this article, we explore self-service applications in general and the emerging

area of personal (i.e., self) ordering applications for guests recreating in the pool and beach areas of resorts in particular. At the time of this writing, several leading resorts are actively evaluating technology solutions and preparing for deployment. The key business challenges these resorts are attempting to address are 1) improving the waitstaff responsiveness and 2) enhancing service levels provided to guests basking in the sun. The concern is that waitstaff cannot adequately service all of the guests at the pool and/or beach. At times, guests are unable to locate or attract the waitstaff's attention when they are interested in ordering food, beverages or other services. The net result is lost sales opportunities for the resort. Personal ordering systems enable guests to place their own orders in their native languages and currencies whenever they want, thus extending the reach and sales potential of the waitstaff. The personal ordering systems can also help to drive new revenue (e.g., through more food and beverage consumption, by up-selling guests to higher profit margin items, by recommending complementary products such as an appetizer to go with a drink order and by cross-selling other resort services such as spa and recreational amenities). For added guest pleasure and a richer guest experience, resorts may want to expand

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the functionality of this device to include Internet access for news, e-mail and stock quotes; video games; music; short video clips; bill inquiry; future reservations; and more. Finally, the technology offers the potential to improve operational efficiencies and waitstaff productivity, thereby lowering overhead to produce a healthier bottom line. In this article, we also provide practical tips for evaluating self-service technologies like a personal ordering system to determine if they are appropriate for your resort.



### Personal Ordering System Product

Advances in technology, namely miniaturization, improvements in processing power and speed, the addition of wireless connectivity and more intuitive user interfaces, have opened up new guest service possibilities and brought new self-service solutions to the marketplace. The personal or self ordering system is one of these.

Much of the technical infrastructure (e.g., the wireless network) may already be in place, easing installation. However, resorts should evaluate their security and eliminate any potential vulnerability. The chair units can communicate with a back-end server which routes all transactions to the appropriate resort system (e.g., restaurant, bar, or gift shop point-of-sale, spa, etc.).

The product is comprised of three devices: a guest unit, a central unit and a server unit. At the time of check-in, guests are provided with an authorization code or personal identification number (PIN). This code allows them to use the personal ordering system and extends charging privileges throughout the resort. The guest unit is essentially a rugged hand-held computer or personal digital assistant (PDA) equipped with wireless capabilities and outfitted with specialized software applications to address the business requirements for which the technology is intending to serve; for example, point-of-sale and information dissemination. The guest unit uses a touch-screen interface and contains extensive menus of items and services (e.g., food, beverage, spa services or retail items) that can be ordered or reserved via the system. A server call button is always available for

guests requiring assistance or preferring the more traditional approach to service. The heavy-duty device, which is resilient to weather and other harsh conditions found in pool and beach areas, can be affixed to a chaise lounge for easy and convenient guest access.

After a guest has placed his/her order, the guest unit wirelessly sends a signal to the central unit, which reads and validates the order and then routes it to the appropriate fulfillment center (e.g., kitchen, bar, spa, gift shop, etc.). Once the order is prepared, the central unit alerts server units that the order is ready for pick-up and delivery. The appropriate guest (i.e., recipient of the order) is located using a wireless location subsystem, which displays a chair layout with the order destination highlighted. The server unit can also act as a mobile ordering device, similar to a wireless PDA connected to a restaurant point-of-sale system. In addition to holding guest preferences, this unit shows guest order history and provides a mode of commutation to other areas of the resort.

### Evaluating a Self-Service System: What is Right for My Resort?

The resort industry struggles with the ongoing challenge to provide outstanding guest service, while streamlining operations with a keen eye firmly fixed on generating revenue and decreasing overhead. Increasingly, self-service initiatives such as kiosks are emerging to address these challenges, but how does one know if this technology is appropriate for a given resort setting or application? The key to any successful technology solution, self-service or otherwise, is an acute

understanding of the requirements of the stakeholders using and benefiting from the chosen solution. Quite often, however, stakeholders have conflicting requirements and agendas. Guests want high quality, responsive service while resort properties seek cost-effective ways to manage guests and their service expectations. The question is, can self-service solutions such as a personal ordering system address and satisfy the needs of all those in the equation?

Before evaluating a self-service personal order solution for a resort, two fundamental questions must be asked: “What are the property’s overarching goals for guest service, and are the benefits of the proposed solution consistent with these goals and what the organization wants to achieve?” While these seem to be fairly elementary, they are essential to keeping focused on the strategic goals and value proposition of the resort. If not asked, these questions can be easily overshadowed by other issues such as system costs and technical features. Although cost is a significant consideration, an inexpensive system that is not addressing the specific service needs of the resort will, in the end, result in a costly solution and poor fit. Making a list of what is working for the property and highlighting areas of service inefficiencies will prove invaluable when evaluating any self-service solution.

*The evaluation of any system should also include one’s expectations of that system.* No self-service system is a magical solution or “Holy Grail” for staffing inefficiencies or poor guest service. For example, if the expectation is that the system is going to increase efficiency in the back-of-the-house and result in a reduction in staff, take a hard look at why this should be the result. The consequences of reassigning or eliminating staff positions may or may not be the desired byproduct of a self-service system. Some self-service products can actually require additional staff to administer the system, additional staff to support increased volumes of sales, or redeployed staff to other activities or roles. Use caution and manage expectations of any system. Ultimately, the responsibility falls on the property to ensure that service requirements and strategic business objectives are met.

*System implementation is another important consideration.* Upon implementation, many self-service products will require modifications to existing business processes and practices, staffing needs and staff skill sets. There will be a learning curve for both employees and guests in using a new system. Have a plan in place to ease the transition to all those affected. Commitment to this plan is crucial to the success of a self-service product. Foregoing a plan will likely create frustration for guests and staff, and result in unrealized benefits for the resort from the new system. In the end, the system will probably result in a great deal of disruption and dissatisfaction, only to be abandoned.

*Technology has helped drive the self-service movement.* Some of the technology used in self-service products today sound familiar and are easily available from any electronics or computer store; others, however, can get very technical and require specialized knowledge (e.g., in the area of network security) to ensure a successful implementation. Seek the advice of IT managers on the property when evaluating a product and at the corporate office if your resort is part of chain. Ask how the new system and its technology can integrate with current property systems, how the system can be scaled to accommodate future growth, and what migration paths exist should the underlying technology change. Properties should not shy away from innovative or new technology provided that the system selected meets the property's criteria for service and security and so long as a support infrastructure is in place. Ensure a smooth transition to any new system by assessing in advance what additional hardware, software, or other peripherals may be required.

*The cost of any self-service product is an issue, especially given the competition for limited capital available.* Thus, resorts must calculate the return on investment should the self-service initiative receive funding. Here are some questions one should consider when measuring the value of a self-service system.

1. Can the product increase revenue? If so, how and by how much?
2. Will this product produce efficiencies in service? If so, how can one quantify these savings?
3. Is the product easy to support and maintain?

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4. What is the useful life of the product and its underlying technology?
5. Can the technology or application be upgraded in the future?

*No resort should be apprehensive about asking a system vendor for information regarding its clients and their experiences using the solution.* Most vendors will readily provide reference lists so that you can better learn about things like the product usefulness, benefits realized, vendor service levels, guest and employee feedback, and implementation issues.

*Guests’ responses to a self-service system will ultimately drive the success or failure of any system, no matter how expensive, innovative or practical.* It is important to understand your guests, their service needs, and how the product will impact the guest experience. Ask guests for input regarding how they would respond to a self-service initiative under consideration, such as a personal ordering system. Ask how comfortable they would be with the technology and how likely they would be to use it. A dialogue with

guests goes much further than a comment card or guest survey when trying to evaluate which self-service system is right for your operation. After the system is in place, continue to poll guests about their experience with the product and their overall levels of satisfaction. Guest feedback can help identify problems and suggest new features or functionality that can be added.

### **The Guest Service Experience: Knowing What Each Guest Wants**

If resorts are looking for a finite list of guest service requirements, they might as well be looking for a purple giraffe. Because of the heterogeneity of service, guest requirements vary by guest, by resort area, and from resort to resort. This makes it difficult for resorts to define repertoire and delivery method of services offered, not to mention the staff training requirements. A simple three-pronged approach to guide resort managers in the determination of guest needs and services can be summarized as Stop, Look and Listen.

**Stop.** Some resorts go to great lengths to establish metrics that monitor and ensure guests are receiving excellent service. Much time and money is spent determining service protocol and standards, but little attention is given to evaluating them. Resort managers need to stop and see if these metrics are actually being met. More often than not, these rules are falling by the wayside. Sometimes it is because the goal is unrealistic; other times, it might be a question of proper staff training. Stopping to assess current guest service incentives is the first step to ensuring successful service delivery and satisfied guests. Assessment, however, should not be a one time event. Evaluation should be continual as factors such as seasonality can impact service incentives.

**Look.** Many resort managers are involved with guest service only after there has been a service failure. These managers are accustomed to putting out the fires but seldom have the time or resources to find and solve the root cause. Property managers should spend time watching how guest service is being carried out on the property. Take off you managers cap for a moment and sit in the corner of the restaurant and observe the waitstaff — or even better, try being a guest to see just what your guests experience. Put on a pair of shorts and lay by the pool, or take

a newspaper and sit in the lobby. What you see and experience might be startling. For example, one resort manager recounted a situation in which he was told that a guest waited more than 30 minutes before a member of the resort's waitstaff asked for a drink order. In disbelief, the manager went to the pool area to observe the service. Only after he had done this had the problem surfaced so that steps could be taken to rectify it. Taking time to look around the property will not only identify problems, but also highlight service initiatives that are working well.

**Listen.** Listening is the greatest skill a resort manager can have in the pursuit of satisfied guests, but to whom should the manager be listening? The obvious answer is the guests. The less obvious answer is the employees. In most cases, guests are quite capable of articulating their needs and how they can best be met, but oftentimes the guest does not know what needs to be done at the property to provide the service they expect. Asking the guest, "How can we better serve you," is important and should provide useful responses. However, asking the staff at the property may be equally or more telling. The staff on the property can provide a wealth of information not only regarding guest preferences, but also on current service initiatives. Staff members tend to be the closest people to the situation. They not only interact with the guests on a

daily basis, but also have familiarity with service processes and what transpires in the back-of-the-house. Managers should seek out their suggestions and include them in any service process redesign. Service initiatives should not just come from the top down. Listening to guests in conjunction with staff will yield better results in guest service initiatives.

When it comes to guest service, the bottom line is to be proactive. Whether implementing a self-service product or developing new service protocols, if you stop, look and listen, you can create a positive and memorable service experience for your guests.

### Summary

The personal ordering system is a self-service product which does not replace personal service, rather it enhances the level of service and the responsiveness guests experience while recreating at a resort. It offers another approach to serving guests and a way to extend the service reach and capabilities of a resort's waitstaff. Guests' problems are solved by eliminating many of the frustrations currently surrounding the ordering process. Guests benefit from faster service, greater control over their service, increased convenience and improved personalized attention. Resorts benefit from the ability to enhance the guest experience and increase guest satisfaction, the opportunity

to generate higher incremental revenues, and the savings from faster and more efficient service operations. As a result, resorts, with the help of technology and guest assistance, can offer not only more but better service, thus extending both the reach and potential of its waitstaff.

Clearly, there are self-service solutions that can address the needs of all stakeholders in the guest service equation. Take time to evaluate the solution. If you stop, look and listen before you come to a decision, you can determine the best approaches to making a self-service solution such as a personal order system work for your resort. ■

### Footnotes

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