THE CATERER 2021

TECHNOLOGY PROSPECTUS

YOUR COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE FOR THE YEAR AHEAD

WELCOME

Welcome to *The Caterer*'s guide to the hospitality technology that will help drive your business into 2021.

It has been a year in which technology has played a vital part in allowing hospitality operations to continue to trade, and may even have been a turning point for some.

Few of us would have booked a pub table through a mobile before this year, but now everything from purchasing pints to checking shifts is facilitated by technology. Technological solutions will be at the forefront of the industry's recovery as hoteliers search for the right price to tempt in trade and the industry looks to software to solve staffing issues, food safety and traceability, and enable diversification into areas such as online retail and takeaway.

With that in mind, this guide details the solutions, be they in people engagement, payment or revenue management, that are likely to make the most impact on productivity and profitability.

Staffing has come into ever-sharper focus as the industry attempts to engage a workforce that has been furloughed and is operating on extremely tight rotas. We unpick how to remain competitive and attractive to the best talent through improved processes and systems, and how it's possible to create a better working environment with smart scheduling and digital engagement.

We explore the payment and EPoS systems that allow guests to book, order and pay through their mobiles, and analyse the technology that enables operators to diversify. And we examine the systems with the capacity to feed into marketing and loyalty programmes, as well as facilitating click and collect to expand your business beyond bricks and mortar.

Meanwhile, in terms of pricing, hoteliers have had to throw everything they knew about booking and rates out of the window this year, making revenue management an essential piece of kit when taking on the online travel agents.

Through insight, opinions, case studies and supplier showcases, we cover all the elements of an enterprise. Consider this your comprehensive guide to technology for the year ahead.

James Stagg
Editor, *The Caterer*

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The furlough was a life saver for most hospitality businesses across the UK. Without the funding from the government, the face of hospitality in this country would be entirely different.

Initially, the tech team might have believed this was the perfect opportunity to complete unfinished projects and to write how-to guides, but no. It quickly became a demanding time for those non-furloughed workers. Often they operated with a reduced team and an increased workload. Strategy papers were screwed up and thrown away.

It was time for a clean sheet. Systems still had to run, websites were still live, building management systems were crucial and day-to-day operational software solutions had to be managed. In many establishments there were no kitchen staff to monitor temperatures of freezers, no room attendants to check in-room technology, and no office staff to run daily routines.

On top of that, there were staff galore working remotely for the first time with no technology to access servers. Laptops were purchased, configured and dispatched. Old laptops were reconfigured, and others limped on with ancient technology.

Plus, of course, the operations team were still using software solutions daily to manage communications, to issue refunds, and to support trade from key workers and new enterprises. Systems to manage pop-up coffee shops, takeaways, home delivery – all potentially required new technology.

The sale of gift vouchers, incentives and other initiatives generating much-needed income were introduced – and again, IT were called upon to manage it. Property management systems and points of sale had to be adapted, and finance departments continued to run payroll, pay invoices and negotiate with suppliers. IT had to support these functions.

In addition, IT directors had to consider the new guest expectations. Would it still be acceptable to have a TV remote control and a guest directory in the bedroom? What about telephone handsets, coffee machines and other gadgets? How would room attendants let the front desk know a room was ready without using the freshly sanitised phone?

How would keys be distributed to guests? Could the food menus be used? How would diners place their orders and pay their bills? What tools could be used to monitor the temperature of guests and staff? How could businesses maintain guest engagement with such reduced contact?

The hospitality industry was delighted with the government support, and Eat Out to Help Out and the VAT reduction were warmly welcomed. But yes, you've guessed it, they were a demand on our tireless technology experts. And the industry continues to hope for more recognition to help with the devastating impact of social distancing, controls on group sizes, next to no demand for meetings and events, and handfuls rather than plane-loads of business travellers. Each lifeline is grasped and welcomed by everyone, while the IT team diligently deliver the tech to support new business models.

And that is just skimming the surface. I can hear people shouting at me already! What about ever-changing goal posts, local influences versus national directives? What about delivering all of this with reduced budgets? The list is never-ending, and the ever-present demands on the IT teams to document processes, highlight potential savings and develop new solutions didn't disappear.

We must also not forget that many in IT were not lucky enough to keep their jobs, adding to the workload of those left holding the fort. Still the pressure is on. Reduce costs! Increase margins! Reimagine the offering! Be creative! Don't spend any money! Technology is essential and will need to be resourced appropriately.

Hospitality's heads of technology have seen their roles change in recent years, mostly for the better. Recognition of their contribution to the smooth running of operations and commercial advantage is not new. However, now – more than ever – may be the time to take a moment to value their positive influence on the overall success of our businesses.

DREAM TEAM

Workforce management technology had already been widely adopted by hospitality businesses before the pandemic, but now, with rapidly changing staff availability and the need for increased support, it's coming into its own, says *Elly Earls*

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Access Hospitality is a division of leading business software provider the Access Group, which was created to specifically cater for the UK's £73b turnover hospitality sector.

More than 1,300 UK customers use its modular, scalable, cloud-based business management suite, which features 20 integrated Software as a Service (SaaS) solutions and services, including EPoS, reservations, finance, property maintenance, purchase to pay and workforce management.

Access People for Hospitality is a powerful and intuitive cloud-based HR and labour optimisation system that enables busy, multi-site hospitality owners to streamline their HR and workforce management processes.

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Uncertainty generated by opening constraints and trading restrictions have led to a unique set of workforce management challenges for hospitality operators. Not only are they struggling to forecast customer demand due to rapidly changing regulations, it's also much more difficult to predict when staff will be available, whether that's because they are self-isolating or have Covid-19.

Even when employees can make it into work, the mental health impacts of the current situation can be devastating, making it more important than ever for employers to listen and respond sensitively to how their teams are feeling. Clearly, this is all set against an incredibly challenging economic backdrop, with many operators introducing new revenue streams, such as e-commerce, click and collect and delivery, in order to survive.

Workforce management systems, the most advanced of which can help operators forecast their staffing needs, communicate with their workforce and integrate with payroll, electronic point of sale and other business systems, have already been widely adopted in the hospitality industry. But with so many new and fast-changing variables for operators to consider, their value has started to become even clearer this year.

We have also seen tweaks and upgrades to many workforce management systems that might normally have taken much longer to progress and implement. While these developments were designed to help operators through the pandemic, they could also prove beneficial to businesses in the longer term.

FORECASTING CHALLENGES

One of the biggest benefits of advanced workforce management software is that it can provide operators with an insight into both future and historical sales and scheduling. "Using a digital solution to expose illogical manual practices prevents poor decision-making, as it removes some of the inevitable oversight that occurs with manual forecasting and scheduling," explains Dave Ellmer, senior productivity consultant at Fourth, which provides next-generation workforce planning and labour scheduling software to hospitality businesses.

"Workforce management software can provide clear guidance on where and when to deploy team members, and most solutions have the configuration to allow adjustment based on real data feeds."

Henry Seddon is managing director at Access Hospitality. Its cloud-based business management suite features more than 20 integrated software solutions, including workforce management. As he explains, the adjustment part of that equation has become more important than ever this year.

"From a business perspective, it has been impossible to rely on historical data for

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UKG research discovers a burnt-out nation of workers

The Workforce Institute at UKG (Ultimate Kronos Group) recently commissioned research into leadership and employee attitudes and opinions on the impact Covid-19 has had on workplace concerns and expectations, as well as contact tracing and trust.

It found that 46% were concerned about being quickly informed about presumed or confirmed positive Covid-19 cases in the workplace and 43% were concerned about their company's ability to react quickly to presumed or confirmed positive Covid-19 cases.

In addition, when looking at operational concerns, workers were most worried about future redundancies due to economic instability (40%), the ability to balance workloads to prevent fatigue/burnout (39%) and the ability to offer necessary learning and development opportunities (30%).

"Taking on board employee preferences feeds into their mental wellbeing, which should be a top priority for any organisation right now, as both physical and mental fatigue and burnout are prevalent," says Neil Pickering, industry and customer insights expert at UKG. "With over half of UK workers stating that they've been working either the same or more hours regularly since the start of the pandemic (51%), it's imperative that organisations recognise this and respond accordingly."

forecasting as a series of social distancing measures, curfews, closures and limits on household interaction combined with fluctuating consumer confidence has disrupted established records on which workforce management is based."

Because of this, Access Hospitality has introduced a technology upgrade that enables forecasts to be amended when facing sudden or unexpected changes, giving operators flexibility with staffing schedules by quickly triggering adjustments to react to uplifts or downturns as required.

Ellmer says there has never been a more crucial time to get staffing levels as close to optimum as is realistically possible. "Loyalty is more important than ever, with many consumers pre-booking and planning visits to restaurants and bars, rather than walking in," he explains. "As such, if an operator has underforecasted its labour requirements, then it will have an impact on the customer experience, which will affect loyalty and future sales. It's imperative this remains a focus as we move into the challenging winter months."

CLEAR COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

Another challenge the pandemic has brought the hospitality sector is looking after the health and wellbeing of staff – from keeping in contact when they were working from home or furloughed and helping them adjust to new ways of working to offering assurance about their safety and supporting them if shifts were reduced or removed completely.

> "Recent events have made employee engagement and welfare a top priority"
> **Dave Ellmer, Fourth**

As Seddon points out, this is not just a moral imperative for businesses, but a practical one, particularly if staff members' health and financial concerns lead to anxiety and absences. "Giving employees a voice, listening to what they say and responding, keeping them in touch with what's happening as honestly as possible and giving them more control over their working commitments will help reduce absences, increase engagement and motivation to create an agile and mutually supportive team environment," he says.

Fourth and Access both report that the communication features of their workforce management systems have been used much more heavily this year than previously. They've also added new ones, most notably mobile health surveys, which ask employees a series of questions on their current health so employers can establish if they're fit to work ahead of their shift.

Access has also improved its mobile feedback campaigns, giving employees more options to communicate about issues they may not be comfortable bringing up face to face. "The configuration of improved surveys and questionnaires, visible via sign-in or time-tracker portals, allows employers to raise the subject of health and wellbeing in an approachable way, giving the opportunity for a more meaningful dialogue when the staff member is ready to talk," Seddon says.

"A range of questions can be asked, targeted to all staff or specific groups in a user-friendly format, which identifies sentiment, potential trouble spots or safety concerns that may not be aired otherwise."

As Ellmer points out: "Recent events have made employee engagement and welfare a top priority, so a clear channel of communication throughout the entire structure of a business has become almost essential."

CONSIDERING EMPLOYEES' PREFERENCES

Another way technology can help employees feel valued and listened to is by giving them some level of control over their own schedules.

"Challenges being faced vary and are deeply personal and situational, including ▶

"Emotions are high, and schedules are thin, so there needs to be an even more flexible attitude to scheduling"

Neil Pickering, Ultimate Kronos Group

caring for extended family members, facilitating childcare, or emerging from total isolation," says Neil Pickering, industry and customer insights expert at HR and workforce management technology provider Ultimate Kronos Group (UKG). "Emotions are high, and schedules are thin, so there needs to be an even more flexible attitude to scheduling than previously.

"Employees across all sectors have been and continue to give their all right now, under stressful and unprecedented circumstances, as the massive uncertainty over the future of work and major disruptions to jobs has taken its toll. It's consequently crucial that employers now consider each and every employees' needs and preferences wherever and whenever appropriate. Accurate forecasting has a pivotal role to play in this, alongside scheduling that considers employee preferences."

Seddon agrees. "While regularly being scheduled for inconvenient shifts could lead to resentment and apathy, opening the rota up for self-selection empowers staff to take control, feel trusted and able to impact their work-life balance in a positive way," he says.

Tips for a great workforce management implementation

Simon Hedaux is the founder of Rethink Productivity, which helps businesses drive efficiency, boost productivity and optimise budgets. He says that over the past year, workforce management has never been more important and will continue to be the foundation for organisations to make sure they are matching changing customer demand to staff, maximising the opportunity to drive sales while minimising wasted hours, paying people accurately, and tracking sickness.

His tips for a great workforce management implementation are:

Don't try and do everything all at once. Start with colleague engagement or time and attendance and build from there.

You need a strong productivity data foundation to help make good decisions. That means current time standards for your processes and percentage activity splits for less easily planned tasks, such as telephone calls and ad hoc admin.

WFM is a change project, not an IT project. Success requires people to change how they work – it's much more than a tech installation.

Be prepared to face difficult decisions based on issues during the set-up stages. Getting to grips with WFM requires strong leadership and, when done well, delivers benefits for customers, colleagues and your business.

The latest workforce management solutions enable staff to manage all aspects of their work interaction themselves – from shifts to training and holiday planning, as well as drawing down pay when it has been earned.

"It's clear that when a team and their management have good communication around

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the schedule, with clear guidance on requests, holidays, upcoming events and expectations as far in advance as possible, business runs more smoothly for all parties," Ellmer stresses. "Keeping teams engaged, enthusiastic, safe and up-to-date with training and guidelines can't be underestimated."

THE FUTURE OF WORKFORCE MANAGEMENT

Workforce management solutions are already very widely adopted, according to Ellmer, with almost all hospitality businesses having a form of one installed, or in the process of implementing one. "How they are used and what for are the big questions," he says. "Who can afford not to have data-led insight right now?"

Looking ahead, he likes to think we aren't a million miles away from real-time data feeding, deploying live graphs and algorithms that refresh frequently enough for operators to make decisions in the here and now, rather than the 24-hour cycle of 'plan, review, do' that is so widely adopted now.

Something else that's on the horizon is auto scheduling. "While there are solutions that already do this to some extent, they are currently not robust enough to be considered as a main WFM solution," he says.

He also loves the idea that we could soon be using historical sales, labour and performance data alongside current, predetermined parameters and capacity triggers to generate sales and labour budgets. "After all, accurate and realistic budgets motivate good managers," he notes.

Seddon believes the role of technology in the workforce marketplace will continue to improve the experience of staff as its functionality is extended.

"Use in the agency market will allow employers to recruit contract labour, assess their potential and give feedback before opening the option to select their own shifts, where appropriate," he says. "Employees would then have the freedom to work across different employers without the constraints of being allocated fixed shifts."

Pickering agrees that as companies seek to maximise their flexibility and utilisation of the gig workforce, these systems will become the key link between businesses and the contingent workforce. "The use of artificial intelligence, machine learning and predictive analytics will expand too," he adds. "Already used by the latest generation of cloud-based solutions, the value it delivers through improvements to demand forecast accuracy, scheduling optimisation, compliance and predictive analytics will be widely adopted."

In the meantime, Seddon stresses that one of the biggest challenges over the next year will be labour optimisation that works for both the business and the employee.

"Operators must ensure that their business is profitable despite any prevailing restrictions, remaining agile and ready to respond to any significant fluctuations in trading. Yet that pressure cannot impact on the staff, whose commitment and enthusiasm for their job creates a safe and welcoming environment, while they themselves may have health or money worries to deal with," he concludes.

"Although roles may be reduced and shifts may be limited, using technology to communicate clearly and openly will generate a proactive and empowering working environment with everyone working together for a common goal."

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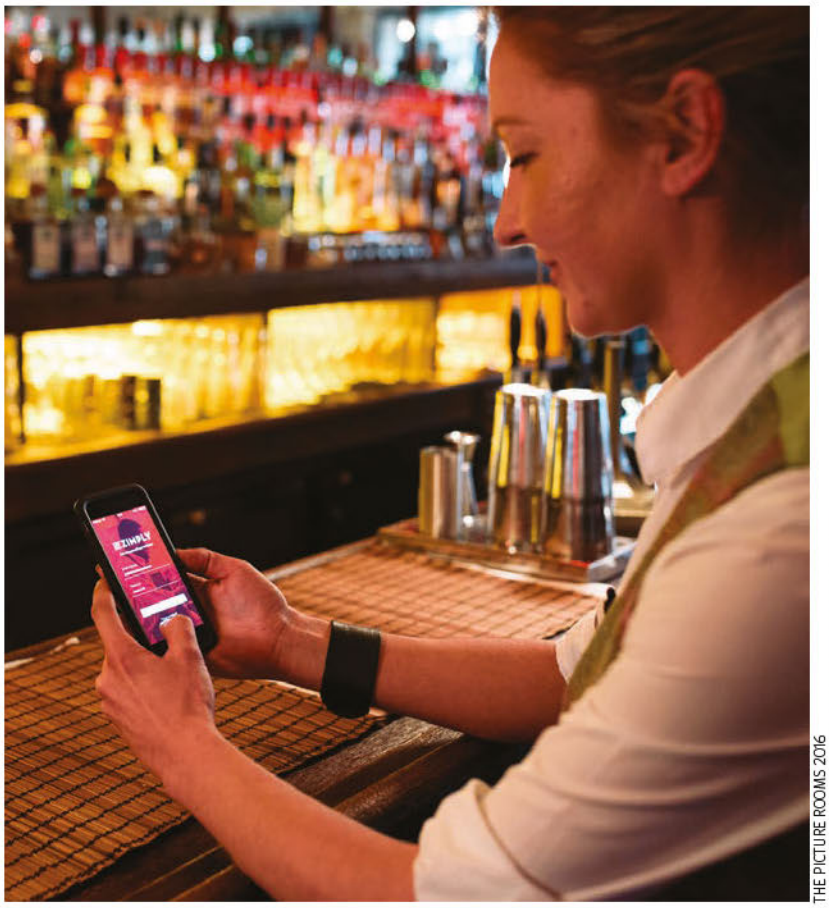

THE PICTURE ROOMS 2016

With stringent measures in place across the UK to contain coronavirus, many hospitality operators have understandably focused on the immediate priorities of protecting the business and preserving jobs.

Workforce management expert Bizimply is urging operators to start to also plan seriously for 2021. Chief executive Conor Shaw says: "Hospitality businesses face a challenge like no other, but it's also important to plan now to make the best of the opportunities that 2021 will bring.

"Operators will need to have a flexible approach to adapt to a changing regime of restrictions, while still delivering on customer expectations. The right employees, in the right place, at the right time, will be key to success.

"The opportunity is to 'bounce back better' in 2021, with a strong, customer-facing staffing model. Reassuring key staff they will still be important to the business is essential, and equally, operators need to look at their business to ensure staff are being used as effectively as possible."

With Bizimply systems used by more than 33,000 employees across 2,500 hospitality locations in the UK and Ireland, Shaw says: "The operators we work with, especially those who trade across multiple sites, have a much clearer understanding of their business in terms of labour costs and pinch points at each location, and are able to easily demonstrate compliance in key areas such as health and safety, working hours and data management.

> "The best staff are going to look for businesses where they feel valued"

"Just as importantly, they typically have higher levels of staff engagement in terms of attracting, motivating and retaining the best people. Even in a post-Covid 'buyers' market', where there is lower hospitality employment overall, the best staff are going to look for businesses where they feel valued."

BIZIMPLY AND MOOREPAY UNITE TO OFFER COMPLETE EMPLOYEE SOLUTION

Bizimply has a newly-launched strategic partnership with payroll solution specialist Moorepay, with the complementary strengths of the two businesses offering even deeper insight into employee costs and working patterns.

Bizimply and Moorepay's integrated cloud-based solution enables key managers to save hours of work each week through easy attendance monitoring, rota-building and streamlined payroll, while saving money through accurate payroll and real-time labour cost tracking.

Shaw says: "The new partnership between Bizimply and Moorepay extends to our customers, as we work closely with operators to ensure they genuinely understand their staff performance and activity, and use that information to run their business more effectively."

Bizimply estimates that general managers can spend up to six hours a week creating a staff rota using Excel or similar. That's a chunk of time where they're not front-of-house doing what they're best at – managing the business. So equipping them with the right tools to produce rotas and payroll should be a priority.

Operators can sign up for a one-to-one 'Bizimply Business Review', a free 90-minute assessment of their business's people productivity, compliance, control and engagement. Email advice@bizimply.com or go to www.bizimply.com for details

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OrderPay has recently introduced gifting functionality to its mobile ordering app, which is used by more than 6,000 pubs and restaurants in the UK, in the hope of digitising and personalising the gift card experience in time for Christmas.

"This Christmas looks to be more impersonal, and meeting up with friends and family is set to be more challenging than in previous years," says OrderPay chief commercial officer David Charlton.

"However, with OrderPay, users can send a personalised voucher and message to a friend, colleague or family member that recognises and celebrates the special occasion."

OrderPay has also developed a wallet functionality, which allows customers to store vouchers in the app. Consumers can also send vouchers to friends and family using their phone number. OrderPay hopes to expand its gifting options in 2021, such as integration with social media.

https://orderpay.com

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In association with OrderPay

FUTURE PROOF

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to rapid adoption of technologies like mobile ordering and delivery, but operators need to integrate tomorrow's technology into today's business, says *Elly Earls*

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, many hospitality operators had electronic point of sale (EPoS) systems that were capable of doing a lot more than they were being asked to. Features such as the ability to scan QR codes to find seats in restaurants, download menus, place orders or pay bills aren't new, but were rarely used. Meanwhile, many businesses had only scratched the surface when it came to the customer and business insights that integrated systems can offer.

Today, human interaction in an EPoS is a minimal requirement, both between customers and staff and between staff members. This used to be valued mainly because it eased communication between the restaurant floor and the kitchen – such as handheld or mobile ordering – but this has now become essential to keep customers safe and comply with regulations.

Research by mobile order and pay app OrderPay, which launched as lockdown restrictions began to ease in July, found that 41% of UK adults said that mobile phone ordering had become more important over the past six months. "This underlines that tech solutions have become a key component in operating safely, rebuilding consumer confidence and driving footfall," says chief commercial officer David Charlton.

> "Tech solutions have become a key component in operating safely, rebuilding consumer confidence and driving footfall"
>
> **David Charlton, OrderPay**

Staff have also been freed up to make table deliveries for drinks – something which was almost unheard of in high street pubs before. Meanwhile, other EPoS features that were seldom used to their full potential before the pandemic have proved pivotal in helping businesses adapt to the new trading restrictions.

"Some EPoS have inbuilt floorplans, which allows for new configurations to be inputted that meet with new social distancing requirements. Doing this electronically is far easier than pulling out the tape measure," says Hospa chief executive Jane Pendlebury.

"In addition, servers now have to be careful to allow time to sanitise tables between guests, and this is something that EPoS, with its in-built table reservations facility, also factors in. Now, more than ever, reservations are crucial to planning and controlling numbers. With many pubs now only taking visitors when they have a pre-booked table, EPoS with its added functionality allows for easy management of this."

Key to the success of any newly introduced technology or way of working is that staff are on board, and one easy way to get staff engaged with mobile ordering, according to Charlton, is by reminding them it can encourage more generous tipping. He's already hearing feedback from operators within the OrderPay ▶

network that the ability to set a tipping benchmark of 10% or 12.5% of bill total through the digital order and payment channel is actually resulting in higher tips for staff than the previous cash alternative.

"It's a virtuous circle, because great tips will give you an engaged team, which in turn will help you to unlock the true potential and benefits of order and payment, including increased basket size, increased retention and visit frequency, direct marketing opportunities to new and existing customers, and optimised operations," he says.

REACHING NEW AUDIENCES THROUGH DELIVERY

OrderPay has more than 6,000 pubs and restaurants – and £7b of the hospitality sector – signed up to its network. But Charlton says mobile payment is just one strand to a successful tech strategy, both during the pandemic and beyond.

"Consumers are now in charge of their own experience, and taking a consumer-centric approach by switching on as many ordering channels as possible is the best way to capture their loyalty, drive footfall and increase spend per head," he says.

He suggests working with more than one solution provider for features like order and pay, click and collect, gifting functionalities and order management and delivery. Indeed, delivery has been one of the big stars of 2020, allowing businesses to stay connected with their existing customers and potentially reach new ones even during strict lockdowns.

What's important for operators to remember is that a delivery solution must be integrated with EPoS to get the best out of it. As Richard Cox, managing director of EPoS provider Langley Business Systems, explains: "It means that all orders can be accounted for, allowing businesses to run on a skeleton body of staff rather than having members of staff to oversee orders and make sure drivers are allocated to the correct deliveries at the correct time with the correct addresses."

EPoS provider Guestline decided to partner with Deliverect, which integrates with third-party food delivery platforms, to achieve exactly that. Hotels can upload their menu items from a Guestline EPoS to Deliverect, customise their online menus and then distribute them to online food delivery channels (or display them on the hotel's website). Orders are then sent direct to Guestline EPoS and the kitchen printer for faster delivery and fewer errors, reducing the need to monitor external ordering sources for any new requests.

"Not only does this help hotels increase revenue but it helps them reach new audiences," says Guestline product manager Jon Lee. "Hoteliers could expand their F&B operations and customer base beyond their usual restaurant or pub customers and resident guests – making their menu automatically available to potential new customers, off-premise, across multiple online delivery platforms. This enables hotels to connect with their local community and develop a new, contact-free revenue stream among a new audience."

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTEROPERABILITY

Dale Nix is director of independent hospitality consultancy Avenue 9, and has been working with hospitality businesses for more than 10 years to help them select the best EPoS systems for their business. He's always maintained that the most important aspect for operators to consider when searching for an EPoS partner is interoperability with property management systems (PMS) for hotels as well as table management, stock and procurement. But he says it's only since the pandemic that many hospitality businesses have started to realise the value of integration.

"Before, it was like pulling teeth to try and talk to a customer about integrated systems. But it all has to work together because it's only when you have this unified suite of systems that you start seeing efficiencies being built into the process," he says. "Once you get the integration, you have the data flowing back and forth. Then you can start digging down to the core granular data."

For example, if you try to interrogate data from a PMS alone, you'll often get three lines

Guestline and Deliverect offer smooth ordering for hotels

To satisfy the demand for hotels to offer an online food and drink ordering facility, Guestline partnered with Deliverect, which integrates with third-party food delivery platforms to provide a two-way API interface with Guestline EPoS. This provided a new, automated online food and drink solution for hoteliers to boost revenue through deliveries, takeaways and collections.

Neil Gilson, general manager at the Sandy Cove hotel in Devon, uses the product: "The two-way interface between Guestline EPoS and Deliverect has enabled us to offer our guests a contact-free service and drive sales of food and beverages," he says.

"We have found that customers are ordering more because it is easier than walking to the bar, and this in turn eases congestion at the bar and frees up a member of staff who would normally be taking orders and payments.

"It's a seamless operation that integrates brilliantly with the Guestline EPoS system – food orders come straight through to the kitchen printer and drink orders come through to the bar printer – it's definitely a feature we will continue to use after the Covid pandemic."

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How to get the best out of your EPoS

By Henry Seddon, managing director of Access Hospitality

1 INTEGRATION IS KEY

Aligning EPoS systems with apps and solutions through technological integration improves the customer journey and simplifies processes. Technology that can integrate and has multiple APIs will ensure stability, removing the need for short-term replacements because of poor functionality and not being scalable.

2 PERSONALISE THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Conversational ordering is available in some EPoS, with configuration on a product-by-product basis. This enables staff to ask the right questions at the right time for the right product, at the point of transaction. EPoS integrated with other products can also capitalise on customer data to personalise marketing for more meaningful campaigns.

3 UPSELLING FOR INCREMENTAL PROFIT

Smart EPoS systems relay transactional data to provide upselling ordering prompts on the till or tablet. Product information built into the system also gives front of house teams access to details about matching drinks and menu items, where products originate and allergens or ingredients.

4 FASTER, MORE ACCURATE SERVICE

EPoS can empower an entire hospitality operation to work faster and more accurately as well as improve communication between front and back of house. Handheld ordering and kitchen video management systems streamline services and automate processes.

5 COMPREHENSIVE BUSINESS REPORTING

You can optimise staffing, product, stock, pricing and future marketing by using real-time sales reports within seconds of a transaction to analyse customer behaviour and trading.

of information – food, beverage and other. But if you go through the interface and dig down into the EPoS data too, it's possible to see exactly what was sold at the transaction level. "We can determine for the majority of customers who will purchase one product – say, a main course – and which add-ons they're more likely to buy, which would then affect procurement, stock, labour and profitability," Nix explains.

Avenue 9 recently partnered with Tahola to create a business intelligence platform called Avenue 9 Analytics, which takes feeds from many different hotel and restaurant systems, mashes them together and comes up with insights, viewpoints and visualisations that the hotel or restaurant can then make decisions on.

The main issue Nix has noticed among his clients is how poor the data is that is being fed into the system. For example, a hotel might have several profiles for one guest – one in the table management system, one in the spa system, and so on. For businesses to get real insights about their customers, these systems need to talk to each other. "If they can identify the true figures of their business, they can take decisions about moving forward from where they actually are," he explains.

Lee agrees: "Simplifying and joining up all key processes that connect the restaurant, bar, kitchen and front desk eliminates frustrations, complications and delays – it also helps deliver a faster, slicker experience to the guest. It helps the hotel become more profitable too, because EPoS provides more opportunities to upsell and it eliminates missing items off the bill and thereby lost revenue."

When a business introduces a new mobile order and payment solution, clearly this needs to be integrated at the other end so the transaction data can be fed into the system, helping operators make smarter decisions based on customer habits.

REVIEW WHAT YOU ACTUALLY NEED

Looking in to 2021, Cox believes table ordering with integrated payments will be sticking around for some time, especially as they boast the advantage of not having to run as many EPoS units as before. In addition, table ordering and app usage will also allow businesses to capture customer data (in line with GDPR law) to push strategic marketing that they may not have been able to do before.

"Having a good understanding of the statistics at your fingertips will be key in 2021, as it will allow businesses to be smarter about their spending, which is crucial for survival during the pandemic," he says.

Pendlebury's advice is to remember that you may already have what you need within your existing system. "Take a good look at what you are using and see what you may already be paying for but not taking advantage of. Review what you actually need and not what the supplier tells you that you need," she stresses.

"Talking to other operators helps you get the lay of the land. One positive thing about Covid has definitely been the increased sense of industry solidarity. And be sure to keep a close eye on government regulations to make sure you are adhering to the new ways of working."

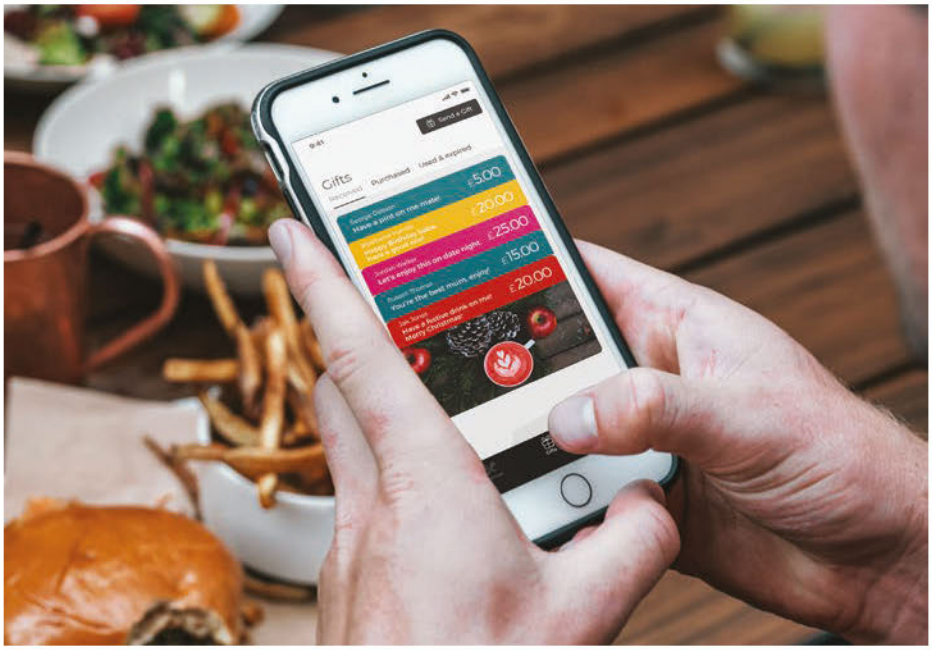
GIFT-GIVING WITH A PERSONAL TOUCH THIS FESTIVE SEASON

Forget vouchers, there are better ways of making this Christmas memorable, says *David Charlton*, chief commercial officer at OrderPay

Many operators have never felt further away from their customers. With enforced closures and restrictions that compel us to keep our distance, building or maintaining relationships with guests is increasingly difficult. In a trading environment where consumer confidence is low and sales suppressed, bridging this divide and keeping customers engaged has to be a top priority.

This year we've already seen multiple ways that technology has facilitated hospitality in overcoming barriers between the operator and guests. Order and payment is a great example, enabling consumers to order safely and efficiently, but for technology to really help bridge that divide, it has to move away from something that feels purely transactional to something more emotional and personalised.

The upcoming festive season would traditionally be an opportunity for operators to build long-lasting relationships with consumers and drive sales through creating memorable experiences but, of course, this year we are all facing a very different Christmas period.



"Large get-togethers and Christmas celebrations are looking increasingly unlikely, but customers should not be completely unreachable"

MAKE IT PERSONAL

At OrderPay, we're introducing gifting functionality to our app to help keep the connection between our community of users and network of hospitality venues. It switches the traditional, cumbersome and impersonal gift card on its head and moves it into the digital world with a more personalised approach.

Large get-togethers and Christmas celebrations are looking increasingly unlikely, but customers should not be completely unreachable. With OrderPay, users can send a personalised voucher and message to a friend, colleague or family member that recognises and celebrates the special occasion. It's a fantastic way for consumers to engage with your brand and gives operators an effective channel to consumers.

This year we have seen consumers adopt new habits and operators have to adapt to meet them. As an aggregator platform, OrderPay allows operators to reach over 100,000 engaged users, and the new gifting functionality gives the ability to strengthen relationships with those customers. Next year there will be even greater possibilities with gifting, including ways to surprise and delight guests and reward their loyalty without the pain points or operational complications of a traditional loyalty scheme. Watch this space!

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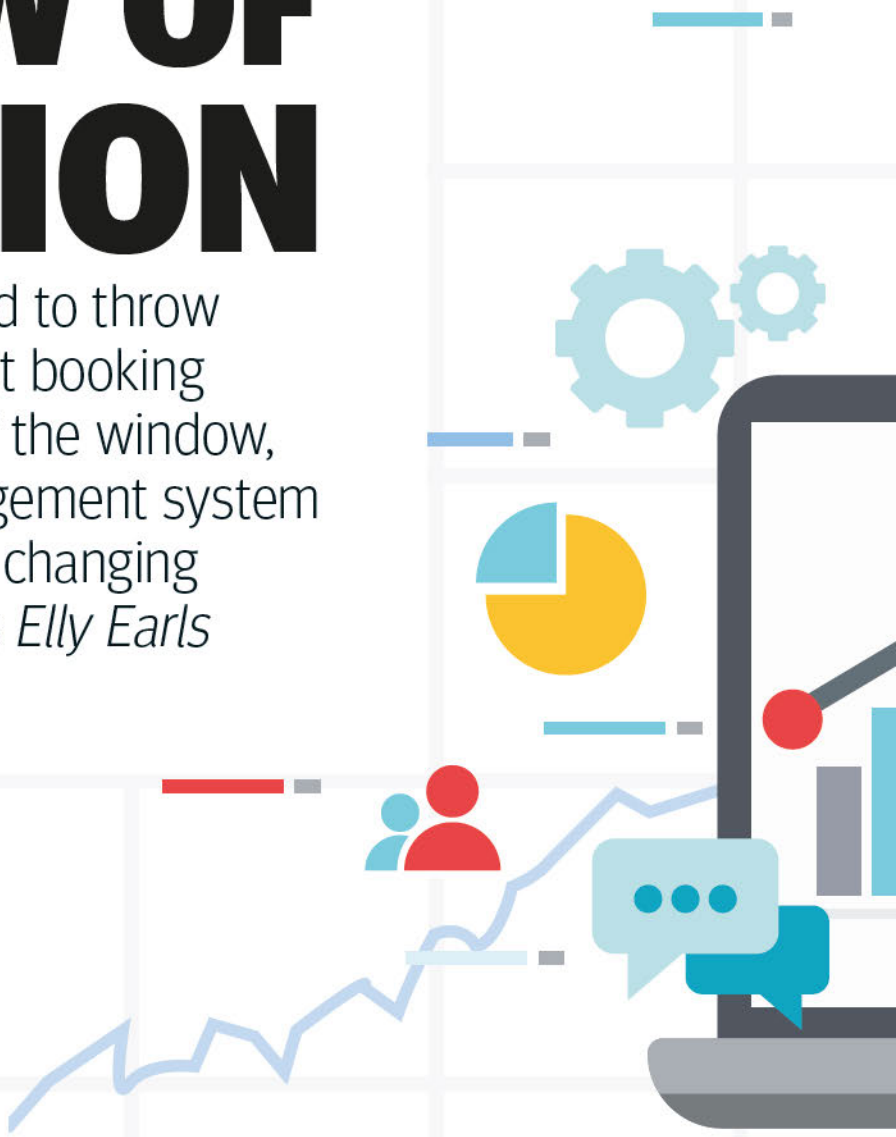
THE LAW OF REACTION

This year hoteliers have had to throw everything they knew about booking windows and pricing out of the window, so a nimble revenue management system that can respond swiftly to changing rules is now essential, says *Elly Earls*



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The coronavirus pandemic has forced the hotel industry to operate in an environment with drastically increased uncertainty and reduced headcount. Hoteliers haven't been able to rely on traditional metrics, such as year-on-year benchmarking, and they've had to contend with a dramatic shortening of the booking window, which has meant being braver than ever when it comes to holding rates.

While there was a lot of scepticism surrounding how revenue management software would handle the unexpected fluctuations the pandemic has brought, the technology has come through strongly, with algorithms adapting quickly to cope with the new emerging patterns and helping operators make decisions that would have been practically impossible without them.

Klaus Kohlmayr, chief evangelist at revenue management software provider IDeaS, says that during the pandemic, revenue management system (RMS) technology has been critical to help hoteliers deal with the rapid shifts in demand as government restrictions change. In some cases, he's seen hotels go from 10%-70% occupancy in the space of 72 hours.

As well as consolidating data from a large number of sources, RMS technology can help hotels understand micro trends, such as which segments are up or down, changes in market and competitor environment and changing price sensitivity.

"RMS technology also automatically adjusts pricing as demand changes," he says. "When hotels are at 30%-40% occupancy, every percentage point of additional revenue counts even more, and an automated RMS will help hotels achieve that."

Samantha Williams, UK market owner at Profitroom, which helps hoteliers drive direct bookings, has seen three key segments pacing ahead in 2020: repeat customers, domestic guests and locals. "Focusing on these segments for growth will provide a hotel with more focus in short-, mid- and long-term planning," she advises.

Profitroom has noticed an increase of almost 20% in repeat business for hoteliers from the leisure market. "In times of uncertainty, people want to feel safe and secure, so traveling back to a place that's familiar is more attractive," she

SHUTTERSTOCK

"People have to travel or want to travel and will do so no matter the price of the hotel"

Klaus Kohlmayr, IDeaS

explains. "Hoteliers should remember to value their loyal guests first – especially where tight restrictions are in place."

A good customer relationship management system can help operators execute this sort of strategy with success. It also means they can personalise communications via guest segmentations, targeting each audience with the most relevant packages.

Domestic tourism has also obviously increased given the ongoing travel restrictions. "On average guests are willing to travel one hour per night, which means hoteliers can use this to promote special packages to the domestic market based on geographical booking patterns and trends," Williams notes.

"But remember that a hotel's target audience might change over time, so you need to regularly review this. For instance, due to the tier system, we might see an increase in demand from the immediate locality, and this is something that hotels should look to capitalise on."

UNDERSTANDING THE PRICE-DEMAND RELATIONSHIP

It goes against a revenue manager's instinct to hold prices when occupancy pick up is behind the budget, especially for short- and mid-term scenarios, but that's exactly what operators need to do.

"In the current environment, what is different to previous downturns is that travellers are often the people who are least price-sensitive," Kohlmayr explains. "It is more critical for hoteliers than ever to understand the price- ▶

demand relationship: will a decrease in price [lead to] an increase in demand and result in higher overall revenues? We have seen that in many cases the answer is no. In fact, some hotels have increased their prices versus last year, because they realise people have to travel or want to travel and will do so no matter the price of the hotel. They are also placing a higher value on health and safety measures – people will book a more expensive room if they feel their stay is safer."

That said, the domestic market is saturated and operators still need to be competitive to attract a higher value guest and increase gross operating profit per available room, according to Williams.

She advises coming up with creative ways to be different from your competitors, such as working with local partners in the area to provide one-off experiences; making the most of your on-site amenities and helping guests envisage the experience through compelling storytelling, video and imagery; tailoring packages to each individual; or seasonal campaigns.

GROWTH IN DIRECT BOOKINGS

The pandemic has made a huge difference in the way guests book hotels and their priorities when they do. For example, there has been a dramatic shortening of the booking window as people are hesitant to commit, given the health and safety uncertainty. The booking window was just seven days on average in October in the UK.

In addition, the once popular advance purchase rates favoured by those looking for the lowest price because they were confident in their travel plans have significantly reduced in popularity, as have negotiated business rates, which are all but non-existent this year.

IDeaS takes the guesswork out of room prices

In 2019, after reopening his 73-room Remarkable Hotels property in Nottingham, following an extensive renovation, owner and operator Al Malik witnessed the gains in average daily rate and occupancy he had initially enjoyed quickly ebb away. With growth plateauing, his gut feeling was the hotel's legacy RMS was "missing something".

"Given that we established a newly renovated offering, I was convinced the suggested prices were too low," he says. "For a single hotel of our size, small movements in prices make a big difference in the long run, and basing key pricing decisions on human intuition meant we were leaving money on the table. I knew I needed to base my business on scientific analysis – guesswork was not going to generate an effective return on my refurbishment costs."

Once fully up and running with IDeaS RMS, Remarkable Hotels saw improvements in performance, including a 15% overall sales increase, a 19% uplift in rooms revenue, and a 12.5% average occupancy increase.

Malik added: "As an owner, having IDeaS on board has taken a lot of the pressure off as I know the system is always there in the background, automatically working for me."

"With the online travel agents being in a weaker position, hoteliers will have the advantage"

Samantha Williams, Profitroom

What's more, according to Williams, there's evidence to show that guests have lost trust in third-party online travel agent (OTA) booking sites such as Booking.com. "We've seen a direct booking growth of 34% compared to an OTA decrease of 24%," she says. "This is a trend that is continuing, so now, more than ever, hoteliers have a real opportunity to take back business on a direct platform.

"With the OTAs being in a weaker position, hoteliers will have the advantage. Hotels can take back control of pricing strategies and penalise OTAs who produce lower rates, creating rate disparity.

"This is a tactic that will be most successful for luxury leisure hotels. It's important to also consider metasearch as a direct channel too, and this should be built into a direct booking strategy to take back OTA market share."

Port Lympne goes wild for Profitroom

Port Lympne, a hotel and reserve in Kent, managed to achieve 99% occupancy post-lockdown, the result of a comprehensive direct booking strategy that allowed it to maximise revenue during heightened demand.

Once the government had given the green light to reopen, the reserve was getting a booking every 11 seconds, which saw it achieve more than 99% occupancy throughout July and August. Port Lympne's average daily rate also increased by 30% in September and 35% in October; a period which helped to make up the shortfall following its three-month closure.

Since 2017, Port Lympne has been using Profitroom's booking engine, which includes automated communication, personalised triggered messaging, centralised reporting, simple integrations and flexible connectivity, as well as secure and schedulable online payments. In the first year of working with Profitroom, the reserve saw a 40% increase in direct bookings, which only increased after the first lockdown was lifted.

Richard Amlot, reservations manager at Port Lympne, says: "We've noticed a huge uptake in conversion levels. With a vast amount of accommodation types, there's an overwhelming amount of information we need to convey to guests. The booking flow Profitroom provides allows a clear and concise area for guests to see that information and make a decision."

Delivering authentic personalisation with ease was another key aspect of the success of Port Lympne's strategy. As Amlot explains: "We receive a lot of generic enquiries via our website, from people who are looking for something unique. The opportunities function allows us to tailor the offerings that go to people, thereby reducing calls and reducing the to-and-fro of emailing information. It also provides the ability to prepare a totally personalised proposal, as well as adding extra incentives, such as discounts or additional nights."

Samantha Williams, UK market owner at Profitroom, says: "It's fantastic to see Port Lympne's success. The hospitality industry has had a very tough time of it in recent months, but Port Lympne has set an example as to how a robust direct booking strategy can benefit hoteliers and other accommodation providers.

"We've seen demand sky rocket for coastal areas post-lockdown, but it's only by having the right measures in place that hotels and resorts have been able to capitalise on this – with Port Lympne very much setting the standard."

THE YEAR OF STAYCATIONS

Williams has little doubt that 2021 will continue to be the year of staycations. A number of Profitroom clients have already seen a rise in staycations of 348% year-on-year and she predicts a surge in bookings post lockdown. Her advice for hoteliers is to remember that they can't create demand by lowering prices. "Demand is now a balance of perceived value regarding safety and trust," she says.

There's also a larger social responsibility expected from hoteliers in the local community. "This isn't just about giving back and engaging to build brand awareness and presence, but it will also support the green shoots of recovery, should another forced closure take place," Williams says.

"For example, collaborating and engaging with like-minded brands and local businesses in the creation of new seasonal packages and unique experiences will become essential to support incremental spending, as domestic travel restrictions and a tiered lockdown becomes an inevitable factor in the months to come."

Yet while there is certainly some cause for optimism, Kohlmayr expects we will continue to be in the current situation for at least the next nine months and that operators will need to continue to work in the leanest possible way to make it through this crisis.

"This means consolidating departments (ie, revenue management, distribution, sales and marketing into commercial functions) and giving their reduced teams the best automated tools to make them more efficient," he says.

"With fewer people it is even less possible to work in a manual environment, which has also become much more dynamic. An analytical, automated RMS will provide confidence to the operators that their pricing and revenue opportunities are optimised at all times."

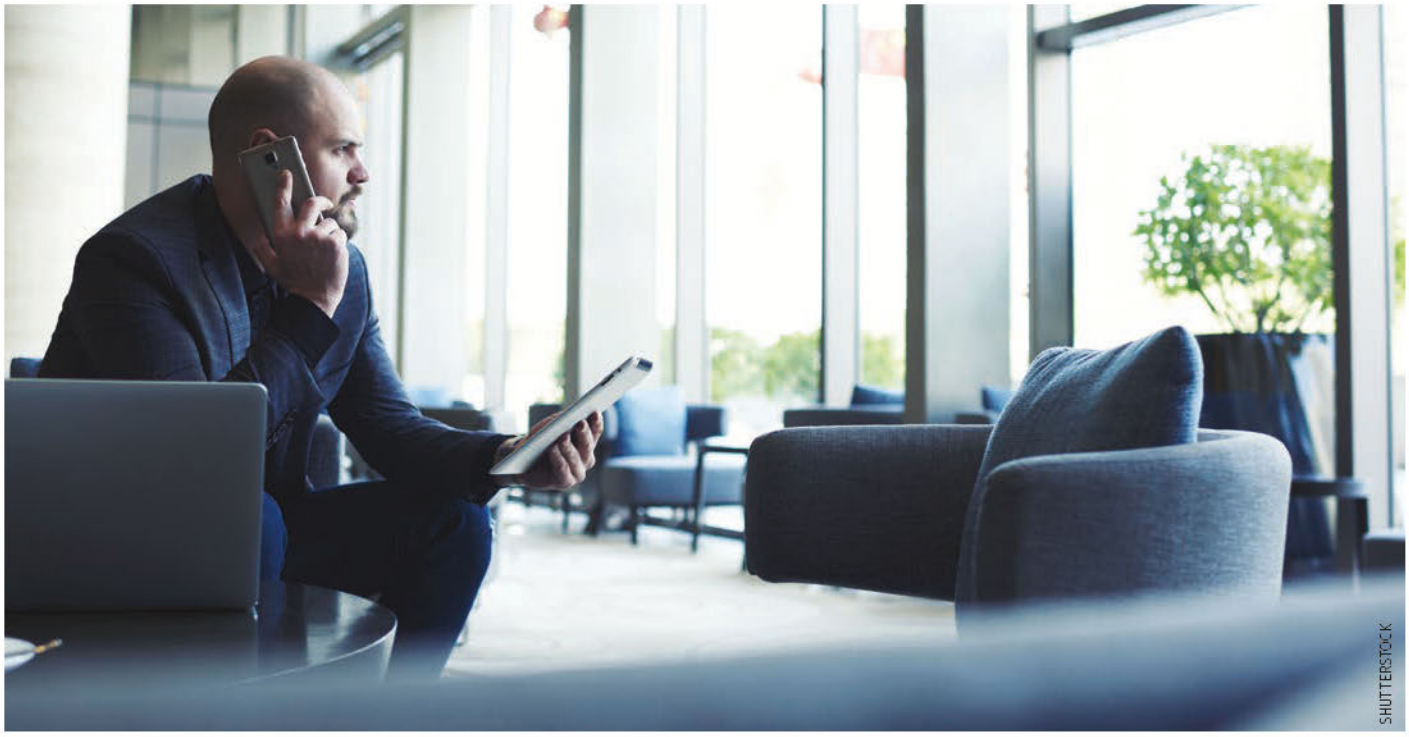
Profitroom's lockdown checklist

Here's what hoteliers should be doing now:

- Turn NRF (non-refundable rate) cancellations into vouchers to protect cash flow – better still, ensure they're redeemable online to reduce the manual admin.
- Get ahead of competitors and prepare early seasonal promotions to get business on the books for December to Easter.
- Promote the use of gift vouchers for Christmas presents.
- Do an audit of Christmas packages and availability to push over this period.
- Launch spring campaigns now. Demand is looking ahead beyond lockdown and Christmas. We anticipate this spring will see a higher domestic demand than normal for leisure hotels typically held back with seasons.
- Load 2021 prices if they have not been released yet, and even 2022 prices for international resorts.
- Use lockdown to make a system change for the better. If there's something that's not working for you, now is the time to change it where there will be less business disruption.
- Maintain your marketing and brand visibility. Don't lose market share over your competitors – focus your efforts on the areas where you can gain the biggest value. Invest in projects such as video or photography shoots or updates to your website.

NEW TIMES CALL FOR NEW TOOLS

It's time to rethink revenue management, says *Mike Chuma*, vice-president of marketing, enablement and engagement at IDeaS Revenue Solutions


SHUTTERSTOCK

Our global hospitality industry is facing its greatest challenge in modern history – and also its greatest opportunity for transformational change. It would seem that 2020 dealt us all a losing hand, but there's still a game to be won. To survive – and thrive – hotels must now prepare to break down silos, think in radical new ways about guest value and the total guest experience, and take bold, strategic action toward profit optimisation and commercial success across the hotel organisation.

The pandemic has forced drastic changes to how we conduct business. This new reality will force us all to do more with less. Reorganised and consolidated hotel organisations have made revenue management resources and time more valuable than ever. No longer are hotel revenue managers responsible for a single property, or a handful of properties within a hotel group, but many are now responsible for a cluster of properties and expected to make strategic revenue decisions for up to a dozen – or more – hotels every day. But what does this renewed focus on consolidation and efficiency mean for the commercial operations, as well as the function of a revenue manager of a hotel today?

The human element is still vital, but hotels must now look to invest in key automated technologies to drive greater operational efficiencies. A machine-learning revenue management system (RMS) that can implement tactical decisions and automatically distribute rates and inventory controls will free up talented revenue managers to better execute long-term commercial strategies.

WHAT IDEAS DOES DIFFERENTLY

At IDeaS, our focus in our RMS platforms has been to enable the solution to serve as your reliable radar, reacting quickly to produce appropriate controls during the disruption and observing and proactively responding as business begins to recover.

We recognise the recovery trajectory will vary for individual properties, even within the same market. Hotels have needed to make hard pivots to leverage their property assets in new ways. A sharp focus on transitioning segment mix and rapidly changing source markets has allowed some hotels to buoy domestic leisure business where they traditionally have depended on domestic business travellers.

IDeaS has taken steps to leverage key analytics capabilities to react quickly to what is really happening and ignore irrelevant data. We know there is a delicate balance to strike in analysing data from this period. It's important that an RMS excludes data from the demand disruption and doesn't use it to forecast the recovery period. At the same time, the RMS must be able to see the evidence of disruption and that the recovery has begun.

To account for this, IDeaS' systems have been carefully refined – and are regularly recalibrated – to guide our clients through the downturn and onward into the phases of recovery to come. Our RMS solutions react as booking patterns, demand, market pricing and price sensitivity changes, and they are designed to price optimally – by room type and beyond the guest room – even in times of very low demand.

A TIME TO TRANSFORM REVENUE MANAGEMENT

With the right leadership, hotels can rise from these ashes stronger than ever before. I believe now is the time to rethink the hospitality industry, reinvent your hotel, and hit the reset button to transform revenue management as never before, finally achieving the right business mix, the right channels, and the right intersections of talent and technology. These strange new times call for a new breed of revenue manager – along with the revenue technology they use – to lead their organisation's path to commercial success in the boom years to come.

By breaking out of the siloed ways of doing business and embracing the automated tools available to improve efficiency and increase profitability across your entire organisation, hoteliers can remain competitive as travel resumes and the industry slowly marches toward recovery. Hoteliers and commercial leaders have an opportunity to evolve and set themselves up for future success, today.

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SAFE AND SOUND

Covid safety has flown to the top of operators' priority lists this year, but with new allergen laws coming into force in 2021, now isn't the time to drop the ball on other food safety issues. *Elly Earls* looks at the solutions

Since hospitality businesses started reopening, food safety consultants have – unsurprisingly – been bombarded with questions about how to keep their staff and customers safe from Covid-19.

Common concerns have been around social distancing in kitchens, the use of face coverings if social distancing isn't possible, enhanced hand-washing, pod working to ensure staff members only work with the same people, implementing one-way systems and ensuring all staff complete health declarations before work. In addition, many businesses have started to offer takeaway or delivery services for the first time, which require additional safety considerations.

But while the food safety advice lines are busier than ever, the worry for experts is that the queries that would usually be coming in – around everything from allergens to cold storage – have dropped off. All of this is happening at a time when staff numbers are severely reduced, which in itself has the potential to affect food safety.

At health and safety consultancy Food Alert, 80% of calls are now Covid-related. As technical director Julia Wilson says: "Our biggest concern is that operators don't lose focus on the most important food safety issues, as well as Covid. We've got to be Covid-safe, but food safety still matters."

STAYING ON TOP OF ALLERGENS

One issue operators must continue to keep at top of mind is allergens. In October 2021, Natasha's Law will come into force, which means that any food classed as pre-packed for direct sale must be labelled like it would be in a supermarket, with allergens highlighted.

"Food businesses will be at risk if they cannot clearly prove that they provided clear allergen information, should they ever receive an allergen complaint," explains Ben Gardner, chief executive at safety consultancy Navitas.

While paper records have long been accepted in food businesses, their limitations have become increasingly clear as regulations have become more stringent. They're easy to falsify, and don't provide the prompts, guidance or instant insight a digital system can. They also take up a lot of front-line staff, which is in shorter supply than ever during the pandemic.

"It's simply no longer possible to truly stay on top of all your food safety using a paper-based system," says Gardner.

With a digital allergen management and tracking system, food businesses can always prove that they have clearly labelled any allergens in all the food they produce for direct sale because it maintains a record of every allergen label that has been printed.

The Navitas Digital Food Safety system, for example, keeps a record of the food that has

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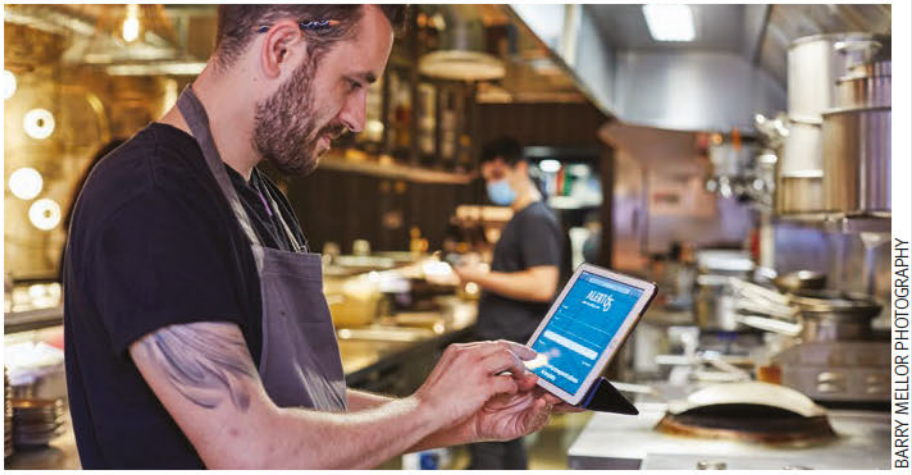
Cloud-based compliance at Urban Leisure Group



BARRY MELLOR PHOTOGRAPHY

Urban Leisure Group, which operates nine bars in the London area, has embraced the digital transformation of its safety compliance during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Faced with having to shut down its premises overnight and then prepare them for reopening with relatively short notice, operations manager Hannah Vernon was grateful to have access to Food Alert's cloud-based compliance software, Alert65.

The application gives hospitality businesses the tools they need to tackle complex compliance issues by automating manual tasks and centrally storing information and policy documents across multiple locations.

Hannah says: "We were already users of Alert65 but the true value of the software has really shone during these challenging times. The Food Alert team were very quick to respond to the crisis and update the operational guidance and checklists in accordance with the new world that we faced.

"Being able to use Alert65 to access all the risk assessment task lists and templates from my home office for all our venues, was such a relief and made my job so much easier. It is also the essential ingredient that every operator needs to make sure that complex food safety management, especially at a time when we are evolving our offer with takeaway and click and collect to meet the new trading conditions, is made easy.

"We manage all our food safety requirements in one place, including allergen management, supplier management, cleaning schedules and HACCPs.

"Covid has demonstrated how digital and paperless compliance is no longer the future, but the here and now."

been produced, who printed the label, which allergens were present within the food and when the label was printed. This can also be cross-referenced with the barcode and the point of sale system for complete traceability.

Many systems can also show an audit trail of compliance right from the supplier. Alert65, for example, has a supplier module, which automatically sends out letters to suppliers to get information from them about allergens, which can then be inputted into recipes and dishes within its allergen management module.

There's also software on the market, such as StarChef, where you can simply type in the ingredients in each dish and the allergens are automatically pulled out.

"Having the ability to have all that information in one place, digitally, is brilliant – much better than having to rely on someone filling in a Food Standards Agency (FSA) form, which they don't update properly and you can't quite read their handwriting," says Wilson. "That consistency is really helpful."

However, she warns that it's important not to rely 100% on technology. "As a manager you need to go over it and check that everything you've put in has been picked up and there aren't any glaring errors. Although these pieces of software are great, there's still the need for some human element to check everything is as it should be."

GETTING FOOD-TO-GO RIGHT

Delivery, click and collect and takeaway became the lifeblood of many hospitality businesses during lockdown, and continue to be more important than they ever have been. One concern safety experts have is whether operators know what this means from an allergen standpoint – and have implemented the correct procedures. ▶

As Mark Flanagan, chief executive of Shield Safety Group, explains: "The guest is now one step further away to communicate with and collecting and understanding their needs becomes more difficult. Careful consideration must be given as to how guests' needs are identified, communicated in the kitchen and then how the food is prepared and delivered safely to the customer."

The FSA has produced excellent guidance around this, as have many food safety companies. According to Gardner, some of the food safety measures that should be implemented, specifically related to allergens, include:

- If using online ordering services, allergy information must be available to customers at the point of selection. This can be verbally, by providing a phone number online; but it is essential that the information you provide is accurate for the dishes produced so customers are able to make informed choices when deciding on their meal.
- Label each container with the exact name of the dish – if it is handwritten, ensure the information is clear and legible. This is particularly important when dealing with allergy sufferers' orders.
- Separate meat, vegetarian and allergy dishes within each order. Any allergy dishes should be placed on top, ideally double-wrapped, with the other containers underneath; or, even better, delivered completely separately.
- Accurate allergy information must be available at the point of delivery for 'distance selling', so encourage the delivery driver to ask the customer if they need any further information at the door before they wish them "bon appétit!"

Hot holding is another challenge for businesses that have branched out into off-premise ordering, according to David Davies, chief product officer at safety compliance firm Checkit. "Safety and compliance depend on food being stored, prepared and served at the correct temperature. Hot-hold food in particular can be kept at a specific temperature only for a specific period of time," he says.

"Consumers will choose not to dine with you if they feel you're not conforming to the highest levels of safety"

Ben Gardner, Navitas

Systems like Checkit's, which can track the provision of hot food-to-go automatically, mean staff don't have to worry about recording temperatures manually – sensors do it for them. Managers also receive important data about how many food items are prepared, how many are purchased and how many are wasted throughout opening hours.

This not only gives operators a much stronger basis for safety and compliance, but enables the business to more accurately align supply and demand to prevent waste and increase efficiency.

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TEMPERATURE MONITORING

Similar technologies can be applied on-premise. "You can now take the temperature of all your goods using a probe that is automatically Bluetoothed into your food safety recording system," says Wilson. "You don't have to write the information down or even log into the system."

Adds Gardner: "A digital probe already contains all your supplier information, so allows goods-in to be checked for compliant temperatures and automatically logged within one central system. Any issues can be flagged there and then, with unsafe food being declined and sent back.

"They also have clear proof, accessible anytime within the system, that the goods were delivered unfit for use to avoid any further issues or disputes."

Automated temperature monitoring of fridges and freezers can also save time and worry for operators. "You get a timeline of the temperature 24-7 and you get to see those fluctuations," explains Wilson. "You'll also get an alarm if there's an issue and you can sort out the issue much quicker."

SHUTTERSTOCK

DIGITAL INSIGHTS

For Davies, one of the biggest issues with paper records is that there is no real-time visibility. "Paperwork gets filed away and problems may not come to light until it's too late. The other problem is that potentially valuable insight from those records goes unseen," he says.

By contrast, a digital approach, such as Checkit's Connected Workflow Management, prompts, guides and logs best practice directly at the frontline. "It's easy for staff to see and record tasks on a mobile device – and collaborate with colleagues to ensure everything is completed. The time savings alone can stretch to several hours a week," Davies explains.

"The resulting flow of data is available to managers in real time and they can configure alerts to let them know when certain key tasks are overdue. The result is a robust digital audit trail, attributable to individuals, automatically time-stamped and tagged to a specific location. Managers can track activity against key performance criteria, benchmark and compare sites, and identify areas for improvement."

A similar level of granularity can be achieved when it comes to stock management, according to Flanagan, with the latest electronic point of sale (EPoS) systems allowing insight into stock holding, yield and slow-moving items.

"For food safety, this can help identify those sites who are potentially holding too much stock, leading to out-of-date food," he explains.

"The same systems can be used during menu changes to identify old and new stock units and manage the risk of allergens. However, a balance must be struck between managing the yield performance and food safety performance. If a business is heavily monitored on stock management and yield performance, it can lead to negative food safety or quality, such as reducing portion size or using out-of-date food."

Next year will be a balancing act for operators. While Covid remains top of every operator's mind, it's crucial they don't lose focus on other food safety issues.

"Before the pandemic, the focus was on allergens," Flanagan says. "The risk has not gone away, but the focus probably has reduced. Ensuring the management of allergens throughout the business, from menu design, procurement, recipe creation, dish preparation and then service, has to be a priority."

Wilson stresses that stock management is also more of a challenge than ever, with Covid regulations changing on a weekly basis. "There's a lot of uncertainty about moving from Tier 1 to 2 or 3 and the impact in terms of having to throw food away. It's crucial that operators know their market, know their stock and know which food is perishable," she advises. "But it's also about rationalising your menu so you can get lots of dishes from similar ingredients."

As Gardner concludes, 2021 is the year to go digital, if you haven't already. "Food businesses need to do more with less and faster. Consumers are going to be even more sensitive to food hygiene standards and will choose not to dine with you if they feel you're not conforming to the highest levels of safety."

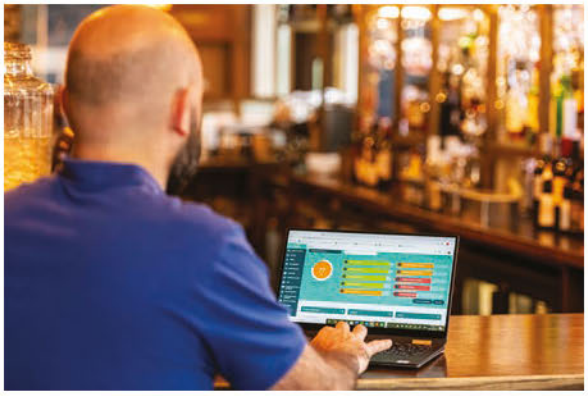
Staying close to the supply chain

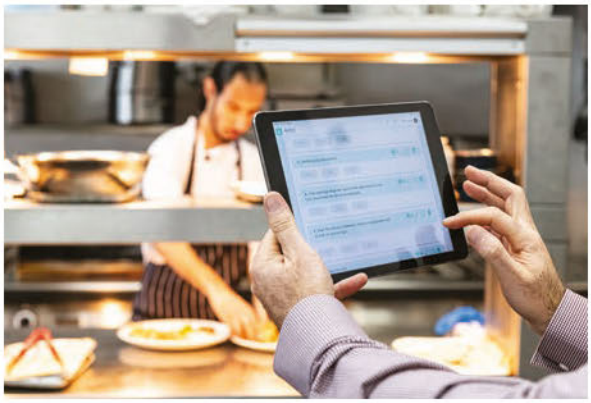
Paul Dickinson is director of food at Fuller's. He says the pause that the Covid-19 lockdown provided was an opportunity for the business to up its game when it came to food safety procedures.

"We had the ability to stop our business, clean up our operations and understand where the opportunities were," he says. "We wanted to focus on efficiency, performance and agility and digital seemed to have the answers. It's something we never thought we'd get into so quickly and although it hasn't been easy, it's been positive."

Fuller's had always used Food Alert to validate its operations. "All the audits were unannounced. You should only be as good as your weakest moment," Dickinson says. But now the business is rolling out an app-based tool to record HACCPs and allergens and moving away from paper.

"It's been really helpful to have a weekly update of the due diligence and safety of our business rather than waiting until the end of an audit to get a paper report," he says. "It's really brought things together and having a digital interface has made it a lot more reassuring that if there's a problem or if you have any concerns, you can manage it.





"Paper is dangerous because it's not live. In Covid times and with Brexit coming, if you're not close enough to the information in your supply chain, you could get caught out."

NUTRITICS

GET YOUR BUSINESS READY FOR NATASHA'S LAW

With major new regulations coming in 2021, food labelling specialist Nutritics summarises what businesses need to do

The UK Food Information Amendment (2019), commonly referred to as Natasha's Law, is driving one of the most significant technology changes facing UK food businesses.

From October 2021 this amendment requires food businesses in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to provide the name of the food and a full ingredient list, with the 14 allergens emphasised, on all foods that are pre-packed for direct sale (PPDS).

Adhering to the new requirement means food businesses offering PPDS items are expected to provide accurate food labelling information that must be updated as new products are listed, recipes changed and when products are substituted by a supplier.

INSTIGATING CHANGE

Damian O'Kelly (pictured) is founder and chief executive of Nutritics, a global leader in nutrition management and food labelling software. He says: "While the law won't come into effect until October 2021, implementation planning will need to commence well in advance of this date to facilitate a smooth transition to this new way of food labelling.

"Operators should consider areas such as how ingredient information is provided to them by their supplier, what happens to this information once it is received, and how it is maintained on food labels across the business."

Nutritics' tips to get your business ready for 2021

1 **Engage with suppliers** Ensure that ingredient information for all the products you buy is readily accessible and up to date.

2 **Review processes** Identify recipes that fall under the new legislation and ensure any seasonal variations are considered (e.g. the Christmas range).

3 **Audit technology** Understand where the gaps are in your current food labelling process

Visit www.natashas-law.com for more information

REDUCING HUMAN ERROR

Human error remains one of the most significant risks to ensuring compliance. Label information can be incorrect or outdated when product updates are not effectively communicated to onsite teams. Additional challenges, such as weekend or seasonal staff printing labels, also present training considerations that require careful management.

HERE TO HELP

Nutritics has created a dedicated food labelling resource that addresses operational and technical queries about the new regulation. Developed in partnership with regulators, industry experts and food law specialists, www.natashas-law.com is a free, one-stop food labelling resource. Businesses can access everything from factsheets on the legislation to steps on getting their business ready, overviews of the software and technology solutions, and implementation training webinars.

"Complying with this legislation is more than just printing a label," says O'Kelly. "Full integration with the rest of the business requires a review of ingredients and handling across almost all areas of production and that will take time. Nutritics is here to help you meet your requirements as seamlessly and cost-effectively as possible."

ARE YOU READY FOR NATASHA'S LAW?

NUTRITICS

DEADLINE

From October 2021, food businesses in England, Wales & Northern Ireland offering pre-packaged items for direct sale must display food labels with full ingredient lists.

GET IN TOUCH

+44 20 3769 5265

info@nutritics.com

WHY CHOOSE LABELMAGIC BY NUTRITICS

Accurate food label software with a fully integrated printing system

- ☑ **Full control** over recipes and labels at point of production
- ☑ **Supports compliance** with a simple centralised system
- ☑ **Reduces human error** with a completely automated process
- ☑ **Real-time updates** of all recipe and label changes
- ☑ **Integrates seamlessly** with new and existing hardware

ENTER A VIRTUAL WORLD OF COMPLIANCE

If the pandemic has taught us anything, being nimble to respond to change is key. And that's where technology has been an enabler.

For hospitality venues, compliance has always been a complex challenge, but nevermore so in the advent of coronavirus.

Part of Food Alert's solution has been its cloud-based safety software, Alert65, which makes a breeze of tackling complicated compliance issues, while confining piles of paperwork to the recycling bin by automating time-consuming manual tasks.

COMPLIANCE MADE EASY

Alert65 helps venues seamlessly manage all your compliance needs across multiple sites from a central location. Everything an operator needs to run and manage a compliant business, from checklists and allergen management to digital HACCP and accident reporting, is accessible via smartphone, tablet or computer.

Consequently, digital safety support tools, such as Alert65, are considered a must-have, rather than a nice to have, in progressive and fully compliant hospitality businesses.

This sentiment is echoed by Urban Leisure Group's operations manager, Hannah Vernon, who said: "Being able to use Alert65 to access all the risk assessment task lists and templates from my home office for all our venues is such a relief and has made my job so much easier during the pandemic.

"It is the essential tool every operator needs, especially at a time when we are evolving our offer with take-away and click and collect options to meet the new trading conditions, as it makes complex compliance easy to manage.

"What I've learned from the Covid situation is that digital and paperless compliance is no longer the future, but the here and now"

"What I've learned from the Covid situation is that digital and paperless compliance is no longer the future, but the here and now."

GOING DIGITAL? A MUST-HAVE

Integrated food safety and health and safety applications and e-learning are nothing new, but what is new is the realisation of how important it is to have this type of software solution as much as it is to have an online order and pay app.

"Compliance has never been the most exciting part of running a hospitality business, but the pandemic has highlighted that it is he most important," suggests Food Alert's managing director David Bashford.

"Operating Covid-safe premises is a legal requirement, and before the November lockdown we were aware of an increase in undercover inspections resulting in heavy fines and even closure. This is where Alert65 comes into its own, with all the correct 'paperwork' hosted in the cloud, so that it can be simply accessed and updated as and when required."

Going digital with your compliance is no longer an option, but a must.

To find out how Food Alert can help make your compliance easy, go to www.foodalert.com or call 020 7244 1900

Food Alert
Food Hygiene • Health & Safety

ALERT65
Plan | Do | Check | Act

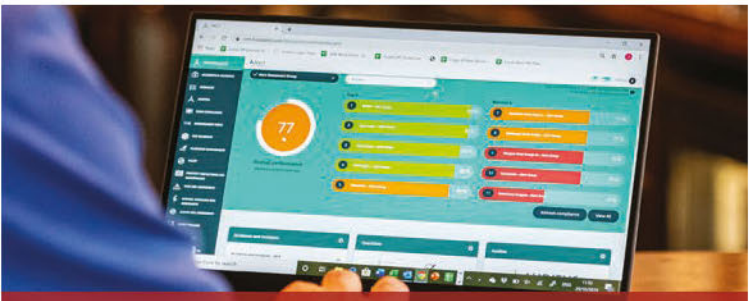
Rise above the cloud and confine your compliance paperwork to the recycling bin with Alert65

Your complete digital Food Hygiene and Health & Safety solution

Why Alert65?

It gives your business the power to easily tackle complex compliance issues, whilst saving time and money.

Covering all aspects of Food Hygiene and Safety, from checklists and allergen management to digital HACCP and accident reporting. All accessible via smartphone, tablet or computer.



Put your business in expert hands and gain back valuable time

Just some of the benefits of Alert65 software includes:

- Automate manual tasks
- Ideal for both smaller, independent businesses and larger, national, and global chains
- Have visibility of compliance across different sites
- Get instant access to your key compliance documents
- Real-time reporting and analytics
- Customise reports to your needs

Book a demo today

call: **020 7244 1900** or email: **enquiries@foodalert.com**

Food Alert

START YOUR ENGINES

Adoption of mobile ordering technology has skyrocketed in 2020, so now the race is on to get the best technology to support the drive to delivery. *Elly Earls* reports

Over the past five years, the adoption of mobile ordering and payment systems has been steadily – if slowly – rising. But over the last five months, that adoption rate has skyrocketed, with both customers and businesses forced to realise the potential of technology to both limit physical interaction between staff and diners on-site and connect them digitally when it's impossible to visit.

Statistics released by Zonal in October revealed that contactless food and drink orders at pubs, bars and restaurants across the UK almost doubled between July (7.3 million) and September (13.5 million), while touchless ordering and payment provider QikServe saw its business grow by 400% in the last six to eight months.

"Customer adoption has been phenomenal as they have seen this as a safer way to interact. They can also still access the same restaurants they accessed before from home," says QikServe founder Daniel Rodgers. "We've crossed the chasm from a digital transformation perspective; the whole consumer mindset has changed. And nothing's going to take that back."

The important thing for hospitality operators to remember now is that mobile ordering has the potential to do much more than meet their pandemic demands. They need to think about how to leverage the benefits that it can bring to their businesses in the longer term.

CREATING NEW REVENUE STREAMS

At QikServe, the biggest growth area in 2020 has been in off-premise ordering – customers ordering food for pick-up, collection or delivery. "This has been one of the key ways the industry has sought to fill the revenue gap," Rodgers says. "And we've made some fundamental changes to our product that have proven really valuable to the industry."

For example, on the online ordering platform, QikServe has introduced a new feature that gives operators the ability to identify a vehicle when it arrives, facilitating a contactless handover experience. The

SHUTTERSTOCK

> "The whole consumer mindset has changed. And nothing's going to take that back"
> **Daniel Rodgers, QikServe**

customer simply opens the boot of their car, which staff recognise due to its registration and colour, the team member puts the food in the back and they drive away.

Adrian Maseda, chief executive and founder of online ordering platform Cheerfy, has also focused this year on helping businesses generate new streams of income. He created the Cheerfy Shop during the first lockdown to help businesses drive sales while they were shut and find ways to generate revenue from audiences who already loved their brands.

"Simply put, it turns a business' existing website into an e-commerce platform allowing it to sell products directly to customers, which could be bags of coffee, branded merchandise or even playlists," Maseda explains.

Businesses can also use it to provide a click and collect and delivery function through their existing website, giving them ownership of the delivery process and autonomy of all of the data that is collected, allowing them to move away from third-party providers and the associated costs.

"While the outlook for hospitality over the next six months is uncertain, what's clear is that operators will need to be dynamic in how they drive sales," Maseda says. "Lockdown proved just how resourceful and creative the industry is, and the ability to pivot, commoditise their brand equity and sell products remotely via an e-commerce platform will be a vital tool in operators' arsenal as they look to drive revenue and negotiate the challenging months ahead."

HOW TO GET PAY-AT-TABLE RIGHT

A new pay-at-table product, which QikServe brought into the market at the beginning of the year, has also proven incredibly popular "Customers can scan a QR code, receive their bill, pay it on their phone and split it with friends. What we've seen is that this has ▶

become a contingency and fall-back for traditional payments," Rodgers explains.

"Restaurants don't want to deal in cash and customers are resistant to touch, so the more we can move onto the customer's own mobile phone the better. We're starting to see adoption rates of digital payment at table of 50%."

The key to success with mobile payment, according to Graham Cornhill, managing director of mobile payment provider Wi-Q, is to give customers options.

"So many solutions just rely on a QR code for guests to gain access, but a good solution will deliver multiple choices of access from QR to SSID [service set identifier], NFC [near-field communication] or URL," he says. "If you want your digital ordering platform to reach everyone, you mustn't fall into the trap of believing everyone understands or uses QR codes."

FIND A SOLUTION WITH LONGEVITY

There's been a deluge of new mobile ordering, click and collect and delivery options in 2020, as well as upgrades and tweaks to existing solutions. The big question many operators are asking is how to sift through the noise and find one that will stand the test of time.

Cornhill says the first question to ask would be 'how long has the supplier been established?' "Solutions that have been developed over just a couple of years will be lacking in experience and product features, let alone critical integrations. Try not to look for solutions that just solve today's pandemic demands; Covid-19 will pass and you will want a solution that has longevity," he advises.

It's also crucial to consider systems integration and how well-suited your latest choice of technology provider is with your existing stack, says George Wetz, chief technology officer at Yumpingo, a digital platform that helps businesses track and optimise their online reputation and guest experience.

"Many IT leaders keep an up-to-date diagram of their stack and integrations, making it easy to visualise dependencies and evaluate where and how new providers will fit in. Be wary of providers that don't offer integrations out of the box or don't show willingness to want to undertake integrations for you – these new technologies need to be a part of an ecosystem that works collaboratively, to provide the best solutions for operators."

Cornhill's advice is to take time out, write down everything you would like the solution to deliver, both today and in the future, and then set that as your criteria. "After all, a good solution should deliver good returns and, in many ways, cost is irrelevant as it is financial return one should focus on," he stresses.

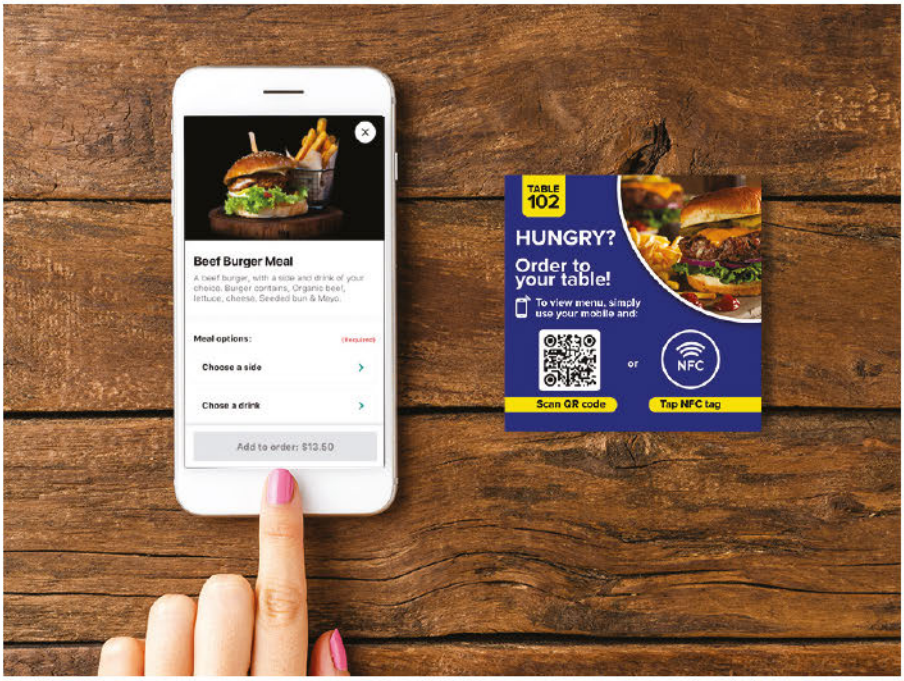
START SMALL, THEN SCALE A SOLUTION

Delivering a credible digital ordering solution can be complicated. If any supplier tells you it isn't, you should probably walk away. As Rodgers explains, "At the beginning of lockdown we were putting up online ordering sites in less than 48 hours. I always say the most important thing anyone can do is take that first step and start, but you have to bear in mind that by taking that approach you're going to have some housekeeping clean-up work to do on the back-end because your operation will need to catch up with the technology."

Nick Liddle, commercial director at digital ordering platform Vita Mojo, stresses that technology cannot solve everything. "Operators shouldn't expect technology to move mountains. It is important to be realistic when managing technology implementation projects; start small, learn and then scale a solution. Put your customer at the centre, and focus on solutions that will create the best experience for customers.

"Trying to do everything at once will actually achieve less. Unfortunately, you can't just

QikServe goes to Legoland



Merlin Entertainments has partnered with QikServe to bring digital ordering and kiosk solutions to guests visiting its resorts, including order-to-table, kiosks and order ahead. Hotel guests can also make use of a new order-to-room service.

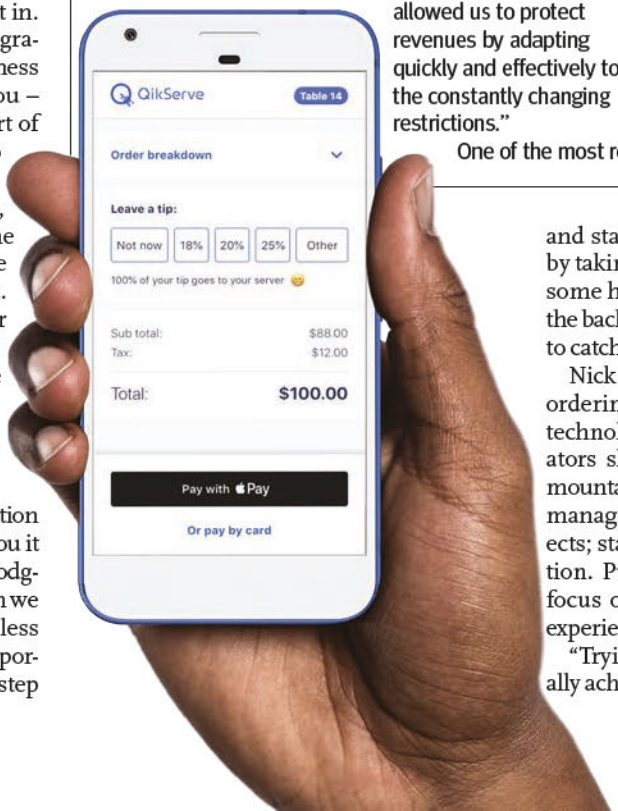
The new technology is already available at resorts including Alton Towers, Chessington World of Adventures and Legoland Windsor in the UK, with plans under way for further implementations at Legoland California, Florida, Heide Park and Thorpe Park.

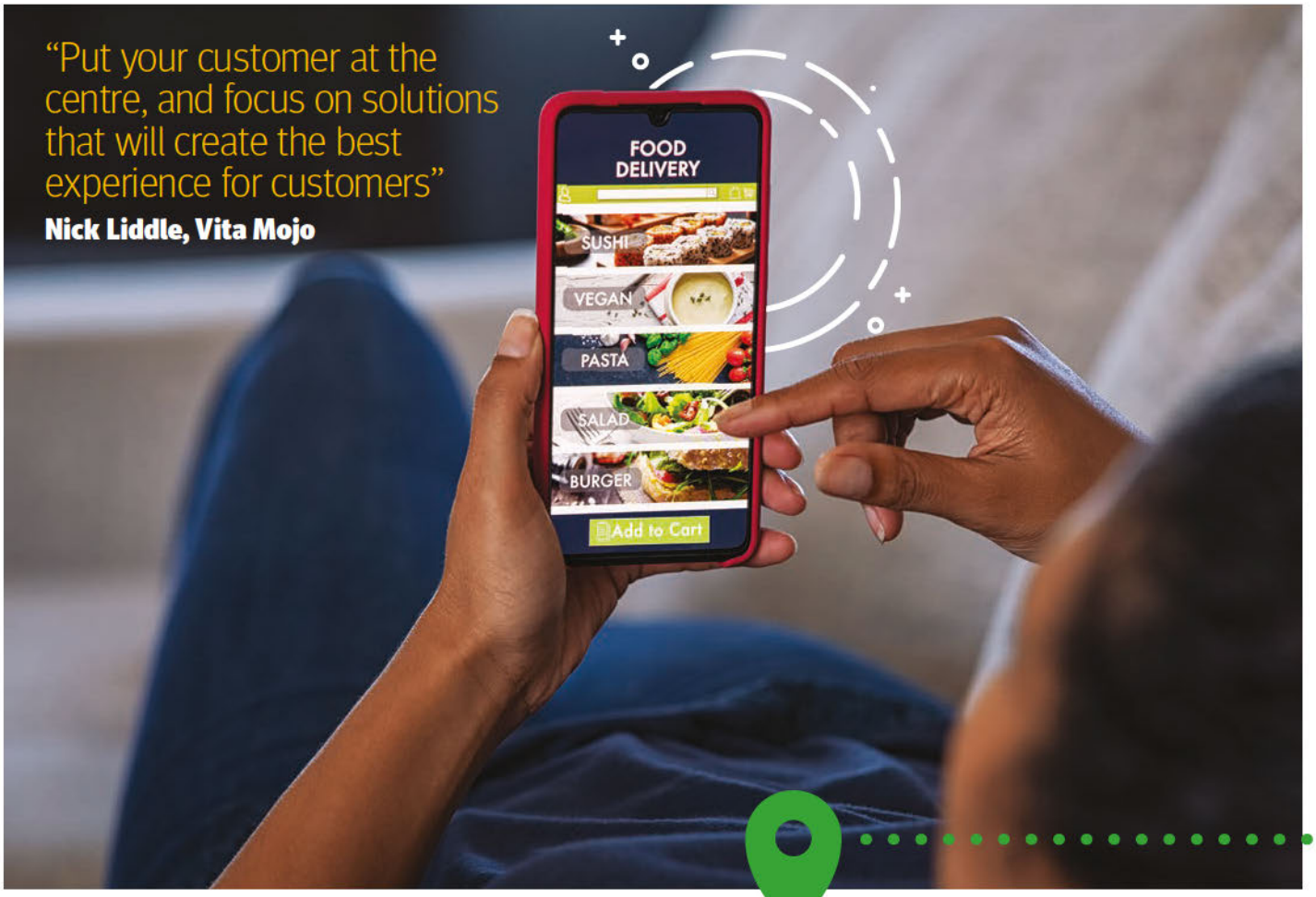
Simon Nathan, head of project delivery at Merlin Entertainments, says: "The safety of our staff and guests is always our top priority. By allowing guests to use their own phones to order food and drink throughout our resorts means we can reduce physical touchpoints and make social distancing a little easier for everyone.

"Digital ordering has been a key part of our guest experience well before the pandemic, but it has also allowed us to protect revenues by adapting quickly and effectively to the constantly changing restrictions."

One of the most recent installations is at the Zafari Bar & Grill in the Chessington Safari hotel at Chessington World of Adventures Resort. There, guests use their mobile devices within the restaurant to scan a barcode and open a digital menu on their phones. They then enter their table number, select their order and pay – all in a safe interaction.

Daniel Rodgers, founder and president of QikServe, says: "Merlin Entertainments is giving guests the power to choose their ordering journey and at the same time, benefitting from detailed customer data collected with each placed order; this will serve to enhance personalisation in its customer marketing."





"Put your customer at the centre, and focus on solutions that will create the best experience for customers"

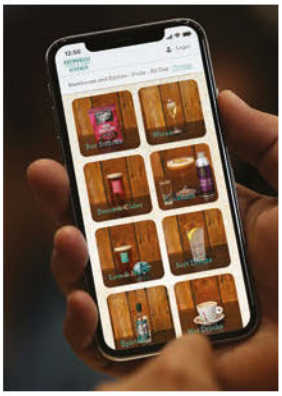
Nick Liddle, Vita Mojo

Vita Mojo helps businesses embrace digital evolution

Digital ordering platform Vita Mojo offers mobile order and pay, click and collect, delivery and POS, all integrated with operators' back of house systems, and has been a key partner in Brewhouse & Kitchen's transformation into a digitally enabled pub group.

"Brewhouse & Kitchen is adapting and changing," says chief executive Kris Gumbrell. "Opening up new sales channels, bringing to life our digital brand, substantially increasing our average order value and transforming our customer experience."

As for many operators, the push towards going digital in 2020 has proven the benefits these systems can bring.



"There is no question about it, technology will continue to become established within the hospitality sector," says Vita Mojo's commercial director Nick Liddle. "Mobile ordering will be the gateway to the rise of the digital consumer; engaged and loyal to your brand.

"Businesses will be able to track behaviour across digital channels, reward, seek feedback and promote in a targeted way. Those hospitality businesses offering the best digital experiences will thrive, in the same way those with the best food, service and physical locations champion the sector."

In the meantime, Gumbrell says working with Vita Mojo has brought immediate value to the business. "They've been such an important partner over the last three months," he concludes.

switch a button to make it all work; technical integrations with different partners will need work, care and attention. However, committing the correct level of resource to deal with the project will guarantee greater chances of success. Getting your staff on board early in the process so they can see what's in it for them and how it impacts their role is also key."

THE RISE OF THE DIGITAL CONSUMER

For Rodgers, while 2020 has been – and continues to be – an incredibly difficult time for the hospitality industry, there are certainly some positives to be taken.

"It's a huge opportunity. The industry will come out much stronger because of the opportunity that digital will afford in terms of knowing and engaging customers."

Indeed, one of the most important long-term benefits mobile ordering technology can bring a business lies in the data it can collect about consumer preferences, which can then be used to personalise each guest's experience.

As Cornhill explains: "There is the assumption that mobile ordering can prevent a personalised service – in fact, the opposite is true. Through technology like Wi-Q, you have access to customer insights that can prompt them with a menu choice they might like at a particular time of day, or even tailor menus and payment types to cultural preferences based on language selection."

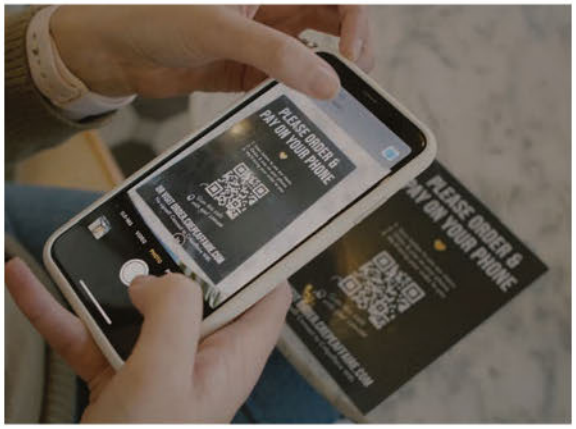
Wetz agrees: "As we get through this pandemic, a guest using their smartphone to check-in, review the menu, order, pay and review will no longer be about safety and much more about providing guests with options for digital engagement to enhance their dining experience.

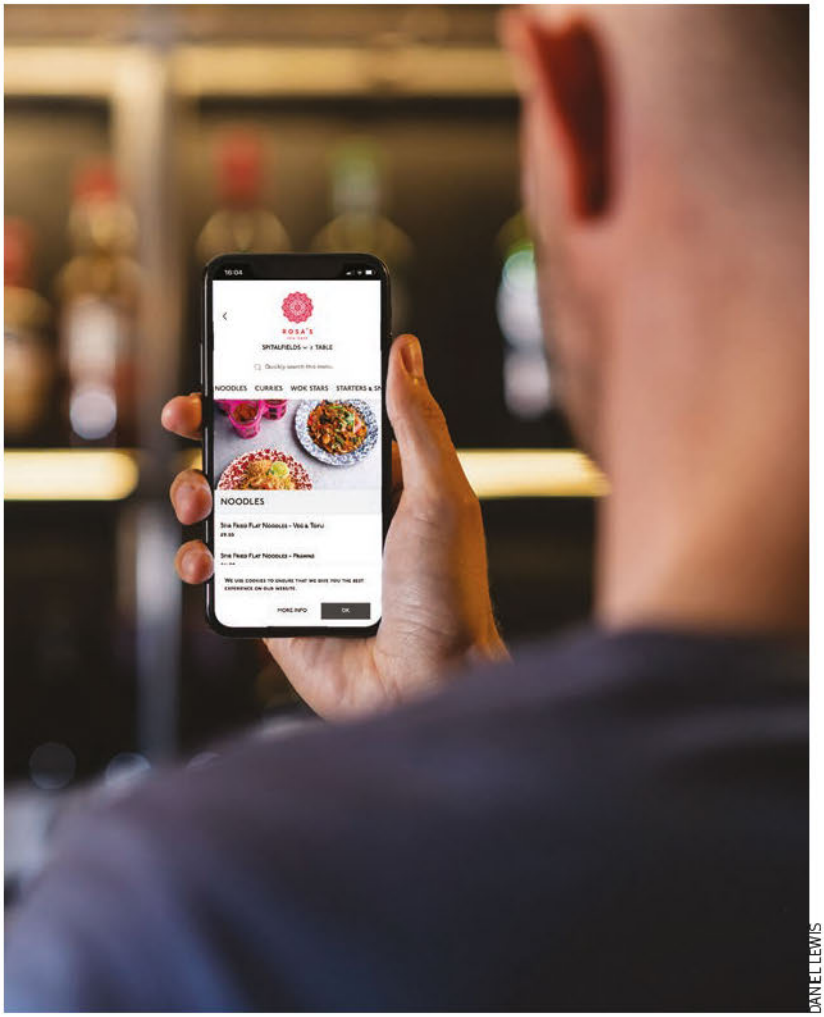
"Due to Covid, this has been either driven by the need for contactless to support safety measures, but many operators have also been driven by the longer-term benefits of reduced front-of-house costs, faster table turn times and the ability to capture data, enabled by self-checkout. This was a trend we thought would take another two to three years, but Covid has made it seemingly happen overnight."

Once the dust settles, the next task will be looking at how we take personalisation to the next level. And what data and information do we need about guests to enable it? "Some operators are already thinking about this, but most aren't. It will be a key differentiator of the future," he concludes.

THE RESTAURANT OF THE FUTURE WILL RELY ON MOBILE ORDER & PAY

Why the growth in mobile ordering will continue long beyond the pandemic





DANIEL LEWIS

Consumers have demanded quick, instant payments in hospitality for a while. Now, new payment habits born during the pandemic have forever changed their expectations, and mobile Order & Pay has already reached penetration levels not expected until 2023[1].

Gavin Peters, chief marketing officer of Wi5, says: "While the future is uncertain, If you couple rising demand with the need for operators to manage inefficiencies, what we do know is mobile ordering is here to stay,"

Recently, the versatility of mobile ordering has proven to be a lifeline for operators, allowing them to adapt to ever-changing measures and restrictions and implementing new revenue streams. But as well as playing such a crucial role in helping businesses survive the crisis, the shift to mobile we're now seeing will have a major long-term impact. "There's a huge opportunity for businesses who put mobile at the core of their proposition to stand out and thrive, long beyond the pandemic," Gavin says. "As mobile becomes a ubiquitous ordering channel, the data created will enable hospitality to finally catch up with the retail sector in terms of deep customer insights and the ability to act upon that information in an agile and personalised way. Rather than relying on isolated transaction data without context, mobile offers the potential for operators to understand who is buying what products, when and why, powering the customer experience in previously unrealised ways," he continues.

> "Mobile offers the potential for operators to understand who is buying what products, when and why"

In this current climate, the convenience of mobile ordering is such that Wi5's operators benefit from significant uplifts of around 30% on average spend versus traditional ordering. With a first-class support team on-hand every step of the way, Wi5 is easy to set up and manage. What's more, the company has invested significant time and resources integrating with leading Epos systems.

"This integration ensures a genuinely reliable solution for both teams and customers", Gavin explains. "The integration is quick to set up, with menus synched with those in the till, with all orders going to one place. There's no need to invest in additional hardware or staff training as, operationally, there's little to no change to existing processes."

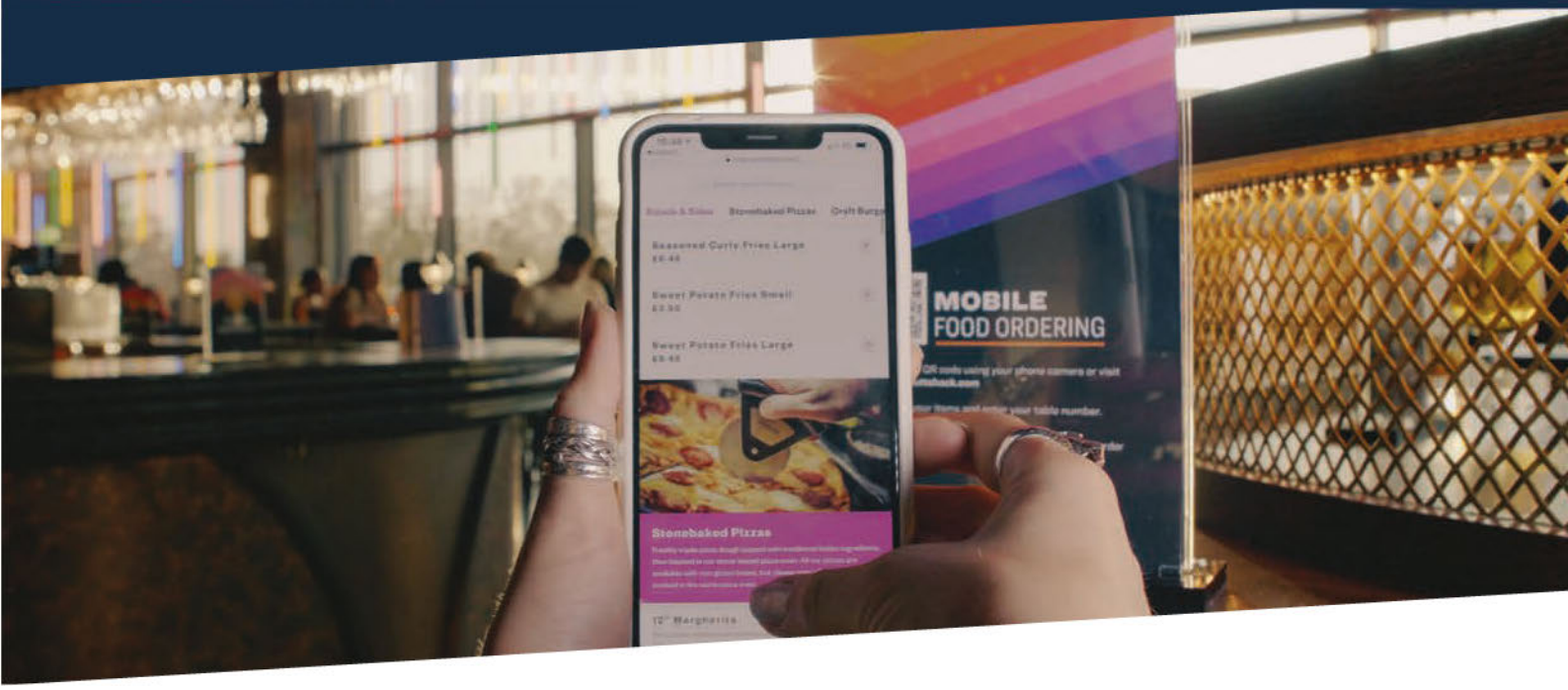
Wi5 has removed all set up and subscription fees, providing the best-in-class solution for just a low transaction fee per order, with everything included. With clear immediate and long-term benefits, there's never been a better time to embrace the opportunities mobile Order & Pay will bring.

[1] BUSINESS INSIDER, *MOBILE ORDER AHEAD & DELIVERY REPORT*

Wi5

Wi5

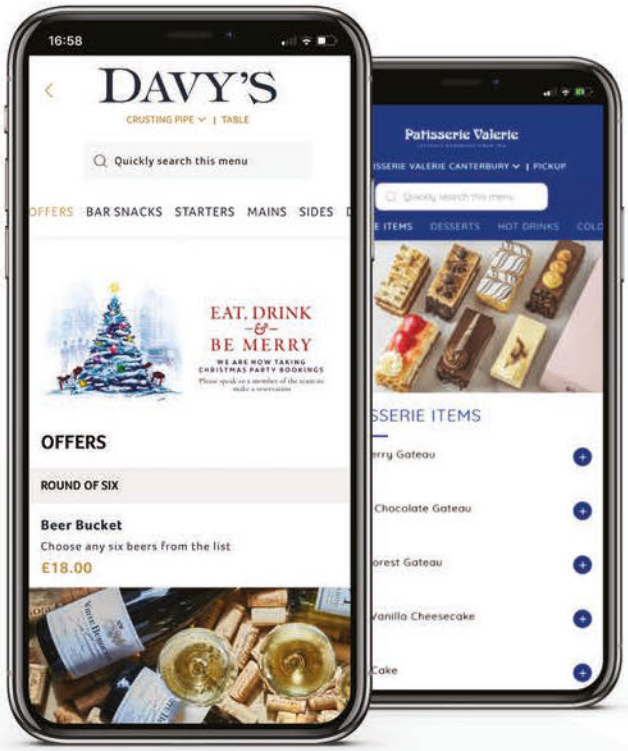
The mobile Order & Pay solution your business can depend on



In these uncertain times, what *is* certain is that you need your operations to run like clockwork.

As you continually strive to innovate and adapt your business to serve your customers you need a mobile ordering solution you can depend on. Designed to be intuitive and easy to use, Wi5 offers the highest levels of security and reliability on the market. Our first-class client support team is on hand to help operators every step of the way, from set up through to ongoing advice.

A tried and tested solution relied upon by leaders in hospitality, from well-known brands to innovative SMEs, with Wi5, you'll have confidence you're providing the best mobile Order & Pay experience for both your staff and customers.



Our friendly team are ready to take your call

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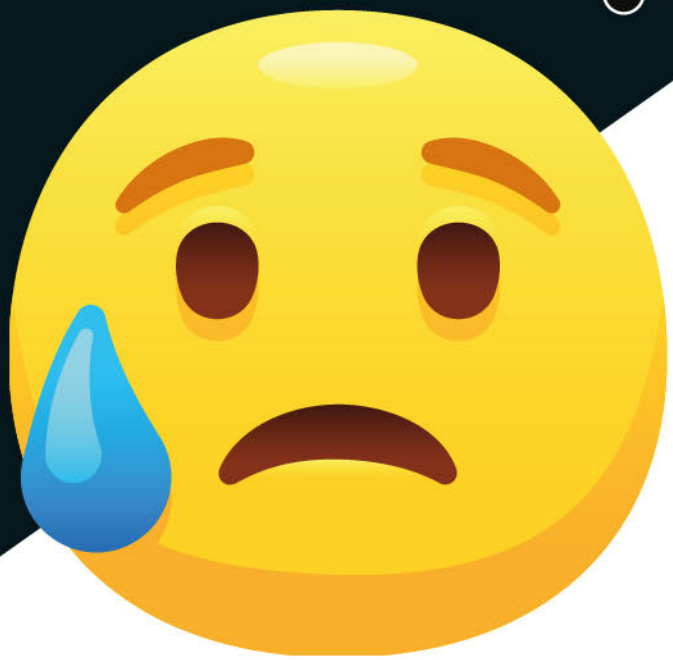
wi5.io

TURN A NEGATIVE INTO A POSITIVE

Online reviews can have a significant impact on your hospitality business, but you can now access better tools to manage your reputation and even turn bad feedback to your advantage. The question is, where should you focus your energies? *Rosalind Mullen* reports



SHUTTERSTOCK

> "Having no online presence is potentially worse than having negative reviews"
> **Simon Wadsworth, Igniyte**

Your hotel and restaurant guests are firing out feedback about you through countless online channels, including booking sites, social media, blogs, review sites and forums. How you handle both good and bad reviews has been proved to be crucial, but with Covid-19 disrupting business and putting the squeeze on customer expectations, your reputation management strategy is more important than ever.

"When researching holidays, hotels or new restaurants, one of the first things people do is look for reviews, as 85% of people trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations," says Simon Wadsworth, co-founder of reputation management company Igniyte. "Positive reviews showcase, for instance, good customer service, the quality of the hotel room and restaurant food. These are vital when trying to attract new customers, especially when 90% of people read reviews before deciding to visit a business."

This chimes with a Harvard Business School study of Yelp, which found that a one-star increase in customer ratings resulted in a 5%-9% boost in revenue. Meanwhile, white papers published by digital marketing specialist Virtual Solutions claim that for every one person that leaves negative feedback, some 26 will simply leave and never come back – plus, they'll tell their friends.

So apart from sharpening up your customer care, what should hotel and restaurant owners concentrate on to take advantage of online reviews and manage any negative comment?

A good place to start is to identify, claim and enhance your profile on the most popular review sites – TripAdvisor, Google My Business, Facebook and so on. This will allow you to respond to reviews, update photos, and edit your business and direct contact information to drive traffic to your site.

Then, take a critical look at what people are saying about your business, so that you can identify and address underlying problems.

"Review sites offer a chance for customers to say what they really think. You should keep an eye out for reoccurring trends that will help you deal with any operational issues," says Wadsworth.

Virtual Solutions Global founder and chief executive Dawn Gribble agrees: "Google My Business is the first place where operators should make sure they've got their listing claimed, because your review rating affects the search engine results. If your website is well configured, a Knowledge Graph will come up and, if people are using Google Maps, your star number or review rating is going to come up, too."

Gribble, whose company provides a range of digital services, including reputation and social media management, adds: "Obviously, TripAdvisor and Facebook should be monitored, too. I recommend [that] brands set up social listening. They can monitor what is being said about them by setting up alerts using brand-related keywords and phrases. Twitter is one of the best places to set up social ▶

listening tools. It doesn't have a review system, but you can search for mentions of your brand. And because it's a real-time environment, you can use it to understand how your guests feel about your brand, now."

DAILY TASKS

With consumers placing so much value on reviews, it's in your interest to make time every day to check in with those channels and gauge how you are performing.

James Bishop, senior director for global demand partnerships at online hotel guest acquisition platform SiteMinder, says: "The best feedback is from your direct guests, but the likes of Booking.com and Expedia actively collect reviews from guests they have sent to a hotel. The important thing a hotelier needs to do is to be able to respond to those reviews – both positive and negative.

"A small, independent hotel without a marketing team will struggle to do that on a day-to-day basis, but there are tools that can help. The most important thing is getting the data to those tools so that it makes their life easier."

Siteminder, for instance, has launched the Hotel App Store, which allows hotels and hotel chains to share data with trusted technology partners, ranging from revenue and guest review management tools, such as Revinate and ReviewFilter, to upselling and guest messaging apps through a single interface such as SiteMinder's channel manager or one of its supported property management systems (PMS).

"Guest sentiment is important," says Bishop. "The apps scan and read reviews and pick up positive and negative trends. It flags up to the hotel which ones they need to respond to and also tracks if its reputation is going up or down, which is important in today's environment. Guests have changed a lot in terms of what they expect from a hotel – especially from the perspective of health and cleanliness" (*see panel*).

Companies that collect reviews on behalf of a hotel make it easy for the guest, too. For instance, if the guest booked through Booking.com, they will get a simple email prompting them to rate their experience from one to 10. It might lead them on to another page to get more detail, but only if they have time.

REAL-TIME FEEDBACK

You can also manage your reviews in real-time by integrating review and reputation management tools into your Twitter, Instagram and Facebook accounts that monitor if guests mention you or tag your location.

"If the guest says 'I am at X hotel and have waited 45 minutes for a pizza' it will alert the front desk and you can respond while the guest is there. Some PMSs build that into their platform to constantly monitor social media," says Bishop.

TripAdvisor recently launched Reputation Pro, a review monitoring tool that tracks reviews on, for instance, TripAdvisor, Google

Reputation management in a nutshell

- Use a review and reputation management platform to glean feedback and help you monitor and respond to guest comments, improve your online image, connect with customers and reduce the potential fallout from negative social media content.
- Take ownership of your online profiles.
- Make sure the platform you use is connected to as much data as possible by linking it with your channel manager or PMS.
- Engage with reviewers quickly and respond to any unhappy customers with professionalism and empathy – then take the discussion offline.
- Use negative feedback to identify and address underlying problems.
- If necessary, seek to get unsubstantiated and damaging online content removed.

The big issues for guests in 2021

Unsurprisingly, guest expectations are changing due to the disruptions and fear around Covid-19. This will change how a business is reviewed.

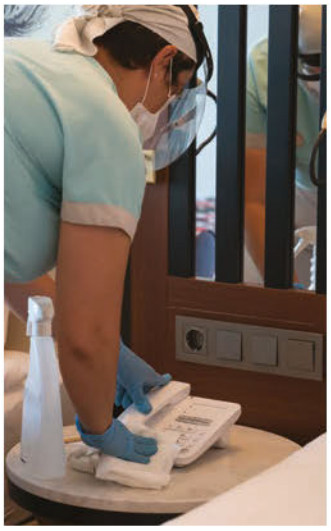
James Bishop at SiteMinder says: "We are seeing more people reviewing cleanliness aspects due to Covid-19, and another behavioural change is the type of place guests are booking. We've seen an increase in the number of private homes being booked, but that is levelling out now."

Virtual Solutions' Dawn Gribble agrees: "Coronavirus has made a dramatic psychological impact, and safety and hygiene is playing more of a part in the decision-making process."

Gribble, who predicts the leisure market won't come back as it was until at least Q3/Q4 of 2021, adds that a lot will depend on a Covid-19 vaccine.

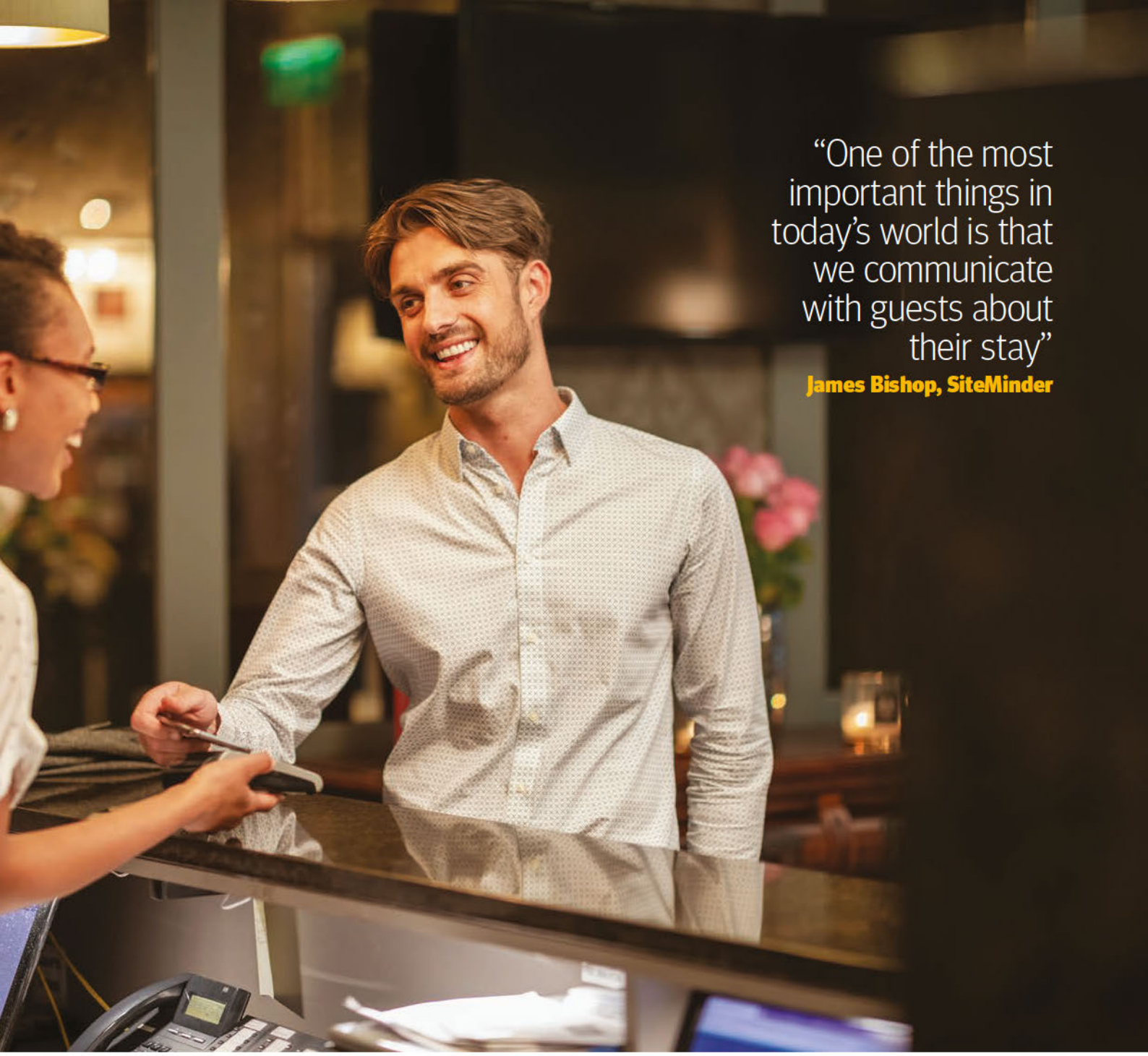
"People are scared, and that needs to be recognised," she says. "Operators need to 'know' their guests. If you've got buyer personas set up, you need to re-evaluate them – unfortunately, you'll find some people will react by lashing out at serving staff, others will want as little to do with staff as possible, and some won't even want to travel."

So, one way to ensure you get good reviews is to train your staff in how guests today might react.



"If you enable your team to handle outbursts, it's going to put less stress on them and the guests. Mental health is going to play a huge role as well as making sure that safety, security and hygiene issues are addressed. These issues are going to be huge in 2021," explains Gribble.

Your website also needs to offer reassurance. Ensure that your guests can see information on the current Covid-19 status in your location and what you are doing to be Covid-compliant. You can also update your Covid-19 status on other booking channels such as Booking.com.



"One of the most important things in today's world is that we communicate with guests about their stay"
James Bishop, SiteMinder

and Facebook. It notifies hoteliers of new reviews and allows them to respond directly from the dashboard. Reviews are also qualitatively evaluated, providing sentiment analysis and identifying specific aspects of the guest experience that are driving positive or negative feedback, such as staff, pricing, food quality and parking.

Once you have collected the information, it is important you respond to any negative issues quickly as prospective guests tend to read reviews from guests who stayed in the past two weeks. By doing this you can demonstrate to the future guest that the hotel is responsive, that similar problems don't recur every week, and that you are trying to resolve any issue.

"You also need to try to take the discussion offline," says Bishop. "So if you get a negative remark, respond with a positive message and say you would love the opportunity to talk more on direct messenger or by phone."

He adds: "It shouldn't feel like another task, it should be part of your strategy to manage your reputation across multiple channels as well as have a goal around increasing scores and making someone responsible for it."

In fact, Wadsworth argues that you should embrace reviews: "When a customer searches for your restaurant or hotel and finds no reviews or social media, it effectively makes you invisible. Having no online presence is potentially worse than having negative reviews."

He adds: "Encourage customers to leave reviews. Think about putting a call to action in your restaurant to prompt people to leave honest reviews, and thank customers who do. Deal with any negative reviews promptly and use them as opportunities to address any issues publicly. Be understanding and try to make the situation right for the customer."

Negative reviews can also be helpful in reflecting areas of your business that need improvement. As Gribble says: "Some customers simply want to have a rant, whereas others may have a legitimate complaint, so it's important to assess and weigh the value of the feedback you're getting."

She says the best way to head off negativity is to "know your values and stick to them – the public aren't stupid; they'll know how to recognise real comments and those that aren't".

Reputation management is also about maximising your positive reviews. It's important to thank positive reviewers, which will help to increase positive sentiment, build confidence and rapport with your guests, and enhance your reputation.

You can also use customer relationship management (CRM) programmes, such as Guestfolio, which helps you to communicate with guests. "One of the most important things in today's world is that we communicate with guests about their stay," says Bishop.

"For instance, from a Covid-19 compliance perspective, you can put out messages such as 'don't forget we require masks' and 'this is a list of things we have changed to ensure your stay is safe'. Doing that communication sets up expectations. If you don't manage expectations, you are setting yourself up for negative reviews."

SPREADING THE POWER OF POSITIVE REVIEWS

Share your business with millions of app users and their online network

The power of the negative review is clear; just four negative reviews can cost a company 70% of potential customers. Not only do recommendation platforms unfairly destroy businesses' reputations, they often exploit their user's data and, according to Trustpilot, 80% of users think that online reviews are not authentic.

"A negative review will always be damaging. Once you get a bad review you can't do anything about it unless you spend a great deal of time requesting its removal," says Tom Aikens, acclaimed British chef and TWISPER ambassador.

Created by professionals in the hospitality and gastronomy industry, TWISPER is unique in the market as the first platform with only positive recommendations. The ability to only share positive experiences means the app's entire UX leaves negativity at the door. For a fixed and transparent subscription price, TWISPER Business gives professionals the keys to unlock the power of digital word of mouth.

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TWISPER BUSINESS FEATURES

- 0% commission Booking Button
- Tools to enhance your online presence
- Listings Manager that simultaneously updates 20+ of your online listings in just one click including Google, Facebook and TripAdvisor.
- Automated customer engagement tools
- Real-time statistics on your business performance

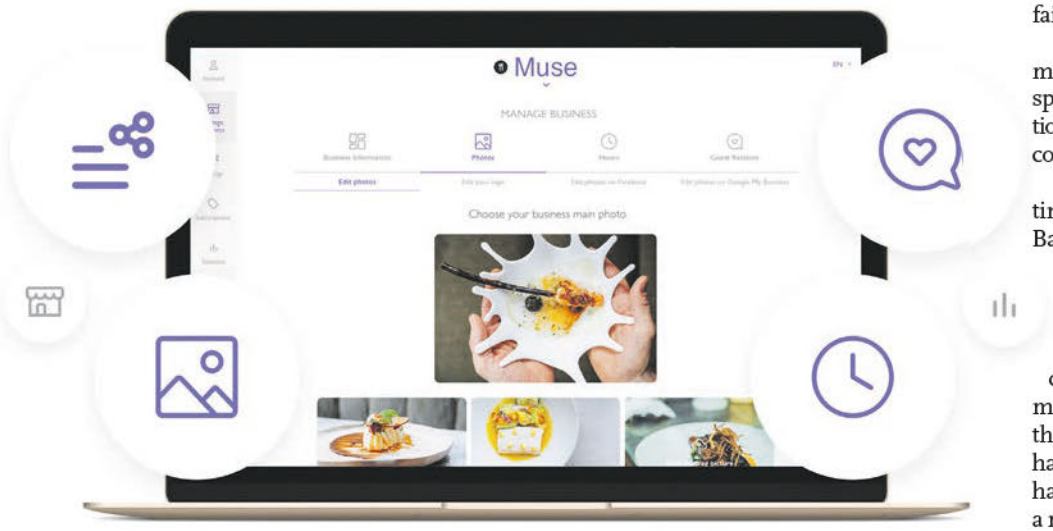
In a year that has been incredibly difficult, our community of 1.5 million users, including Michelin-starred chefs, award-winning bartenders, *easyJet Traveller*, *National Geographic Traveller UK*, and *Time Out London* supports the businesses they love by leaving positive recommendations of the places they enjoy.

Using TWISPER Business for his new restaurant Muse in London's Belgravia, Tom Aikens has discovered that "the great thing about TWISPER being centered on sharing positive recommendations, is that it keeps the fun and experiential side of visiting somewhere or eating out at the heart. It brings back fairness and positivity to hospitality."

Statistically, for each person who recommends you, 67% of their network are likely to spend money at your business. A recommendation on TWISPER creates a snowball effect that converts friends of friends into new customers.

"Hospitality needs positivity at this crucial time," states Matthew Jones of Bread Ahead Bakery and School, London. The need for trust and security is determining consumers' purchasing decisions.

Positive word of mouth does what traditional reviews fail to: it provides a personal connection to a business that reassures and motivates customers to spend money with them. As we look towards 2021, negativity has no place in hospitality. If the last months have taught us anything, now is the time for a refreshed and positive outlook.



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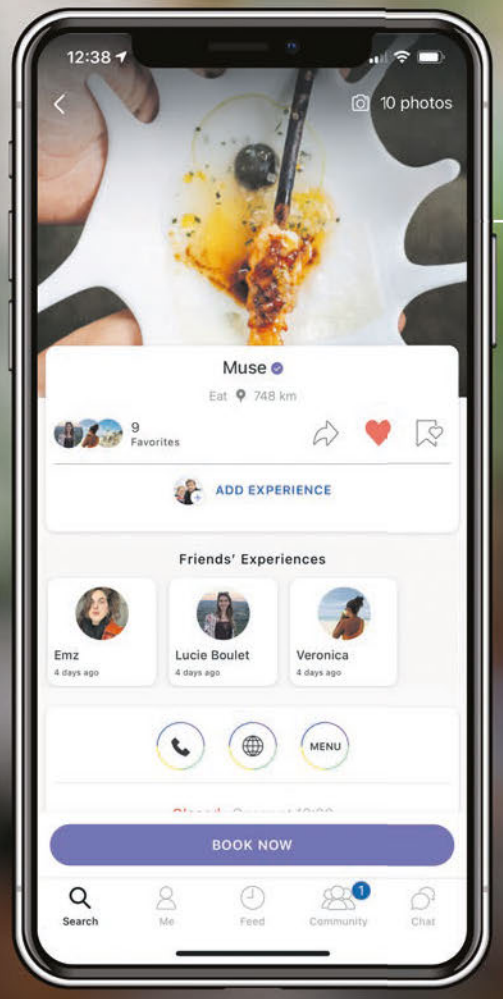
Position Yourself For Growth in 2021



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