



Foodservice Technology SOLUTIONS

Looking at new computer systems?

by Mike Tash

Are you in the process of looking at a new computer system? Regardless of whether you are looking at a system for your office or restaurant, there are a couple of things you should keep in mind when installing systems that will help run your operations and store all of your critical data.

1. Network cabling. The majority of systems are PC-based, designed to run on Microsoft Windows technology. This means that the workstations and periph-

erals most likely will communicate over standard Ethernet networking. Even though wireless communications have become increasingly popular for home and office environments, the preferred method is to "hardwire" as many of the stations as possible. Some vendors include this service in their bid; others specify that cabling must be contracted through a third-party vendor.



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Regardless of who does the cabling, it will need to be completed and tested before installation of the equipment. Each piece of equipment will require a cable drop. A drop is considered a cable that runs from a remote

printer or workstation back to the networking source such as a patch panel in the mechanical room or office.

For POS systems, the restaurant should be wired with CAT 5 or 6 network cabling that runs from every conceivable POS workstation, remote printer or KDS, office computer, hostess station, delivery order desks, cashier stations and network server to a "home run" area such as a central patch panel, preferably located in your telephone or electrical room or closet. Cabling routes need to ensure that cables are at least 24 inches from fluorescent fixtures, neon transformers and electrical motors, as these devices can cause communications interference.

2. Electrical. Install dedicated and isolated circuits that all of your POS, computers, network devices such as hubs and routers, and phone systems can share. No other electrical equipment should be on this circuitry. Preferably, your network, phone, and electrical service will be near one another. An isolated circuit means that the circuit has a ground separate from that of the main electrical service. This helps to prevent spikes and surges that can damage motherboards and hard drives. Note, however, that you'll still want to use surge protectors at each workstation.

3. Properly designed workspace.

When designing workstation areas, be sure to leave enough space to comfortably fit the equipment needed there. Tabletop space for server stations should be large enough to hold a computer monitor, guest check printer, and possibly a credit card terminal if you plan to use separate credit card equipment. There should be enough space directly underneath the tabletop to hold the computer, surge protector, power strip and a battery backup (UPS).

If you plan to place your workstations on millwork surfaces such as granite or woodwork, you'll want to have your contractor pre-drill holes if needed to run cables or power cords beneath the surface. A 2-inch hole should give sufficient space for cords and cables on most POS systems.

For cashier and bartender stations, the tabletop space should also be large enough to fit a cash drawer and an order confirmation customer display. Most cash drawers have a footprint (space requirement) of 15- to 17-inch depth; 16- to 20-inch width; and 3.5- to 4-inch height. Be sure to get the drawer specifications from your supplier in advance if you are building a custom countertop so that the drawer is recessed into or underneath the counter.

4. Service Plans. Most vendors will offer some type of service plan as part of your original purchase. The fact is, business grade systems are composed of hardware that will not last forever especially in a restaurant environment. Printers will eventually break, fans will fail, and hard drives will crash. How often is dependent upon the conditions under which they operate. Dirt, dust, heat and moisture are not friendly allies to office and POS equipment.

I've seen some systems that rarely experience problems while others deal with them constantly. The best thing an operator can do is to invest in good equipment and then protect that investment by maintaining it. Many POS providers will offer ongoing service agreements that are basically extended warranties. The annual cost for these services usually ranges anywhere from 10 percent to 20 percent of the original purchase price.

Computer systems represent a sizable investment. But if you dedicate the time and planning required to properly put in place and maintain the system, you are more apt to be rewarded a return on your investment by getting the most from your system in cost reduction, labor savings, and ensuring that you can account for all cash.



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