

Food Industry

Needs, issues driving foodservice technology glimpsed in confab attendees' participation strategies, 'to do' lists and observations

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When Levy Restaurants' director of information systems, Craig Dooley, says he is attending the International Foodservice Technology Exposition for the "experience," he means other peoples' experience.

In foodservice, "where there is such a strong tie to brick and mortar, and the leap to digital [applications] is not always obvious," information technology professionals are constantly on the prowl for "the next best thing," Dooley observes in commenting on the FS/TEC conference, which will be held Oct. 27-30 in Orlando, Fla.

FS/TEC, hosted by Nation's Restaurant News, offers networking opportunities and educational sessions that are valuable because "some of the companies out here have crossed that battleground already [in search of cutting-edge solutions] and understand where things are won or lost," Chicago-based IS professional Dooley says.

Regarding the candid exchanges about challenges won and lost that he expects to find at FS/TEC, Dooley adds, "I think it is good for the industry as a whole to move forward on that stuff."

Produced and managed by NRN and Robert N. Grimes of Accuvia, the seventh annual FS/TEC will be held at the Gaylord Palms Resort & Convention Center. This year's

conference will feature more than 30 seminars, panel discussions, general sessions and keynote speeches as well as an exhibit floor showcasing the products and services of 150-plus foodservice technology specialty companies.

If the "to do" lists of several conference attendees are any indication, foodservice companies are looking to hardware, software and service providers to enhance operations, service and margins on a variety of fronts.

Of the areas of technology he plans to explore at the exposition, Levy Restaurants' Dooley says telecommunications is "a particular focus" this year.

"I also want to look to see how things are going with ASPs," or application service providers, the IS director says. "We already use ASPs for some POS and financial applications, so I'm not as interested in the offerings as I am in finding out about other companies' experiences with ASPs."

Larry Beckwith, vice president of information systems for family-restaurant operator Bob Evans Farm Inc. of Columbus, Ohio, says he is attending FS/TEC to see all the available point-of-sale systems in one place. "I can get a better feel for hardware when I can walk back and forth between booths and compare," he explains.

Of newer technologies, or systems new to his company, Beckwith says, "I have an interest in wireless, handheld technology for back-office applications and maybe someday at POS." Beyond that, he will be examining "communication technologies, i.e. walkie-talkie-type products, to be used within the restaurant, say, hostess to manager [or] manager to manager," he explains.

Operator opinion on where valuable information can best be found at FS/TEC differs greatly, with Beckwith and Dooley on different sides of the fence.

"I do not attend the seminars, even though some of them pique my interest," Beckwith says. "I mainly work the showroom looking for ideas to improve Bob Evans' bottom line."

Dooley believes he can wrap up what he needs to accomplish in the exhibit hall in "three or four hours," freeing him up to interact with other operators and do "benchmarking exercises," he says. "Being from a medium-sized company," he adds, "I love to hear what bigger companies are doing."

Molly Fine, vice president of information technology for Delaware North Cos. Inc., says she likes to attend educational sessions that highlight "how other companies are installing technology" and touch on "the issues they are facing and the hurdles they are overcoming."

On the exhibit floor this year, Fine says, she'll be "looking at food-and-beverage back-office functions--recipe management, food inventory and purchasing software, handheld devices and new technologies." In the area of handhelds, she says, Buffalo, N.Y.-based Delaware North is particularly interested in inventory-management and quality-assurance

applications.

"Back office is a tough [technology category]," Fine observes. "We're looking for ideas on how to make the process easier and the data-entry and upkeep less intensive for the unit. We are probably looking at some kind of centralized system that the units access remotely, that is also cost effective."

Back-office systems are also being researched at this year's FS/TEC by Ten Robinson, Metromedia Restaurant Group's senior vice president and chief information officer. MRG is "looking at labor-scheduling options and better tools to manage our recipe process at the support center," she explains.

Plano, Texas-based MRG is the parent of the Bennigan's Irish American Grill & Tavern and Steak and Ale dinner-house chains and Bonanza and Ponderosa steakhouse chains. During the past year it entered into a five-year contract to outsource nearly all of its information technology functions and much of its accounting and finance department workload to Affiliated Computer Services Inc. of Dallas.

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