



What to look for in an online ordering system for your restaurant

By *Tim Sunderland*



Each year, the figures show us what we already know: Take-out is a bigger and bigger part of the pie for more and more eating establishments. But in the last few years another number has become as important. Restaurants are also finding that if they really want to drive that take-out business, online ordering is the ticket.

Orders can be placed, you can up-sell by suggesting additional dishes or dessert specials and payment can be received. The only thing the customer has to do in some cases is come up pick up their meal—or have it delivered to them.

The benefits are there, too. Restaurants that use online ordering report average ticket size is up to 20% larger—often more. Online ordering is so convenient that customers increase their take-out frequency. There is greater accuracy of orders.

But with all selections come questions: What are the features I need to look for in an online service? What are the trends? Is it going to be complicated? Will my employees be able to work with it?

What follows is a list of what you should consider when selecting an online ordering system?

Can the online component be made to look like your website? You have invested a lot of time and capital in developing a website that reflects the brand and personality of your restaurant. When a customer goes onto your online ordering site, you want them to feel this is a logical extension of your website. You want it to be seamless.

The more the online component is integrated into your website, the more you can promote it. If the online ordering component looks like your website and reflects your brand, this also allows you to take greater ownership of it. You can add a message to your customer receipts. You can promote it on signage and table cards and in your menu.

Does it take advantage of social media? Facebook has more than 500 million users. Each of them has an average of 130 friends. The progressive online ordering systems have a Facebook icon on their site that, when clicked, automatically posts on their pages that you just ordered. Some even include a link that lets their friends click it and automatically go to your menu. They can order just as easily.

Is it accessible by mobile media? Conservative estimates peg the number of smartphones (mobile phones that can access the web) at 50 million. If you own one, you know that you quickly start to live your life on it. If you can order from your favorite restaurant on your mobile phone, that's even better. This is a must-have feature.

Think twice about portal-based systems. Portals group a number of restaurants on one website for diners to search and find restaurants based on a variety of criteria. It's typically free for a restaurant to get listed. They simply pay a percentage of each order. It appears to be a good deal. You only pay when you get the business.

But most portals show the same listing for every restaurant, offering no individuality or branding capabilities. It is also hard to control your menu. You may receive an order for a dish you no longer offer, or the price has changed. Finally, the service charge to your restaurant is often steep—as high as 15%. Ouch!

Restaurants with the most successful online ordering businesses use a site-based system with integrated marketing functionality. A custom site can help reap huge rewards if they promote the service to customers. For example, a restaurant in the Seattle area began pushing their online ordering to customers using Twitter, Facebook, store signage and messages on their receipts. Within six months, their online ordering site helped them to almost double their take-out business. Orders roll in every day.

Does the online ordering company take their business seriously? The good online ordering companies are prepared. Their websites—and in turn your website—are hosted on servers in secure co-location sites. There are redundancies and firewalls, so your information is not lost and your site is always functioning.

Review these criteria and make your decision based on it. Online ordering can move your restaurant to another level of business, but the best results will come when you have selected a service that offers the best features. ■

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