

# HOT FOOD *Quiet Kitchen*

## **KDS proves to be beneficial technology in test roll-out**

*By H. Rae Gibbons*

**W**ithin a large chain restaurant such as Applebee's, which has a total of 1,300 stores, it's a difficult task to ensure that all locations are performing up to par. Around November 2000, Applebee's rolled out a test project that involved equipping 23 corporate stores with QSR Automations Inc.'s Kitchen Display System (KDS) 4.0 to aid the restaurants in their effort to remain consistent throughout the chain and help to maintain their high standards.

Recently, Applebee's launched an initiative that stresses "hot food hot" as a reminder to all employees of the importance of serving hot menu items while they're still fresh from the kitchen. The KDS helps with this initiative, as it routes items as they move through the kitchen and displays cook times for kitchen staff to view at a number of stations within the back of the house. Having that information so conveniently displayed makes it easier to manage the kitchen and ensure food standards are being met.

### **Visual tool to track and manage**

Restaurants using printers in the kitchen to display orders have the capability of communicating orders from the front-of-the-house to the back-of-the-house, but don't have the capability to track those orders in a consistent manner that enables them to effectively manage the kitchen. Originally, Applebee's used one printer at the mid-cook station to send back orders. As the orders were printed, the mid-cook would call them

out to the appropriate station. While this system got the job done, it was difficult to trace how long each station was taking to get the food out, including the expeditor, which made it difficult to detect where timing problems might have initiated from.

In order to better track cook times and to pin down any possible timing issues, most Applebee's, including the 23 above-mentioned corporate locations, moved to a three-printer system. The three-printer system routes items to their designated station in the kitchen, with one at each cook station. In addition, most sites have another printer set up at the expeditor station.

In migrating the 23 test stores to QSR Automation's KDS, Applebee's hoped to go beyond the printer and into a system that would not only communicate orders to the kitchen, but also improve kitchen management, pinpoint cook times and provide an easy-to-follow visual of the preparation stage of every ticket in the kitchen.

The test stores are equipped with three monitors on the cook's line, and one monitor and one printer at the expeditor station. All food items ordered and their prep status are displayed at the expeditor station. At the other three stations, kitchen staff view only the items that need prepared at their station, making the screen easy to read and organizing staff efforts. When all of the items for a particular ticket have been bumped off, the ticket turns blue on the expeditor's monitor. That

completed ticket moves to the front of the line on the monitor, and a ticket is printed so the runner knows to get the food to the table.

### **Getting organized**

Since implementing the KDS, the kitchens at Applebee's have experienced a significant shift in atmosphere from a noisy, bustling scene to a quieter, more organized one. Previously, the mid-cook called out the orders that came in to the one printer, creating a very loud kitchen. Joseph Vagher, the senior manager of operations services for Applebee's and project manager for the KDS roll out, says that because all of the information is now displayed on the KDS, it's very quiet at the test stores. "Paper isn't all over the floor, and the expeditor window isn't crowded with entrees. It's nice," he adds.

### **Beneficial automation**

QSR Automation's KDS includes a delay feature that sends items to the appropriate monitor at staggered times so that all the items come up in the expeditor window simultaneously. Vagher offers the example that a well-done steak would be displayed on the monitor at the broiler station before chicken fingers would be displayed on the fryer station monitor so the food comes up together, helping to ensure the "hot food hot" initiative.

The information that can be garnered from a glance at the screen is also very helpful in managing the

kitchen, according to Vagher. He says, “It’s very easy to manage the kitchen without having to go back on the line because the manager can do it right from the expediter position. The information you can get from the expediter screen allows you to see what items have been dropped, and what your lead tickets are.”

Vagher goes on to say that there are reports that can be run using the software that are helpful in managing the kitchen as well. “You can look at information such as how long any one item spends in the expediter window. We can also look at the time from when the last item was bumped from the system to when the expediter actually bumped it off their monitor — that tells us how quick our expeditors are. Also, over the course of an item being sent to the kitchen, we can find out what its average time spent in the window is or the total cook time for that item.”

### **Each step a learning process**

This information is not only useful to the manager, but also benefits the back of the house. The system offers managers a means by which to measure the performance of back-of-the-house employees, and therefore provides an

opportunity for incentives such as contests and promotions based on their performance measures.

Vagher is currently working on presenting the data he has gathered from this test installation to an executive committee at Applebee’s, so they can decide whether to implement the KDS at all locations. As project manager, Vagher has had to take on an unbiased position toward the project, but does say that operators love the system and want it in their stores. The QSR Automations’ single solution KDS that Applebee’s is using includes a software/hardware combination, and consists of the following:

- ePic Ethernet video controller — Communicates via 10Mbps Ethernet;
- KP-2200 PS/2 keypad — Used as a bump bar; and
- KDS 4.0 software solution — A suite of applications consisting of the KDS, KDS Console and KDS Builder Pro.

Applebee’s rolled the KDS out in stages: The initial hardware set-up for equipment, such as the brackets that mount into the wall, was outsourced. After that, NCR, which provided the terminals, went to the stores to install

the monitors and ensure the systems were working. The next step was a software download.

According to Vagher, from the time the hardware was set up to the time the system went live was approximately one week. But because it was a test, Vagher did experience some bumps along the way. He did not have the IT resources available to him that normally would be present during an installation, so he has done some troubleshooting during the installations.

Vagher says that initially the monitor brackets were mounted too high and the expediter monitors were facing the wrong direction. In addition, Vagher has found that downloading KDS cook times for any new items or new campaigns has not been a smooth process.

On the whole, though, Vagher says the KDS is a good system and that aside from tracking cook times and ensuring that the “hot food hot” initiative is followed through, it is a helpful system for the restaurant operators. He adds that one operator who transferred from a store that was using a KDS to one that wasn’t equipped with one was very upset because she had become so reliant on the system. **FCS**