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How Adopting Technology Helped Restaurants Survive and Thrive During the Pandemic

Restaurants and other hospitality businesses were among the hardest hit during the pandemic, and even as infection and hospitalization rates wane, many consumers are hesitant about returning to their pre-pandemic activities. Despite these challenges, businesses have managed to survive and thrive with the help of innovative technologies like Toast, a restaurant-only software solution that addresses point of sale, restaurant operations, kitchen dashboards, online ordering and delivery, and marketing. Though created years before COVID-19 as a means for improving operations, the product has helped restaurants large and small to adapt, minimize contact, improve overall service, and boost profitability.

Born in 2012 in the bars, restaurants, and cafes of Boston, Toast started as an app that eliminated the need to wait for a check. It allowed customers to start a tab and link it directly to their credit card. From there it grew into a comprehensive system that provided Android tablets that servers could carry with them and use to enter orders as well as process payments. The idea was that mobile technology would avoid the need for expensive in-house hardware and software systems. It would cut training time for staff, thus saving valuable money for owners. It also saved servers steps, thus allowing them to assume responsibility for more tables and grow their earnings while providing clients with better service. Finding a way to avoid running back and forth between the table and a terminal to place orders or process payments was a win for everybody. But that was just the beginning.

Because Toast relies on open-source Android technology, the system continued expanding. By the end of 2015, its functions included payroll, inventory management, and multi-location menu controls. It was being used by thousands of restaurants across the country. Then the pandemic struck, and though its founders feared that their single-minded focus on the restaurant industry might mean the end of their successful venture, when restaurants reopened their doors they realized that their product's flexibility meant they could add new functions in response to the virus. They developed contactless ordering and mobile payments, curbside notifications for takeout, and flat-fee deliveries that limited contact between servers and diners.

According to Perry Quinn, senior vice president of business innovation development for the National Restaurant Association, businesses that adopted a digital presence were the ones that were able to emerge from the pandemic and survive where others closed their doors. "One restaurant I know of, within about four days in March, pivoted to more digital. They turned it on and had 250 orders that day," he said. "Those that embraced and got in front of the digital side of this, whether it's email, web, mobile, online ordering, etcetera, really hit the ground running as it related to just extending their services to their existing customers."

Though the slow waning of the virus's worst effects has calmed fears about signing checks and dining in, the advantages of these innovations have remained, boosting profits and efficiency in restaurants. Establishments that have adopted Toast often have QR codes printed on their receipt, allowing diners who have finished their meal to simply scan the code and pay directly instead of waiting for their server to arrive and process their credit card. That type of convenience is memorable, and brings diners back. The technology is returning to its original mission of improving operations for diners, owners, and staff alike.