

Kiosks Increase Efficiency of Dining on College Campuses

How Sodexo and NEXTEP SYSTEMS partnered to create a reliable and flexible restaurant solution.

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The players

NEXTEP SYSTEMS, based in Troy, Mich., is a provider of self-service solutions for restaurants, casinos, airports, sporting venues, grocery stores and other high-volume food-service and entertainment venues. NEXTEP's core business revolves around self-service kiosks, online and smartphone ordering and digital menu boards.

Sodexo, based in Gaithersburg, Md., is a provider of integrated food and facilities management services in the United States, Canada and Mexico, serving more than 10 million customers daily in nearly 6,000 locations, ranging from educational facilities and government agencies to health care centers and private corporations.

The challenge

College dining halls can be extremely hectic. Hundreds or even thousands of meals must be prepared and served each day, and hungry students must cram studying and eating into short breaks between classes.

Efficiency, quality and variety are key to keeping students happy. Lines can stretch during peak times, and almost everyone is in a hurry. One solution for many residential dining facilities is a buffet line, instead of made-to-order items. Unfortunately, buffet-style dining can seem bland and boring, especially to students using meal cards several times each day at the same residential hall.

Sodexo knew there had to be a better way to feed college students.

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— Jeff Pente, senior director of brand management for residential dining, campus services, Sodexo

“We wanted to provide students with the option of self-ordering food, just the way they like it and when they want it,” said Jeff Pente, Sodexo’s senior director of brand management for residential dining, campus services. “We needed a solution that was extremely fast, reliable and flexible.”

To make its dream of streamlined college dining a reality, Sodexo needed to find an innovative partner with the ability to move the automated ordering process to the next level. The company wanted a solution that enabled students to quickly and easily order items in busy college dining halls. The system needed to be easy to use and efficient. With the high-traffic locations, the ordering kiosks also needed to be rugged and reliable, and effective and engaging digital signage needed to be incorporated.

The solution

Sodexo partnered with NEXTEP SYSTEMS to launch Food on Demand, a computerized, self-service ordering system that provides restaurant-style dining experiences for college students.

With Food on Demand, students use touchscreen kiosks that feature an extensive made-to-order menu.

The menu can be customized by food-service staff, using more than 400 recipes selected specifically for the Food on Demand program. Authorized personnel can change menu selections quickly and easily from any desktop.

Unlike traditional menus, the kiosks have photos and descriptions of every item, which allows users to quickly assess the options. Students also can view nutritional details before finalizing an order.

Benefits of implementing Food on Demand

The Food on Demand program features:

- Easy-to-use touchscreen kiosks
- Customizable menu options
- Integrated reporting tools
- Remote administration access
- High-resolution digital signage
- Reliable, secure POS interfaces

While waiting, diners can help themselves to a beverage, soup and salad. When the order is ready, students can see their order number on a digital monitor in the dining hall and, if they choose, via text message.

The results

Food on Demand systems already are a mainstay on several college campuses and the successful program is rapidly expanding. By implementing the Food on Demand program, colleges can dramatically enhance efficiency, reduce wait times and improve the quality of residential dining without increasing labor costs.

At the University of Vermont, for example, students typically take less than 20 seconds to order food and it usually arrives in less than five minutes.

“Students seldom have to wait more than a few minutes because our cooking technology is so amazing that we can cook a chicken quarter — or almost anything else — in less than three minutes,” said Pente.

The self-ordering kiosks also speed up the ordering process and provide labor savings. Instead of taking orders and payments, dining staff members can focus on food production and customer service.

“The biggest benefits are that the system has reduced wait times to just a few minutes and food waste to almost zero because the food is no longer prepared in big batches,” Pente said. “Also, with the text notification, students can wait almost anywhere and study or visit while they wait.”

“Food on Demand provides the ultimate in flexibility for university dining programs,” he said. “The system can be set up one way for breakfast, changed to entirely different items for lunch and altered an entirely different way for dinner. Specials can be added on the fly for times when we have certain products, such as fresh, local vegetables, that we want to highlight.”

Universities also can utilize Food on Demand as a secondary option alongside traditional dining programs. For instance, at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y., a residential hall that is located inside a renovated hotel features two dining rooms: one that offers traditional, residential dining and the other hall uses the Food on Demand system.

“That allows students to experience the best of both worlds,” said Pente.



Incorporating self-ordering kiosks allow students to place and pay for their order, while the dining staff focuses on preparation and customer service.

As the next step, Sodexo and NEXTEP are fine-tuning an application that will allow users to order via devices, such as smartphones.

“Thanks to NEXTEP, we really are taking the college dining experience to an entirely new level,” said Pente. “Food on Demand is making an amazing difference in college dining rooms.”

***About the sponsor:** NEXTEP SYSTEMS, based in Troy, Mich., is a leading provider of self-service solutions for restaurants, casinos, airports, stadiums, arenas, delicatessens and other high-volume food-service venues. NEXTEP's core business revolves around self-service kiosks, online/smartphone ordering and digital menu boards.*