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iPod set to replace waiters' note pad

Montreal entrepreneurs aim to revolutionize restaurant industry

BY JASON MAGDER, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE JULY 6, 2010

STORY

PHOTOS (1)



The iPod may have started a music revolution, but two Laval men are hoping it can also start a revolution in the restaurant industry.

Photograph by: Robert Galbraith/Reuters

The iPod may have started a music revolution, but two Laval men are hoping it can also start a revolution in the restaurant industry.

Michael Benaroch and Emanuel Vintila, have been friends since their high school days. Last June, the 28-year-old entrepreneurs started Cluster Systems and Technologies, selling point-of-sale terminals to restaurants that speed up the order-taking process using an iPod Touch to take orders.

Waiters enter the order on the iPod, which connects to a printer in a kitchen and prints them out there, so chefs know what to prepare. It also hooks up to another printer that can produce bills for customers. Mr. Benaroch said waiters can have a portable printer so that their invoices can be printed on the spot. In a few months, there will be credit and debit card readers for sale that will plug into the iPods and allow them to charge customers without having to return to the pay terminal.

Mr. Vintila, a freelance computer programmer who has worked for several years in Montreal's tech industry, is the firm's main software developer.

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He has designed the software for large touchscreen point-of-sale terminals and for the iPod Touch.

"We decided to find a way to allow waiters and waitresses to take orders with a touch screen, but the devices we were using as prototypes weren't very good," said Mr. Benaroch, who left Telus Communications to co-found the company. "We decided to use the iPod Touch because it was the best quality device we could find. It's slim and it has a long battery life. We figure it can last two restaurant shifts without having to recharge."

Mr. Vintila said the advantages of the mobile device are numerous for large restaurants, especially ones with big terraces. It eliminates a step for waiters, who would now jot down orders in a notebook then enter the information into a large touchscreen terminal for meal preparation and invoice purposes. It makes service faster and more efficient, thus increasing turnover rates.

From an office of four employees in a strip mall in Laval's Chomedey district, Cluster began supplying restaurants with point-of-sale terminals in November, and already has 10 customers. The iPods have only become available in recent weeks, and are debuting at the three Laval locations of Allo Mon Coco, a breakfast restaurant.

Mr. Benaroch said the iPod will allow restaurants to save money and become more efficient. It costs just \$600 to purchase the souped-up iPod (with internet access disabled), compared with a second point-of-sale terminal that costs between \$2,000 and \$3,000.

Mr. Benaroch said the technology is relatively easy to use, because it's just a smaller version of the large touchscreen.

"It takes about 20 minutes to be trained on the touchscreen, and then if you know the screen, it's almost no adjustment to use the iPod," he said.

This is a good time to get into the business of supplying restaurants with pay terminals, said Francois Meunier, vice-president of public affairs for the Association des restaurateurs du Quebec.

"About 40% of restaurants don't have any computerized system," Mr. Meunier said, adding that many now must buy computerized systems by the fall to conform to new requirements by Revenue Quebec to combat tax evasion.

Many restaurants are looking to buy mobile devices that will allow staff to charge debit cards equipped with chips, which will become the norm in Canada by 2012.

Mr. Benaroch and Mr. Vintila are aware of the opportunity, and have already started approaching restaurants.

"We're getting ready for a big push," Mr. Vintila said. "The flyers were just printed and they're ready to go."

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