Facilitator — February/March 2013

What's New With You?

Thomas Krier

Facility Management on the Go
Smartphones and tablets present some key opportunities for restaurant facility and asset management

Technology news and features have focused on mobile devices and their applications for the last few years. The rapid adoption of smartphones and tablets has surpassed even manufacturers' expectations, and the rapid advancement of mobile technologies far exceeds that of any other computing platform, such as laptop or desktop computers.

Many restaurant chains are providing mobile applications and websites to their customers, and are working with top mobile application developers such as Yelp, Foursquare and Urbanspoon to help promote their brands. Popular features include customer reviews, online menus, ordering and even the ability to pay for your meal using your smartphone.

Mobile devices and applications present some key opportunities for restaurant facility and asset management. Computerized Maintenance Management Systems (CMMS) generally support the entire maintenance team, including restaurant, district, regional and facility managers as well as their contractors and vendors. Each of these users can benefit by using a mobile device to access their CMMS.

A Natural Fit
Restaurant managers are generally very busy, and when they notice an issue that needs to be reported, having to retreat to the office to create a new work request is a hassle and can add unnecessary delays. A mobile management application reduces the amount of time required to submit a request, and can assist the manager in providing a more accurate and complete description of the problem.

For example, if a refrigeration unit is not working properly, a store manager can launch the mobile app and start creating a request by scanning the asset tag barcode on the side of the unit. The app can find the asset record in the CMMS and prefill the request form with the store number, asset number, trade and any additional information. By knowing the type of asset, the application can then present a series of troubleshooting questions related to the refrigerator. After answering a few short questions, the store manager can complete and submit the request, or the problem may even be resolved without the need to create a request.

Some types of requests may require a photograph of the issue. A mobile app can initiate the camera feature on smartphones and tablets and upload the photo during the request creation process.

Additional Perks
Facility managers are usually tasked with visiting restaurants to survey the general condition of the facility and its assets. A site survey feature included in a mobile app could be used to walk the facility manager through that process. If problems are found, new requests are created immediately, and pertinent store information such as floor plans and equipment manuals are readily available. Additionally, any open issues for that location are displayed in the mobile app, and both the facility manager and store manager have all of the information they need to complete the survey.

When a high priority or emergency occurs at a restaurant, it is very important that the manager gets the help he or she needs quickly. Traditionally, companies have used a call center or answering service to handle after-hour emergencies. Mobile technologies are now being employed to automatically inform facility managers quickly

using escalating text messaging or even an outbound Interactive Voice Response (IVR) generated phone call. Facility managers can then use their mobile app to create a new work order and send it to a contractor for immediate action.

Contractors can also make extensive use of a mobile management app while performing scheduled maintenance or making repairs. Checking in and out using the GPS feature built into smartphones and tablets can take the place of IVR applications and provide the accountability required by many restaurants. In addition, barcodes can be scanned to identify the assets being repaired or maintained, ensuring that all activities and costs associated with the asset are being tracked. Better yet, details about the asset such as warranty information, repair manuals and preventative maintenance schedules can be made available.

The mobile device's camera can also be used to take before-and-after pictures of repair work. Making use of a mobile app to document contractor visits can greatly reduce the time required by the contractor for documentation, which in turn reduces overall cost.

Another trend that is gaining popularity is the replacement of laptop computers with tablets for field users, such as district managers. Although the primary motivation is to save money, this can only be accomplished if these users have the tools they need to complete all of their tasks. This includes fast and reliable access to the company's CMMS.

As the popularity of mobile devices and apps continues to grow, mobile access to CMMS will not only be a cool feature, but will be a firm requirement.

Mobile Apps vs. Mobile Web Applications
One of the first decisions application developers must make when creating a new mobile application is whether to create a mobile app that is downloaded or a Web application that is accessed through a mobile browser. Although both methodologies can result in a great application, there are pros and cons with each.

Once a mobile app has been downloaded and installed, it can be very easy to use. Just clicking the icon will start the application. Accessing a mobile website can require a bit more work initially, but once the site has been bookmarked, it can also be accessed easily. A shortcut can even be created and added to the device desktop.

Some manufacturers, such as Apple, require users to download applications from their app store. Although the development and deployment process is not difficult for software developers, the application does need to be reviewed, and, in some cases, changed before it can be made available to the general public. This can present delays when an application update is necessary.

Mobile Web applications work across mobile devices of all brands, while mobile apps are required for each type of device such as Google Android, Apple iPhones and iPads, Microsoft Mobile Windows or Blackberry. This can result in a significant development effort by application developers.

One clear advantage mobile apps have over mobile Web applications is that all hardware devices within the phone are available to be used in the app. This is not yet the case with mobile browsers, although consistent access to GPS and camera features from within the mobile browser is promised in the future.

View All Articles