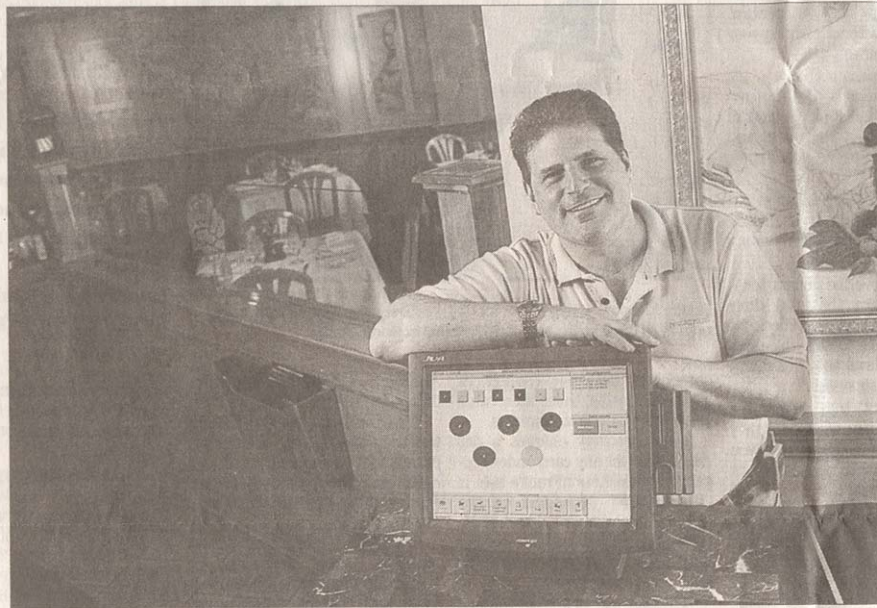


SMALL BUSINESS



CHRISTOPHER BARTH FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Scott Spitzberg of Restaurant Software Solutions displays the Restaurant Manager system he is installing in Florino Ristorante in Summit. The computer allows wait staff to stay on the floor to tend tables.

From soup to nuts

Restaurant software tracks payroll and more

BY DAN WEISSMAN
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

When his technology job was outsourced to India, Scott Spitzberg says he thought about getting into the restaurant business.

With a wife and three children to support, the West Orange resident says, "I needed something to do." He says he was drawn to the restaurant business, thinking of a bagel shop or some other breakfast-lunch operation that would get him home nights and weekends.

Fortunately, he found a situation where he could try out the trade before he made a major commitment of time or money. John Stagnitti, owner of Locomotion Cafe, a Secaucus lunch restaurant, let him come to work and check it out.

His first day on the job began with cleaning, preparing and swabbing bathrooms. "It took me half the first day to see this was not for me," Spitzberg says.

But his brief restaurant stint sparked a concept for his next venture — the computer hardware and software to improve restaurant operations. He quickly worked up a prototype and showed it to Stagnitti. He didn't buy, but Spitzberg pressed ahead with the concept.

"Computer networks and software don't scare me," Spitzberg says. "I did a lot of research, downloaded demos and talked to people in the industry. I found a product I thought was priced well. I picked up the system and started reselling it.

"So far, it's been a great success," he says. "I am doing three installations a week."

He says he keeps his costs down by controlling his overhead, working out of a home office and hiring consultants on a per-diem basis as needed. The cost to the restaurant, he says, depends on the number of terminals and the functions that are installed.

SCOTT SPITZBERG

Personal: 38, president of Restaurant Software Solutions, West Orange,

www.EfficientRestaurant.com

Lives: West Orange, with his wife, Jodi, and three sons

Education: Philadelphia College of Textiles, Seton Hall University, MBA.

In his spare time: "I love to play golf and spend time with my children."

Spitzberg says he provides restaurants ranging from the neighborhood pizza place to the four-star restaurant with a custom-designed software system that handles myriad tasks: It handles processing orders taken by servers and linking them directly with the kitchen, identifies when a menu item should be updated, calculates payroll and keeps track of the best- and worst-selling items.

"It's great," says Adolpho Marisi, owner of Italianissimo, a Caldwell Italian restaurant that has been in business for 15 years. Marisi says with everything from inventory control to credit-card processing to keeping track of the hours his full- and part-timers' work, "this has simplified the process, and it all translates into doing more business."

Spitzberg says the prospect of being more profitable and cutting down on losses and lost time is what sells the systems.

"The restaurant business is one of the most difficult, if not the most difficult there is," Spitzberg says. "There are fixed costs, untrained workers and highly demanding customers who want quick service and good value and there is a highly perishable inventory. That's why more than half the restaurants fail in two years.

"Excellent food is not enough," he says. "You can have the best food in

the world, but if it's priced too high, not served hot, fresh and fast, your customers are not coming back."

Deborah Dowdell, executive vice president of the New Jersey Restaurant Association, says computerized systems are a trend in the food service industry nationwide. The industry, she says, is "behind the curve in technology, and the move to computerize is really the industry catching up to other industries."

Spitzberg says one way to cut costs, for example, is to have a system that doesn't require food servers to leave the floor to put in an order.

"That immediately keeps the server on the floor 50 percent more of the time," he says.

Then, he says, because the order is processed by computer, it cuts down on the problem of chefs being unable to read handwriting, "which cuts down on waste and how long a table will be occupied. The customer will be satisfied because the food comes up correct and errors in totaling the check are eliminated."

Spitzberg says with efficient inventory controls and a constant record of what has been ordered, the owner can reduce, if not eliminate, employee pilferage, "a huge problem in the restaurant business."

Theft of product, he says, is a by-product of the nature of the business that hires unskilled and part-timers and works on tight profit margins. "There's no free food coming out of the kitchen," Spitzberg says, thwarting potential schemes such as ordering two or more extra meals to tricks such as bartenders selling drinks out of bottles they bring with them and keeping the payment.

Dan Weissman writes about small business. He can be reached at dweissman@starledger.com.