TECHNOLOGY

At Johnny Carino's, cell-phone paging system the right call

By Alan J. Liddle

AUSTIN, TEXAS – Technology that lets restaurateurs use a guest's personal cellular phone as a wait-list pager has reduced conventional pager expenses at the Johnny Carino's Country Italian chain, officials there said.

The Austin-based company has had the Trinity paging system from Long Range Systems, Inc. of Dallas up and running for about three months and in recent weeks was using it at 18 of the casual-dining chain's 28 restaurants.

"It's a little premature to say anything definitively, but it appears that replacement costs on pagers are dramatically decreasing," remarked David Prichard, Johnny Carino's opening unit director.

"Our main concern was shrinkage and the loss of pagers," Prichard said, explaining what prompted the initial trial of a system supporting cell-phone paging. However customer convenience also was a consideration, he said, adding, "We didn't want [guests] to have to carry around a pager if they didn't need to.

"This gives our guests an alternative to waiting for a pager to buzz, listening for their name to be called 'over the public sound system' or looking up at a number display," Prichard said in written statements about phone-based paging.

He acknowledged that the increased range afforded by phone-based paging, compared with the reach of conventional on-premise paging system, can contribute to a "a bit more lag" between guest notification and arrival at the hostess station. "They [customers] might have to make their way back from the Home Depot" store or some other nearby attraction, he explained.

The Trinity System works with conventional pagers including the stackable "coaster" type and Long Range versions, as well as cell phones. Prichard said Johnny Carino's plans to incorporate the technology into all new units and retrofit where and when it makes sense.

The degree to which cell phones are used for pagers varies by markets and reflects local rates of cell phone usage, Prichard noted. Long Range Systems representatives are quick to point out that a Gallup poll from April 2000 suggested that more than half of all Americans now own cell phones.
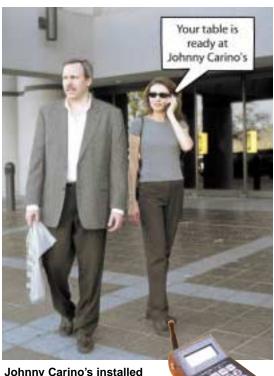
Any use of cell phones to replace pagers is seen as a good thing by Prichard, who said he has made it a "goal" to slim down the traditional new-restaurant allotment of 30 to 40 pagers as well as to reduce ongoing costs related to pager breakage and theft.

The Trinity device typically sits on the greeter-host station or front counter and takes up less space than a paperback book does. It requires an analog phone line.

Prichard said the host or hostess asks guests leaving their names for the wait list if they have a cell phone that they would like to use for table-availability notification. Agreeable guests are asked for their cell-phone numbers, which are entered into the Trinity transmitter's keypad storage and the assignment of a three-digit reference number, which the restaurant staffer writes alongside that guest's name on the paper wait list.

When a phone-using guest's name is up on the wait list, the restaurant employee enters the corresponding three-digit reference number into the Trinity transmitter, which then phones that party and plays a prerecorded message of up to five seconds, such as, "Your Johnny Carino's table is ready."

Prichard said he anticipated that some guests might be hesitant about parting with their cell-phone numbers for fear that the information somehow might be used for intrusive marketing initiatives or otherwise end up in wrong hands. However, those situations have occurred rarely, he said, which he suggested was a positive reflection on the chain's relationship with its customers.

Johnny Carino's installed Long Range Systems' Trinity paging system, enabling the chain to notify customers via cell phone that their tables are ready.

Inset: The small footprint Trinity paging device, which typically resides by the front door

The Johnny Carino's representative also noted that some markets require a little more customer "education" about phone paging than others do because of the newness of the process. Overall, he said, guests and employees have responded well to the new technology.

Because Johnny Carino's has served as a development partner, it received a discount on the price it paid for its Trinity System, Long Range Systems' Jim Livingston said. He noted that the system comes with conventional pagers as well as with phone-paging capabilities and typically is priced from about $2400 for a 25-pager system to $5,000 for a 60-pager system.

Long Range Systems markets its phone-paging technology as a good fit for restaurants in malls, waterfronts and tourist attraction areas, where guests might wander extensively while waiting for a table.