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Ideas and Insights for Full-Service Restaurants

A Restaurant's
Guide to
Travel Guides

Chef Dishes for
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WOMEN OF TASTE

At Girl & the Goat, chef/owner Stephanie IZARD advocates for farmers and animal welfare.

Talk is Cheap

More locations usually mean more success for an Applebee's franchise group. But for Gator Apple, a franchise group with Applebee's restaurants in Florida and Georgia, 42 locations meant 42 different phone bills. Each location had its own bill with a different method of payment and due date every month.

Locations also couldn't transfer calls to other restaurants, adding to the stress of directing a confused customer to the nearest Applebee's or getting in touch with staff from a nearby store. The phone system was outdated, costly, and inefficient.

In June 2012, the company turned to RingCentral, a cloud-based phone system, to simplify its communications and advance the technology of the 1,985-employee company.

"Gator Apple, because it is multi-location, wouldn't have been able to tie together locations on a single system," says Bonnie Lam, senior director of channel and franchise sales at RingCentral. "Now they can tie together as many locations as they need to, and use extension dialing to transfer calls that come into the wrong location to the correct location."

Instead of 42 bills, Gator Apple now has one bill covering all locations at the same amount each month.

"RingCentral has dramatically cut our operational costs by \$7,000 a month and we can reallocate those dollars towards advertising for more business and promoting our stores," says Maureen Jackson, controller of Gator Apple.

"Every store is on the same phone

system, and as our business grows we can easily add lines and train our staff on the phone system."

Gator Apple is also able to use conference bridges at each location to have staff meetings so that employees who are not in the restaurant can partici-

After consolidating phone accounts to a cloud-based system, Gator Apple cut operational costs by \$7,000 a month. "We can reallocate those dollars towards advertising for more business," says Maureen Jackson, controller of Gator Apple.

pate remotely. Each store's extension is the same as its store number, and every store has phones located at the hostess stand, bar, and back office. Additionally, the company now has a single comment and complaint messaging option for all locations. Restaurants can transfer callers to this mailbox via extension, and owner Greg Georgas is notified via email when a message is left.

Messaging features also allow customers to text a reservation request that appears on the restaurant's computer, and all voicemails, faxes, and texts are directed to the same line.

Cloud-based phone systems such as the one used by Gator Apple and those using VoIP (voice-over Internet protocol) are cheaper and easier to use than a physical phone system, and both restaurants and phone companies are catching on. Companies such as RingByName offer only cloud-based communication systems, while older companies such as Comcast have added VoIP options like Comcast Business VoiceEdge.

The Meatball Shop, with four restaurants in New York City, first opened in 2009 with a standard Verizon landline.

"There were a lot of problems with the phone service, especially because the phone rings off the hook," says Jason Brooks, IT manager at The Meatball Shop.

When the company switched to ShoreTel Sky about a year later, they gained control of call-flow settings, call

volume, and transfer settings. If a call is missed, the manager is emailed the voice message and can check it on a cellphone. Brooks can forward calls to the management offices, main office, and other locations as well as reroute calls to a cellphone.

"One person can basically control the entire call-flow system from a web browser," Brooks explains. "It allows one person to essentially control everything remotely and quickly at the fraction of the cost of an in-house phone system."

As long as Brooks has Internet access, even on his cellphone, he's able to control the phones at The Meatball Shop.

"Just the other day one of the phones wasn't working, and I just changed the call-flow setting so that calls got transferred to a different number and they didn't lose their takeout phone," he says.

The Meatball Shop is in the process of opening a fifth location, and the cloud-based system allows Brooks to add phones easily as the company grows.

"When I add a phone, all I have to do is buy it and add in time," he says. "The system allows you to be up and running very quickly." ■