

Interview with **Chili's Grill and Bar**, the ubiquitous casual dining chain. Chili's, which pretty much defines the mainstream of chain restaurants (and is not a place that self-service couponing – free chips with your loyalty points! – will be off-brand), is quickly becoming a definitive mainstream example as well of tabletop point of sale (POS) technology and mobile self-service restaurant technology.

The Chili's technology offers a lot of Chili's-appropriate functionality: loyalty points earning and redemption, mobile carryout ordering, easy check-splitting (including easily moving items to the appropriate side of the split, even in large parties), re-ordering drinks, even “getting in line” while the customer is still at home, so they can be seated not 15 minutes from arrival but 15 minutes from when they set out to drive to the restaurant, which may mean zero to three minutes from arrival. Let's hear more from Chili's vice president of digital innovation and customer engagement, **Wade Allen**.

Micah Solomon¹: Can you bring me up to speed on how the Chili's digital service came to be deployed, and how it's going so far?

Wade Allen, **vice president of digital innovation and customer engagement, Chili's Grill & Bar**: We started our digital guest experience journey in Sept. 2013 as the first mover in the casual dining industry to bring tabletop technology to our restaurant tables. The goal was to remove common guest pain points around paying the bill and re-ordering drinks. We've seen rapid adoption with 75 percent of guests using the tablets to quickly pay their bill. Furthermore, we've been able to gather valuable insights through real-time feedback where 25 percent of guests use the tablets to complete the Chili's survey at the end of their dining experience. This feedback allows us to make improvements on an individual restaurant level, as well as, provide proof points for national-scale decisions around our Fresh Tex and Fresh Mex menu favorites.

Once we had the tablets in place, we took a different approach and launched a fully digital loyalty program, “My Chili's Rewards,” in May 2015. The goal was easy access/participation for all guests. We also included unique elements around gamification to keep guests engaged. In six months, we went from no loyalty program to 4.2 million members. Furthermore, approximately 18 percent of transactions in restaurant are tied to loyalty members. We're building on this for what we call “loyalty 2.0” with our latest partnership with the Plenti rewards program, as the newest partner to join representing the casual dining industry. This will allow guests to earn points at partner locations and redeem for their Chili's favorites.

Solomon: How are customers receiving this?

Allen: The innovations we're chasing at Chili's are guest centric and focused on how we can give guests their most valuable commodity – time – to do the things that are important to them. As a result, they have loved it! Guests are able to take control of their dining experience, whether it is quickly paying the bill through the tabletop

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technology at lunch, or ordering dinner for the family while sitting at their kid's soccer game.

Solomon: Is the human element getting lost?

Allen: Absolutely not! A key differentiator of casual dining is the personalized service model. Our technology innovation is not only a win for our guests, but also a win for our team members. With technology, we're able to remove some of the mundane tasks of the server and allow them to make our guests feel special with a memorable dining experience. Furthermore, technology is completely optional and guests can choose to opt out if they wish.

These tablets do not eliminate the personal service our guests receive from servers. In fact, these tablets have served as a good tool for our team members to help eliminate some transactional pain points, such as paying the bill or ordering dessert, and have helped our team members do their job more efficiently. This allows our team members to focus on the duties that make a personal impact on the dining experience, such as getting to know the table, taking entrée orders and delivering meals, among other duties.

Solomon: What are the backup plans for when guests want human rather than kiosk service?

Allen: Our model is based on personalized service to make guests feel special when dining with us. So, the personalized aspect will always be a part of what guests experience at Chili's. The technology innovation is completely optional and guests can choose to opt out if they wish.

Solomon: What about guests with disabilities—visually impaired, for example?

Allen: The technology innovation is completely optional so guests with disabilities will enjoy the same Chili's service they have always had.

[Micah Solomon: I have to interject here. The reality is that technology has significant implications – not always bad, but always worth considering – for those with disabilities, whether they are visual, auditory, or physical. It is possible that the Digital Menu and other technology being deployed by Chili's actually makes it easier for some diners with disabilities (certainly, the screens are easier to read than the typical paper menu designed by a 21 year old in 6 point type), but they are also going to be potentially more difficult to use by other diners, for example those with more serious visual impairments or those with mobility issues. And if the staff isn't trained to watch out for these cues, they're not going to know that a particular table, or a particular guest at a table, is going to need more human intervention than they may assume from their fully-abled, generally youthful view of the world of technology and dining.]

Solomon: Can you share some tips for smaller players (startups, entrepreneurs) for how to implement or whether to implement such tech?



Allen: The key is building the infrastructure. Technology will continue to quickly change, but once there's a solid infrastructure in place where technology can easily communicate to each other, then building on top of that framework becomes easy. This allows you to try new technology and quickly adapt.