

# Customer-Facing Tech: What's Its Value?

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The tight labor market, with a scarcity of skilled and semi-skilled personnel and increasing wage rates has inspired operators to find and adapt technology to fill the gap and hold down labor costs.

In the “back of the house” (kitchen), food prep equipment is being automated – new combi ovens need no more skill than being able to tap an icon on a screen. Fryers lift the basket out of the oil by themselves when the food is cooked. Now, the “front of the house” (servery) is where technology is being introduced to reduce staffing and increase productivity.

## Self-Service Pros and Cons

The oldest attempt at labor-saving is the self-service station. Salad bars have long been accepted by customers.

Attempts to make hot food self-service have been less successful. The station quickly becomes sloppy and, at least in corporate employee cafes, customers dislike it. Many prefer the pleasant interchange with live servers as they get their meals.

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*Be careful when  
placing an order  
remotely.*

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Recently, tablets for placing orders have been installed in serveries. The customer taps the order – maybe a tuna salad sandwich with a pickle. The dish is handed to the customer as he/she reaches the service station. Minimum contact required. If the customer accidentally touched the wrong icon, the wrong food is delivered. Tough luck. Efficient, but impersonal.

## Self-Checkout

Another innovation is self-checkout, adapted from big box stores. More self-checkout means fewer cashiers, but not one-for-one. A competent cashier can process three customers a minute. A customer scanning two to four items on a tray, then paying doesn't complete the transaction in 20 seconds. It probably takes two self-checkout stations to replace one cashier; maybe three to replace two cashiers.

Most likely, customers will learn to adapt to less personal, more technical service. Fifty years ago, self-service gas stations were a controversial novelty.

Whether the efficiencies will be enough to offset the reduction in personal interaction in customer satisfaction levels is an open question.

*Whether you're planing a new dining facility or upgrading an existing one, Clarion can help find the right balance between efficiency and customer-pleasing service. To learn how we can add value to your dining and hospitality services, call Tom Mac Dermott, 603/642-8011 or Ted Mayer, 617/875-7882 or e-mail us at [info@clariongp.com](mailto:info@clariongp.com).*