# The Techie

Meet Jim Melvin, the man behind the touchscreen POS system and hundreds of other technologies you use everyday. By Frank Jossi

For Jim Melvin the best place to begin a career developing software for the quick-service restaurant industry turned out to be the back office of a Wendy's in the heart of the University of Alabama-Birmingham's medical center campus. There, in 1982, Melvin spent mornings writing code for a back office program he developed for Bodner and Associates and lunch hours as a member of the kitchen crew assigned to the grill.

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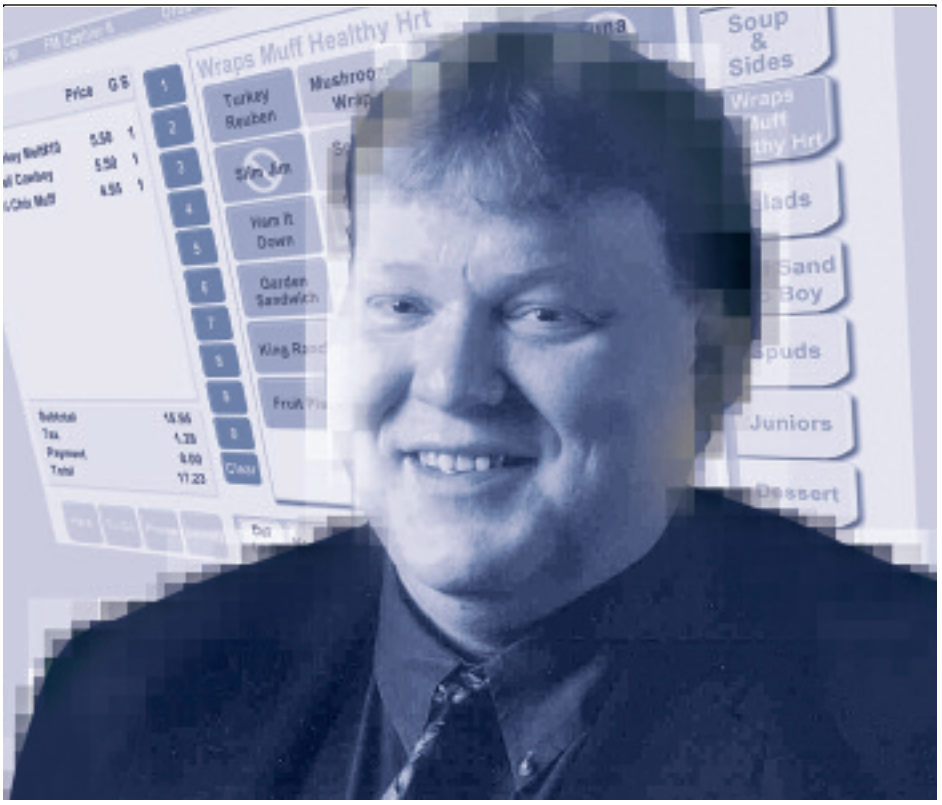


You could say he loved the smell of fast food in the morning—and afternoon. The advantage of crafting code and then trying it out in the restaurants had a decidedly mixed result in the beginning.

"I used to say to managers that if they discovered a bug in the software I'd work a shift for them and I ended up working a lot of shifts," he says with a laugh. "But if I hadn't worked with them I wouldn't have known how they did their jobs and how they used the software. Even today I'll say if I didn't own a technology company I'd own a restaurant."

For someone who does not own a restaurant chain Melvin probably understands the business better than anybody. For the past two decades the 41-year-old has been a serial software entrepreneur, selling companies he started every two or three years while amassing, along the way, a reputation as one of the best minds in the restaurant technology business.

Melvin's product can be found in 75,000 restaurants and his roster of customers feature several industry heavyweights, among them Burger King, Wendy's, McDonald's, Carl's Jr., and Yum! Brands. His technology credentials, a long list, include being the technology advisor to the National Restaurant Association (NRA) and the current chair of the Technology Pavilion Advisory Committee. As the tech advisor to NRA he occasionally testifies before congressional committees on technology issues.

Under the hood of every successful chain restaurant is technology that helps manage finances, workflow, scheduling, speed of service, and other challenges every restaurant faces. Managing in this environment is no easy task, as Melvin learned back in his Birmingham days. His chief focus is to build products that help managers burned out by 70 hour weeks and beleaguered by large and inexperienced teenaged staffs. "We aren't trying to create software just to create software, we're trying to create software that's a tool to help managers do their job," says Melvin, a gregarious talker who seems to have met nearly every major quick-service player and moves between topics in a hyperlinked fashion. "I always figured I could help them if I created the right kind of software."

### POS SOFTWARE

Melvin has software coding in his blood. As a teenager in Houston, he sold a gaming company he started in his bedroom. While attending Tulane University in New Orleans during the early 1980s he missed many of the party school's best celebrations because Bodner and Associates—operated by Shoney's manage-

ment veterans Mike Bodner and Ray Shoenbaum—would fly him on a private jet to their Atlanta offices every Friday and put him to work writing code.

It was their idea to send him to quick-service graduate school in Birmingham to gain an understanding of the business. The result was ROS (Restaurant Operating System), a back-office software package using Radio Shack terminals operated at the district offices of chains. After completing the software he and his partners sold it to Wendy's. Now firmly entrenched in the IT end of the restaurant business, he grew to like the turf and never left.

In the mid-1980s two things happened to change computing forever. One was IBM's development of personal computers. The second was the introduction of the touchscreen, allowing people to enter information with the touch of a finger rather than using a keyboard. In 1984 Melvin visited Comdex, the huge computer show held annually in Las Vegas, and saw the first touchscreens unveiled. "I really wanted to get out of Comdex at that point because all I could think about was how I could use that touchscreen for a point-of-sale system," he wistfully recalls.

The entrepreneur operated other software companies throughout the 1980s before starting Compris Technologies, a firm dedicated to developing a POS/touchscreen system in collaboration with Wendy's and IBM. As Melvin points out, having an end client always helps secure financing, especially when, in this case, IBM would be selling potentially thousands of PCs to Wendy's. Touchscreens were novel back then and the chain was breaking new ground. "Wendy's was one of the very first users of touchscreens," says Bernie Gray, who worked with the company in information technology at the time. "We used to be very keyboard oriented and that required a high level of typing. The touchscreen was graphics-based, configurable, and it really improved the usability."

Compris Technologies not only developed Wendy's first touchscreens, it created "line busting" technology allowing employees to use a wireless pad to take orders from people waiting in line inside the restaurant or in the drive-thru. Though an intriguing concept for moving people through lines, Gray remembers that only about six stores were involved in testing it. Today it can be commonly found in rush lines at quick-service restaurants everywhere.

IBM decided not to pursue quick-service restaurants with Compris software and Melvin sold the business to NCR, an industry leader in touchscreen and PC technology in the restaurant industry. He went west to work with a software company financed by Mrs. Field's, the Park City Group, which developed more than 20 technology applications for foodservice companies. After a good run in Park City, Utah, he teamed with a regional telecom company in Oklahoma and began Apigent Solutions, which sold high bandwidth connectivity and a software suite that could be hosted remotely under an application service provider (ASP) approach.

### TODAY AND TOMORROW

Apigent managed to sign up Yum! and several other food vendors before Melvin and his partners sold it to a technology firm with ties to McDonald's Corporation and he invested in yet another company, Delray Beach, Florida-based SIVA Corp. The company sells three products. *iSIVA*, an enterprise POS, uses universal internet related languages such as Java, XML, and HTML for managing remote systems through the web. The second, IntelliKitchen, offers a suite of kitchen management applications. The third, EventAlert, deploys alphanumeric pagers to warn employees about potential problems such as a cash drawer over the limit, a drink order waiting to be paid or a too warm temperature in the food storage area.

So what does the future offer? Melvin offers two scenarios, one for the operator, the other for the consumer, with plenty of overlap. Although he's spent much of his career developing back-office and POS software, he concedes those applications have "an impact that might be five or 10 percent" of an average manager's day. He wants the computing enterprise centralized at corporate headquarters, where managers would have a bird's eye glimpse of every restaurant's productivity and speed of service.

**CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW: iSIVA order entry screen, an EventAlert page, and IntelliKitchen screens.**

"I want everyone to be aware of where they are," he says. "I see a system where we're taking all that data that is disconnected and putting it into a context with knowledge that everyone can use.

"I'm now focused on enterprise level and trying to put together enterprise POS, a connected state of the world where I can have as many technologies pull into it as makes sense.

He foresees a day when a regional manager in Louisville can see in real time where a store is slagging off on speed at the drive-thru window and then make a call to the manager of that store and ask: "What's up?" And he sees such a system as less Big Brother and more a training and coaching opportunity to teach store managers how to do their jobs better.

"With a commonly integrated framework where they get the same information at the same time they can make proactive, not reactive decisions to that information," he explains. "If you wait until the day after or the week after something is broke you can't fix it and save money. If I know what the problem is I can coach you and I can save myself

a lot of money. That's what the goal is."

This doesn't mean corporate will hoard everything. One of his clients, a Canadian pizza chain, has developed a technology where orders via faxes or the internet go directly into the POS in the appropriate store. Many companies who get orders off the net—or the fax—now simply turn around and fax them to individual stores, he says, thus adding work and a potential for inaccuracy.

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For the consumer the advancements are already in the pipeline. Melvin sees the cell phone as the communications touchstone for restaurant operators. At restaurants he sees the day when cell phones will replace pagers in alerting customers that their table is ready. He's seen a system where a cell user can link a number on their phone and credit card number to a specific food vendor—say Starbucks. The individual pushes number 1, buys coffee and a bagel through a voice-activated system and then hears his order will be available in five minutes. He picks it up in a special express line and walks out, his credit card debited for the purchase.

He sees a day when restaurants come together and arrive at a number, say 711, that will allow cell phone users on the road to hear how far they are from the next McDonald's or Burger King and what exit they need to take. Restaurants could also query customers on their cells with brief surveys asking how they liked their meals, adds Melvin. He finds little to recommend about electronic comment cards now available and finds most surveys too generic to offer restaurants any meaningful information.

Whether this will be the way of the world remains to be seen, of course, but Melvin will certainly be part of it, working on solutions using cell phones and artfully linking the silos of information into a web of data. There's little question he'll sell SIVA someday. After all, he's an entrepreneur.

Reprinted from the December 2003 issue of QSR.
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