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Under the Radar

Apigent Keeps Fast-Food Managers in the Know

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PAUL BOBO CHECKS UP on his Burger King restaurant from the comfort of his home computer 30 minutes away in Tallahassee, Fla. Work has never been so easy since Zeom.net came into his life.

Manager of three Burger Kings in Florida and Georgia, Mr. Bobo logs onto the Internet to see how sales are doing, double-checks that the temperatures of the freezer, refrigerator and fryer are on target, and gets an inside view of the activity of the restaurants from the video feed.

Designed and sold by Apigent Solutions Inc., a closely held Oklahoma City software company serving the hospitality industry, Zeom.net makes life easier for managers like Mr. Bobo, giving them data at their fingertips so that they can make informed decisions about how to best run their restaurants.

The brainchild of Apigent Chief Executive Officer Jim Melvin, Zeom.net was launched 18 months ago and already has been installed in 600 fast-food franchises, 40 of which are Taco Bells. By year's end, the company hopes that number will grow to 2,000.

Mr. Melvin, 38 years old, got started with \$22 million in funding from Chickasaw Holding Co., an Oklahoma City telecommunications company that is Apigent's largest shareholder. A teenage computer whiz, Mr. Melvin started his first company, DND Games, at age 16. Before heading to college two years later, he sold the company for \$60,000. He then went on to found, and sell, a concern specializing in retail technology, Compris Technologies Inc., which he sold in the mid-1990s.

Mr. Melvin says he built on his experience with Compris Technologies, spending a lot of time in fast-food restaurants observing employees and managers at work so that he could spot areas in which the staff could use a leg up. "I started investigating what kind of software I could create to support the operations side of the restaurant business. There's no need for the manager to be constantly running back and forth to look up the level of sales" being tallied, he says.

Most restaurants use point-of-sale systems that access customer-purchase data in 15-minute increments. With Zeom, sales information is automatically updated online after every transaction. Managers can access in real time the number of items sold at any time of day. By stripping them from the nightly grind of preparing the restaurant's sales report, managers can focus their energy on working with employees and dealing with customers.

The service runs on a subscription basis and costs between \$250 and \$350 a month per site, including installation. More features are included for the higher charges.

Zeom.net isn't the only product in this growing niche. Besides Apigent, a handful of companies have popped up

in the last two years designed to provide restaurants access to real-time sales information. They include closely held Alloha Technologies Inc., based in Bedford, Texas, and Vital Link Business Systems Inc., of San Francisco.

Although those companies offer many of the same basic features, the difference with Zeom.net "is the flexibility of the reporting tool," according to analyst Rob Grimes of CynterCon Technology Advisors Inc., a consulting company specializing in food-service technology. Zeom.net allows users to change what they see on the Web site and to sort the information in various ways.

Managers can clock what products and product mix sells best. If sales are slow on a certain day, a manager can call up and send idle employees home and shave off some of the labor costs. "It's happened about four times a month. My boss loves it when I save him money," says Mr. Bobo.

The device also monitors the daily workings of a restaurant through cameras and sensors around the clock and notifies managers of any areas of concern, from a mechanical breakdown to an employee dipping into the cash register. The system can alert the manager of any trouble through a pager, cellphone or hand-held device.

The system tracks speed of service to the second. If employees are too slow in helping customers, managers call the store and tell them to speed up. They can also keep tabs on the number of voids and no-sales employees ring up. A high number could indicate an issue of theft.

By being able to monitor the temperatures of different appliances in a restaurant, managers can find out instantly if any temperature is creeping above or falling below its normal range to maintain food quality and safety standards.

That has been a big help at Taco Bell, say managers who credit the system with helping them with their most gripping problem: soggy taco shells. Sensors control the humidity and keep the shells crisp and crunchy.

And Mr. Bobo doesn't have to worry about the refrigerators at his Burger Kings losing power. The refrigeration units are on the roof—a vulnerable spot for an area of Florida prone to vicious storms. "If they would be struck by lightning, I would be paged right away and could get working on solving the problem immediately," said Mr. Bobo.

Video feed from the restaurant also tracks employees' actions to keep their behavior in check—making sure they are doing their job and in proper uniform. The feature has come in handy for Mr. Bobo, who, while at home, caught one of his employees doing her homework instead of working the cash register.

He gave her a call letting her know he was watching through the store's security camera. Since then, Mr. Bobo says, "employees have stopped goofing off."



Jim Melvin