

A whole new way to flag down that waiter: Servisensor

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SANTA ROSA – Local restaurants and national chains are talking up the launch of Servisensor, a device thought up by frequent-diner-out and first-time inventor Brenda Solheim.

The Servisensor ServiceLight device is a low-tech, low-key solution to improving efficiency among service staff and keeping customers happy, said Ms. Solheim, who ate in more than her share of restaurants as long-time Northern California administrator for Cultural Homestay International.

"During the collective hours I spent waiting for a coffee refill, waiting for a glass of water, waiting for the check, I often wished there was a quiet way to indicate what I needed in the way of service," said Ms. Solheim. "Or when I didn't want service at all, which I did just as frequently."

She came up with a touch-sensitive LED array that customers use to ask for refills, general service or the check.

"I contacted Applebee's corporate headquarters to tell them what I was developing. When they called me back the next day I knew I was on the right track," she said.

The devices are now in beta testing in about 450 locations in the U.S and Canada, drawing a positive response from customers and staff.

"Our staff was worried that customers would overwhelm them with requests for service, but it didn't happen," said Jeanette Carpenter, manager of the Tivoli Garden Restaurant in Reno. "Instead, they made fewer visits to the table with no decline in the level of service. And the customers found it very interesting."

After finding a patent attorney, Ms. Solheim hired an electrical engineer and a mechanical

engineer to build the ServiceLight prototype. She also worked with Steve Schneider at the Santa Rosa Junior College Sawyer Center to find test markets and distributors.



The Servisensor ServiceLight alerts restaurant staff when diners need attention

"One contact led to another. Once we had the prototype, interest was immediate," she said.

The lightweight, stackable devices cost \$74.99, with discounts for volume orders. Servisensor allows restaurants a 14-day trial period and provides cards for customer feedback. Those cards go into a raffle, the winner returning to the restaurant for a free meal.

Nobody is making a similar device, said Ms. Solheim, although the maker of a popular restaurant pager is working on a

table-side device.

"But it only reaches one staff person, and that person still has to visit the table to find what's needed. The ServiceLight is visible to bus staff and managers as well as individual servers," she said.

The devices are manufactured by Wright Engineered Plastics in Santa Rosa. Masterwork Electronics in Rohnert Park is building the circuit boards. Sweet River Cafe in the Coddington mall is eager to try the product.

"Because we're a chain, it'll be a few weeks before we can get the ServiceLights, but I think it's the wave of the future," said Sweet River manager George Pineda.

Although he agreed that the devices would improve staff efficiency and allow tables to be turned more quickly, he said that was not the reason Sweetwater was interested.

"We don't care if customers stay for hours if they're happy. Efficiency is not our goal; a well-attended, pleased diner is what we're after," he said.

Betsey Fischer, instructor and coordinator of front house operations for the Santa Rosa Junior College Culinary Academy, agreed. "Good service is all about communication, and establishing a relationship between two people who don't know each other. Zagat surveys about bad service conclude that it mainly stems from miscues about what the customer wants."

She regards the Servisensor device as an enhancement, not a replacement, for personal service. "Anything that adds to communication should be welcomed by service staff," she said. The Culinary Academy restaurant will have the lights in a week or so.

For more information, visit www.servisensor.com.

