



The audiophiles

Nowadays, you can't just plug your iPod into speakers—a proper restaurant sound system is a combination of smart hardware, clever software, and appropriate content. By Francesca Newby

Ambience, atmosphere or even just the vibe, whatever you call it—when it comes to dining out, everybody's looking to either find it or create it. It's no secret that sound has a profound effect on how we interact with our environment, and the link between consumer behaviour and background music is well demonstrated. Getting the soundtrack right should be a no-brainer, but according to a survey of 3000 outlets conducted for Gordon Ramsay's *The F Word*, "inconsistent, mismatched and out-of-place music" comes in as diners' fourth biggest gripe.

Happily, help is at hand, with a growing number of companies offering full-spectrum sound system solutions tailored specifically for the restaurant and catering industry. Given the rapid evolution of music technology, and the rather dramatic increase in the relevant Phonographic Performance Company of Australia (PPCA) licence, installing the appropriate system for your venue can lead to savings as well as helping drive income.

On the technology front, the systems on offer tend to fall into

one of two distinct categories, either a hardware and content package, or a software-based delivery system that runs on the venue's existing equipment. Most hardware offerings revolve around a proprietary digital media box, such as Trusonic's MBOX or the DMP Xpress developed by Music Makers, that plays downloaded content on subscription. Software-only packages are designed to utilise the venue's existing equipment and network, and the focus is on providing specialised content, such as Sydney-based bartunes' partnership with UK outfit 8Track, and their fashion-focused, European-oriented playlists.

Similarly, affordable and legal alternatives to the content covered by the PPCA licence tend to fall into one of two categories, either original music published via the content provider or packages licensed through direct negotiations with various record labels.

Troy Cooper, CEO of Trusonic, is passionate about both the technology behind his company's offering, and the need to create an affordable alternative to the current situation. "The Trusonic MBOX is a digital media player that connects via internet to our servers," says Cooper. "The strength of our system is in the simplicity of the unit itself and in the delivery of nightly updates so that playlists don't get stale. There's no need for



Above: The Trusonic equipment and playlists are specially designed for hospitality businesses.

restaurant owners to do anything once it's installed, and most have better things to do than fiddle with a playlist."

Almost as much work has gone into the development of those playlists as into the technology itself. Alongside its carefully curated major-label playlists, Trusonic has essentially developed its own publishing arm, allowing it to offer PPCA-free playlists that aim to deliver high quality music at a greatly reduced rate. "We've put together a complete music licensing package with Australian artists who are not members of the PPCA," Cooper explains. "Our PPCA-free playlists are appropriate to almost every style of cafe and restaurant and they are easily specialised to the venue."

The question for any venture that veers away from the known quantity that is mainstream music publishing is how to allay the natural suspicion that the music just isn't good enough for the labels, the answer has to lie in quality. Justin Blank, entertainment director for Hamilton Island, is quite certain that, in the right venue, the PPCA-free playlists work as well as any other. "A resort the size of Hamilton Island is quite a complicated set-up with lots of different venues and requirements," says Blank. When the resort upgraded its music system several years ago, they opted for a mix of major label and PPCA-free playlists depending on the needs of the venue. "The music just sounds right in whatever space you're in. You wouldn't pick the playlists as being one or the other."

Dean Cherny, DJ and founder of storePlay, believes this point is key when it comes to providing quality, affordable music systems to the restaurant industry. Cherny's latest venture, storePlay, aims to provide music that's tailored to the individual venue without the need for investment in new hardware.

"storePlay is an app-based system. All you need is a smartphone or tablet and wifi speakers," says Cherny. "It's wireless, compact and flexible. It eliminates the need for expensive hardware and doesn't lock you in to set playlists."

An increasingly sophisticated approach to the various elements that go towards creating a successful venture is a smart way to minimise risks and maximise profits.

With yet another bump in the licence fee due to be implemented next month, now is as good a time as any to look at upgrading an old system. ○



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