

The importance of IT efficiency

Vital business can be lost if operators don't look after their computer systems

RESTAURANTS, bars, hotels and other licensed trade businesses are becoming more and more dependent on technology, to promote their services, take bookings and provide information to customers, writes Angus Kerr of computer consultants PC Support Group.

So it has never been more important to ensure that IT systems are functioning as effectively as possible.

Valuable business can be lost when computers crash or websites are not functioning.

Both existing and new customers could choose to go elsewhere and may not return.

No one wants their competitors to benefit from their IT glitches, but this can be avoided, particularly if you take the view that prevention is better than cure.

It is crucial to know the steps to take to avoid IT disasters, and how to deal with them quickly and effectively when they occur.

It can be hard to find the time when you've got a busy operation to run.

But developing good habits and effective processes can make all the difference between your business running smoothly and grinding to a halt.

Good housekeeping is key.

Simple actions, such as ensuring your virus checker is current, can be easily overlooked when other priorities are pressing.

But setting aside the time to keep things up to date can save much time, money and inconvenience.

Making sure data is backed up is an important priority too. Losing valuable customer information can



Kerr: taking steps to avoid "IT disasters" is crucial.

have a serious impact on your business.

I'd recommend automated on-site and off-site back up, as it avoids the possibility of human error and provides business continuity.

Often, when things are busy, dealing with IT issues is postponed until it's too late.

If you're seeing early warning signs, such as error messages, or if systems are slowing down, it's best to take action immediately.

Knowing when to call in an expert is important too.

Valuable time can be wasted and damage caused by trying to fix a problem which may be more serious than it looks.

Businesses of all sizes can benefit from having an ongoing agreement with a good IT specialist, who can ensure the problems don't arise in the first place. Alternatively, some prefer to be able to rely on their IT consultant to fix the problems as they arise.

The main aim is to have peace of mind that your IT systems are always working at optimum levels – freeing up your time to do what you do best.

Keeping better records

HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) has launched several new tools to help businesses keep better records.

The four free tools are available on the HMRC website (www.hmrc.gov.uk) and provide guidance on what types of records

different businesses should be keeping.

The tools have been launched ahead of HMRC's Business Record Checks programme, which will be introduced later this year. The programme will impose penalties on businesses for record-keeping failures.

Craft beer is a national treasure

It's going from strength to strength, but duty system must be reformed to help microbrewers fulfil their potential

SUCCESS stories in the drinks trade have been hard to locate since the recession first loomed into view.

That's why the rise of craft beer has been something to savour these past few years.

When I first joined SLTN, in 2001, the cask scene was still largely the preserve of the beer enthusiast.

No matter how good the beers were, the idea back then that cask or craft could break into the mainstream in the manner it has seemed a far off prospect.

That the small brewing scene has come to thrive so impressively is down to several factors.

Cask has its true home in pubs where it's lovingly looked after and rotated.

Ask SIBA (Society of Independent Brewers) and it will say the sector has undoubtedly been helped by the introduction and expansion of Small Breweries' Relief, which grants tax rebates of up to 50% for those producing less than 60,000 hectolitres per year.

Since the scheme was brought in under Gordon Brown's chancellorship in 2002, SIBA said its membership has doubled, along with the number of people its members employ.

The tax savings have allowed brewers to invest in new equipment, brewing capacity and in marketing their businesses.

At the same time, the craft brewing scene has almost certainly benefited as consumers have taken more interest in the diversity, provenance and authenticity of the products they buy.

As John Henderson of the new Scottish Borders Brewery attests, more and more people are seeking out goods that are different to the mainstream, made locally and underpinned by a good story – qualities many craft beers have in abundance.

But while the progress of the category shows no signs of slowing just yet, SIBA says a



glass ceiling is looming.

Pubs remain the most important route to market for many craft beers – indeed for cask ale it's the only route, not counting cask conditioned bottles – but those outlets are coming under increasing pressure thanks to current government duty policy.

Successive duty hikes in recent years, added to this year's VAT increase and rising inflation, are leaving many pubs with no option but to put prices up, according to SIBA.

And in the current climate, with fears over unemployment and public spending cuts, there's a very good chance the price of a good pint of cask could soon move beyond the reach of some.

Sure, there's a decent selection of craft and cask conditioned beers in the supermarkets these days, but home

drinking's not what this kind of product is about.

Cask has its true home in pubs, places where the beer is lovingly looked after and rotated to give drinkers plenty of choice.

If fewer consumers are able to enjoy such experiences it can only be bad for the trade (fewer customers are obviously bad news, with implications for jobs and businesses).

But it's also bad for the policy makers charged with tackling the country's problems with alcohol misuse, on the basis it could drive more people to drink at home instead of the supervised environment of the pub.

So in my view there are many reasons to cherish craft beer, and the Treasury ought to be mindful of that as it puts the finishing touches to this month's Budget.

More than a passing fad

BECOMING more efficient in your energy use isn't just the trendy thing to do – it can help your business realise genuine cost savings.

That was made abundantly clear in the interview we have this issue (page 24) with William Twaddle, who runs the Tayside Hotel in Stanley with daughter Joanne Hardy and her husband Neil.

William reveals a consultation with the Carbon Trust led the operators to make several

simple changes which have made a huge difference to the bottom line.

I certainly didn't realise just how much could be saved by segregating rubbish properly, composting food waste or even by bringing a freezer temperature down a few degrees.

It just goes to show that in these straitened times there are lots of ways important savings can be made. And in some cases it might even be the difference between succeeding and failing in business.