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Casinos adopt micro markets for faster and better food for employees

By [Megan Clemens](#)

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With casinos more often than not being a 24/7 operation, employers are seeking out new and more effective ways to feed their staffs. One potential solution for workers and management alike is the micro market, an automated store that not only provides numerous food and beverage options, but also saves money on the bottom line.

Although micro markets have only been around since 2010, the concept is quickly gaining popularity. According to The National Automatic Merchandising Association (NAMA), more than 9,000 micro market units will be in place nationwide by the end of 2014. NAMA also predicts that the category will grow to 35,000 units by 2022.

Micro markets, or unattended mini convenience stores, are workplace refreshment centers that offer a variety of fresh food with a self-service check out. From salads and sandwiches to snacks and an array of beverages, micro markets work to not only refresh staffs, but themselves as well; sending a message to a

local warehouse when a market needs re-stocking.

Gaming facilities have been among the early converts to the micro market product. “We have been servicing [casinos] since right about the time we started,” said Joe Mitchell, president of Company Kitchen, a producer and distributor of micro markets.

Unlike the vending machines you would typically find in employee break rooms, Company Kitchen offers more than a machine can deliver—crisp salads, fresh sandwiches, dairy products, fruit, yogurt, protein drinks, juices and more, along with 24/7 convenience. There is no cashier and all transactions are handled at the kiosk using a Company Kitchen card or on a personal debit/credit card.

“What we traditionally do is replace either a bank of vending machines or a small, convenience-sized full-service cafeteria,” Mitchell said. He explained that Company Kitchen found that casinos were spending more money than they needed to on employee meals—typically a hot meal service from the front-of-house kitchen or a smaller satellite kitchen. “But the cost of doing so has run the casino somewhere in the neighborhood of \$8-10 per employee, per meal. So what they’ve been offering is a benefit to the employee, but what Company Kitchen is able to do is to convert that to a defined contribution,” Mitchell explained. “Somewhere in the neighborhood of \$4-5 per meal, we can offer fresh, healthy meals ...with a greater variety than they would get in a cafeteria, where they’re just bringing down one or two pans of hot food. We can offer a greater variety for the employee to choose from out of the store.”

When it comes to payment options Company Kitchen also has come up with more convenient ways for employees to pay, and for employers to monitor it. Although credit and debit cards are accepted, Company Kitchen also offers a pre-paid card solution with an employee specific barcode, which can also be registered to their thumb print. “Employees get a certain amount of money on their card for each shift that they work and they charge that off as their meal.” Mitchell said. “They can add more money on their card if they want to spend more, and at the end of the day any money they didn’t spend goes back to the casino.”

Sidebar: Market Expansion

Founded in 2011, Company Kitchen (www.kitchencompany.com) has carved out a niche in the micro market business by focusing on gaming operations. The company’s micro markets are currently installed in the following casino locations:

- Binion’s Gambling Hall & Hotel—Las Vegas
- Colorado Belle—Laughlin, Nev.
- Edgewater—Laughlin, Nev.
- Harrah’s—Council Bluffs, Iowa
- Harrah’s—North Kansas City, Mo.
- Harrah’s—Metropolis, Ill.
- Hollywood Casino—Toledo, Ohio
- Hollywood Casino—Tunica, Miss.
- Hollywood Gaming—Dayton, Ohio
- Hollywood Gaming—Youngstown, Ohio
- Horseshoe Casino—Bossier City, La.
- Horseshoe Casino—Cleveland
- Isle Casino Hotel—Black Hawk, Colo.

- Isle Casino Hotel—Waterloo, Iowa
 - Lady Luck—Blackhawk, Colo.
 - Thistle Down Racino—Cleveland
 - Wheeling Island Casino—Wheeling, W.Va.
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SPACE NEEDS

In order to have a Company Kitchen installed, operators will need the space to put in the store, which is essentially one wall with a minimum of 13 linear feet. Everything they put in is modular and can be customized to fit a space. Second is electrical power, enough to run a few refrigerators and the kiosk. And finally the piece that holds it all together is an Internet connection.

The Internet connection is used to record sales transactions, which reports back to Company Kitchen servers, which sends a replenishment order to the warehouse, driving the process of keeping the store filled and fresh products being refilled on a regular basis. Some micro markets also provide HR professionals wellness support, allowing HR to see the collective nutritional habits of their employees, as well as to monitor if employees are stealing or misusing the micro market.

Mitchell said that excitement around micro markets is building in the casino industry as employers learn about their convenience and money-saving power. “As far as I’m aware [Company Kitchen is] the only one that has been specifically designed with the capabilities for loading and unloading of funds onto an employee’s card,” he said. “It’s an area that we really also have a much greater experience in. We’re really the first micro market concept to come to a casinos and we have by far the largest market share in that vertical.”

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