



## Weathering the consumer storm:

### What's the right technology for retail's toughest environments?

All retail technology must be robust enough to cope with the stresses and strains of multi-channel, multi-site demands, but some environments test the capabilities of today's solutions to their limits. What are the unique challenges of operating in an 'extreme' environment, and how can technical decisions impact consumer experiences? Here, [BCP's](#) Richard Marshall, explains.

Today's consumers crave high standards wherever they shop. However, when it comes to retail 'on the edge', motorway services probably take the title of the UK's most demanding shopping arena.

Harassed parents who've spent hours in an enclosed vehicle with crying children; concerned couples who are running late for a friend's wedding; tired HGV drivers who have queued for miles in stationary traffic; there are hundreds of scenarios to demonstrate why most motorists and their passengers arrive at a motorway services in a less than relaxed state of mind!

Moreover, when they do pull into the car park, the aim of the game is to get in and out as quickly as possible – whilst dealing with the variable requirements of each member of their party. This can often mean queuing at several food outlets to make sure everyone has their preferred choice of lunch, plus stopping at convenience and other stores before leaving to pick up drinks, magazines and essential items that were forgotten when packing.

There are over a hundred motorway services in the UK, all of whom are trying to meet the needs of these time-starved, end-of-tether consumers around the clock, on a daily basis.

Whilst rising to this challenge will – in some part – involve getting the right vendor mix and customer service credentials in place, day-to-day running is reliant on the technology that supports and underpins each outlet. A technical glitch is frustrating for a retailer or hospitality vendor at the best of times, let alone when there's a long queue of hungry customers who can easily jump in their cars and place their custom elsewhere. It might even make them think twice about stopping at those services again!

Historically, motorway services have tended to address this problem by seeking what we call a 'fat' solution; heavyweight terminal equipment, linked to an industrial strength database. The logic behind this is the more robust the devices and accompanying network, the less chance there is that something will go wrong.



However, leaning towards this approach has its drawbacks. Yes, it's very resilient, but there is also an enormous infrastructure maintenance cost. On-site solutions can also be difficult to fix when something does go wrong.

This has pushed forward-thinking retailers towards swapping out such technology in favour of solutions that offer agile functionality, without the bulky support network: electronic point of sale (EPOS) systems based in the cloud.

Not only does a cloud based EPOS system reduce hardware and infrastructure costs, by making effective use of lower consumption technologies, the comparatively lightweight devices reduce equipment maintenance needs. Plus, the majority of technical issues can be addressed remotely if something does go wrong, and system updates can be despatched in real time from the cloud – to keep hardware and software running at optimum speed and functionality.

Of course, ensuring systems are operating smoothly is only half the battle won. Motorway services retailers and hospitality vendors use that foundation level of reliability as a platform for development, to keep their customers even happier!

For this, one of cloud architecture's great advantages is the network-wide data integration it enables. With all devices on site using the same, robust operational system, and further devices able to connect to the cloud to draw down information, motorway services operators and vendors have access to real-time operational details.

This means businesses have the flexibility to adapt quickly to changing consumers demands, and replenish stock at greater speed. It also enables more comprehensive reporting, to reveal insights that drive long-term improvement in customer experiences.

Already we're seeing service station retailers and hospitality vendors successfully using cloud EPOS systems to improve their agility and speed, and sites that are still using longstanding terminal solutions are showing an interest in moving over to the cloud.

If these businesses can use technology to keep customers happy when their stress levels are at breaking point, imagine the support cloud EPOS can provide in a more relaxed environment!

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