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The cash register, a staple in the retail industry for years, has increasingly disappeared from the counters of stores nationwide. In its place, you'll frequently find a variety of tools that resemble a cash register but offer a much wider array of features, such as a touch-screen terminal, product scanners for quick product processing, and a card reader to swipe debit and credit cards. For many of these systems, the most identifiable remaining item is the cash drawer. Unlike the mechanical calculators of previous generations, modern point-of-sale systems provide store associates with quick access to a comprehensive list of products in inventory. With a simple touch or click, they can now access detailed customer information and retain that information for future targeted marketing efforts. Gift certificates are rapidly being replaced with gift cards, changing in the last 10 years from simple paper certificates to something resembling a private credit card loaded with money and processed electronically. We also see more retailers are offering loyalty and/or member rewards cards, where customers presenting the cards earn points towards future purchase or are given targeted special pricing on sale items, permitting special deals for those best customers.

Where exactly does your client's retail business fit? Are they a small gift shop or a high-transaction retail shop? Do they maintain a web store or offer customers a mail order option? Do they have multiple locations throughout a city, or even the country?

These are a few of the things you'll need to determine prior to advising a client on the purchase of a point-of-sale system. The good news is that even the smaller retailer or single-store owner can now have access to many of the features previously found only in more expensive programs.

In this review, we've looked at the following categories, keying in on specific features

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Specialized Features/Services – Going one step above basic system functions, this category looks at touch-screen capability, e-commerce support, customer management capabilities, and loyalty and reward program support. Keep in mind that some retailers may have no need for these specialized functions, so the rating for this section may be of no consequence in such instances.

Tracking/Reporting – Reporting options can often be overlooked in POS systems in deference to other features, but reporting capabilities are essential for retail business owners. Everyone needs to know how their business is operating. To that end, in this section, we looked at available reporting options, real-time reporting, inventory tracking and customer demographics, and if an audit system is available.

Integration/Import/Export – This category evaluates full system integration with a vendor's own suite of product as well as with third-party systems, the availability of integrated shipping options, hardware integration, and time clock support.

Help/Support – Another area that is sometimes given lesser consideration, support options can be particularly important to the retail business owner who often works outside normal business hours. Will support be readily available if there's a problem? This section also evaluates support plan options, system updates, and what support or documentation is available on the product's website.

Clearly, this review cannot cover all areas that may be important to retail business owners. A visit to the various product websites is always vital, as additional information, downloads and system demos are frequently available. Reading these reviews, visiting the respective websites, spending some time talking to the vendors and asking for references for those on your short list can help make the final decision to purchase a new POS system just a little easier. n

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