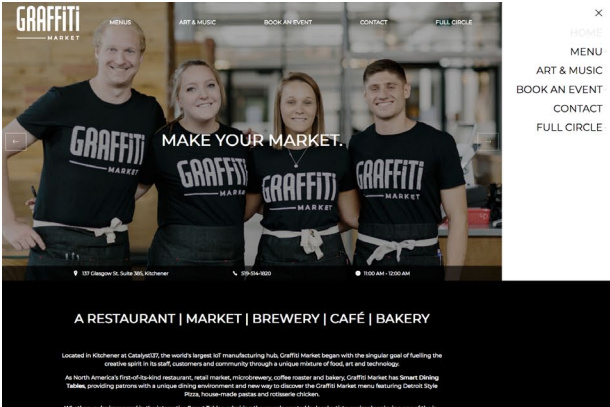OpenPhone

Sociavore

Locally designed apps for business-related problems

Alex Kinsella

My day job at Communitech exposes me to some of the most cutting-edge technology you can imagine. It seems like every day is a chance to hear of a new software service or to try out hardware products that were just science-fiction dreams 50 years ago. I have friends who work on advanced robotics to help surgeons. Some of my former colleagues are building cryptographic security systems to protect against future quantum computer attacks.

We talk about these kinds of technologies often – especially when we're trying to set up a conference call or connect a laptop to a projector. ("Can you believe we're building a hyperloop transit system, but we still can't get four people on a call on the first try?")

Of course, I'm excited by these game-changing technologies. But I'm also excited when a company comes along and solves an everyday issue.

Let's take a look at two local products that tackle business-related problems. (Sorry, neither of them will help you connect a projector to your laptop.)

OpenPhone

When someone asked me for my telephone extension at work, it took me a few minutes to remember that I even had one. Of all the standard office staples (pardon the pun), the one that has changed the most is the office phone system.

When I started working, it took a week to get an extension added for a new employee and that usually involved a visit from a technician to update the system. When I call someone at work today, the call most often goes directly to their mobile phone. If they have an extension, the call is sent to that same mobile phone.

This change – and the many continuing changes in the way we work – is what led Mahyar Raissi and Daryna Kulya to develop OpenPhone. OpenPhone gives you a business phone in an app instantly.

"We spoke to people who used their personal phone for business and they hate it," Kulya says. "As their business grows, their phones aren't growing with them. OpenPhone does."

Getting started is simple. You either select a new number from www.openphone.co or port your existing number over. This includes toll-free numbers. Once you're set up, you can download the OpenPhone app for your iOS or Android-powered smartphone.

It is a Voice Over IP (VOIP) solution that lets you make phone calls over an Internet connection instead of using a cellular phone network. When a customer calls, there is no difference between the OpenPhone call and one made to a traditional office phone system.

The app gives you a separate business phone on your mobile device. Beyond the basics of making and receiving calls and texts, you also have a business-only voice mail system. You can also set specific hours so that your business calls go straight to voice mail when you're not working. The app also keeps business contacts separate from your personal contacts.

Whether you're a freelancer or running a small business, OpenPhone provides all the functionality of a business phone with additional features to help you stand out from the competition. It costs $12.49 CAD per month for unlimited calling and texting.

Sociavore

For me, the experience of going to a restaurant begins before I even walk in the door. The process of choosing where to dine out has evolved with social media.

My Instagram feed consists mainly of the restaurants, bars and diners in town that I love going to. Their feeds provide me with updates of weekly specials or events – or just remind me that I haven't been to Ethel's Lounge in a while and that I really do need their pulled-pork nachos.

When restaurants focus their attention on social media, their websites often suffer. How many times have you gone to a restaurant's website to find a blank events list, out-of-date menus or worse – no website at all.

Growing up in his family's restaurant exposed Thusenth Dhavaloganathan to these problems. Working with co-founders Amina Gilani and Taneem Taldar, Dhavaloganathan set out to build Sociavore (www.sociavore.co), a digital hospitality platform.

Sociavore is built with restaurants – and their potential diners – as its core focus. From menus, to social integrations to food delivery, Sociavore can handle almost every online requirement of a hospitality business.

Graffiti Market, one of the region's newest restaurants and the latest addition to Ignite Restaurant Group's roster, launched with Sociavore this summer.

"We have multiple brands to manage and one of the many benefits to Sociavore has been its ease of use and brand consistency between multiple restaurant websites," says Neil Huber, co-owner of Ignite Restaurant Group.

Other local restaurants, including Wildcraft Grill Bar, Borealis Grille & Bar and Red House, also use Sociavore to power their online presence.

I want to dive into two features that, as a patron, I find particularly important. Having celiac disease means I have to stick to a 100-per-cent gluten-free diet. It's an automatic no-go for me when a restaurant doesn't list gluten-free options. Sociavore makes it easy for an establishment to list dishes that contain various types of food allergens. And customers can easily filter the menu to specific items that fit their dietary needs.

Another valuable element is the messaging system. When you're running a restaurant, the last thing you have time for is answering the phone. Sociavore's built-in messaging system lets you engage with your customers in real-time chat or later via an email followup. It can also take online requests for catering or private events.

Sociavore service starts at about $45 per month and the company offers a 14-day free trial.

When people ask me what types of technology I find exciting right now, I often think of companies like Sociavore and OpenPhone – people building products that help businesses around the world run better. G

Alex Kinsella has been part of Waterloo Region's tech community since 2004 and is always looking for the next great gadget (or tacos, if it's Tuesday). Find him on Twitter at @alexkinsella