

Let's Get Digital

New tech emphasizes order accuracy and speed of service.

For quick-service restaurants, drive thrus are, in many ways, the lifeblood of the company. Providing customers with an even quicker means of service—the convenience of literally grabbing food on the go, without getting out of their cars—is a critical element of success for quick-service models.

As technology and consumer behavior patterns change, however, operators are placing even more emphasis on their drive-thru infrastructure, strategizing new layouts and implementing a variety of new equipment in order to optimize the experience for customers and staff alike.

“The drive thru typically accounts for 50-70 percent of all quick-service sales,” says Rob Meiner, kiosk business manager for **Peerless-AV**. “Restaurants need to be able to quickly deliver food to consumers, while still ensuring all food meets customer expectations and needs.”

Accuracy and speed of service are frequently cited among the greatest challenges for quick-service operators, and for that reason brands are installing new devices to help solve inconsistencies and lag times.

“Operators are extremely focused on moving customers through the drive thru as quickly as possible,” says John Moezzi, national account manager for **NEC Display Solutions of America**. “Highly reliable, full-digital display solutions with POS integration are increasingly important to achieving this outcome.”

One of the biggest changes is a move toward digital menuboards, which provide a higher level of personalization and control for operators. While indoor digital menuboards have been embraced by many brands over the past several years, replacing static signage in the drive-thru space



has been a slower shift—until now.

“Digital menuboards in the drive thru have finally come of age,” says Scott Marentay, global director of outdoor service innovation for **Acrelec**. “The increasing affordability of outdoor displays has also made these products more accessible for quick-service operators across segments.”

The move to digital provides operators with increased flexibility and control—including the ability to schedule or change out daypart menus with the single click of a button, emphasize limited-time offers or seasonal items, and display branded messaging to passersby when cars are not present in the queue.

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age, different consumer behaviors have come to the forefront,” Marentay says. “Operators have to continue to deliver along all the metrics they always have, but the average consumer is driven less by brand loyalty than they used to be and craves an entire experience, rather than just a hamburger.”

While millennials are returning to quick-service restaurants and continue

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Top 3 Drivers			Current Hour			Current Day		
#	Driver	Cars	Avg	%	Cars	Avg	%	
1	Thurston, 00127	3:30	26	2:18	80%	60	2:08	64%
2	Powell, 00134	3:30	11	2:17	100%	62	3:00	94%
3	LaGrange, 00133	3:30	3	2:22	100%	13	2:37	77%

001192			Current Hour			Current Day		
#	Driver	Cars	Avg	%	Cars	Avg	%	
1	Woodruff, 00103	3:30	13	2:57	82%	69	3:06	54%
2	Hampson, 00105	3:30	8	3:05	100%	27	2:56	82%
3	McDonough, 00119	3:30	16	3:09	100%	66	4:03	60%
4	Columbia, 00144	3:36	38	3:34	86%	116	4:11	85%
10	Galveston, 00151	3:30	30	3:34	30%	142	3:30	82%

Bottom 3 Drivers			Current Hour			Current Day		
#	Driver	Cars	Avg	%	Cars	Avg	%	
10	Galveston, 00131	3:30	20	3:34	30%	142	3:30	82%
11	Galveston, 00169	3:30	42	4:26	31%	111	4:19	50%
12	McDonough, 00159	0:00	0	6:00	0%	0	0:00	0%





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to be the driving force in the success of many fast-casual brands, younger consumers are exacting with their expectations. According to a FoodBytes report from Datassential, millennials are more likely than any other group to rank company values and brand identity among reasons to patronize a restaurant—and that identity must be evident across brand spaces, including in the drive thru.

“Changes in customer attitudes have given rise to the idea that maybe there are other things that push customers to the drive thru,” Marentay says. “Convenience is only part of the differentiator between brands.”

Other factors that attract consumers of all ages are the visual appeal of the drive

thru itself and the perception of quality service.

Surprisingly, data has shown that consumers are not as concerned with speed as operators are. Rather, the brands that have consistently ranked high on service in quick-service restaurant surveys are those that provide customers with pleasant interactions and accurate orders.

“It’s important that operators not treat drive thrus as an afterthought,” Meiner says. “Consumers pay attention to the decor, technology, and atmosphere of a drive thru, and if these areas are not addressed, consumers will likely choose a different location for their meals.”

By ensuring that the drive thru space supports overall brand messag-

ing through a well-maintained, functioning, and attractive display, operators can attract customers to their restaurant. And by delivering on consumer expectations for a consistently positive experience—by properly training staff to be mindful and polite—brands can attract guests back to their store over and over again.

“Operators have been a little myopic about what is important in a drive thru,” Marentay says. “What good is a 30 second window time if there are three minutes between cars?”

A properly designed drive thru indicates brand quality to consumers and will attract them to the restaurant if they are driving by. If customers have trust in the brand arising from overall brand image, units are more likely to have a consistent flow of traffic.

The layout of drive-thru lanes is often determined by the physical space allotted on a particular lot or store. Whenever possible, however, operators should give careful consideration to the flow of traffic that their drive thrus promote. For example, does the design ease congestion during busy dayparts, or does it create problematic roadblocks in the parking lot, which could deter drive thru and dine-in customers alike?

“A lot of quick-service restaurants are changing their drive thrus from single lanes to dual or side-by-side lanes,” says Joseph Ciampi, sales manager for food-service supplies and communications business at 3M. “This helps get more cars through per hour, ensuring speed of service and better accuracy.”

The visual perception of serving customers quickly is as important for a quick-service restaurant as the actual provision of speedy service. The length and condition of a drive-thru queue often operates as a visual cue for consumers driving by, who may quickly assess whether they have time in their day to stop at a particular brand location. A good drive-thru design will get customers in line—and a quality service experience will keep them coming back.

Lane layout is not the only consideration to be made, however, when operators are strategizing to improve their location’s order speed and accuracy. New con-



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sumer expectations for technology are also influencing drive-thru infrastructure.

“Drive-thru design plays an important role for operational success,” says Evelyn Pravaz, co-owner of **Summit Innovations**. “But technology will continue to pave the way on how customers would like to order and receive food.”

One way that some successful brands are using technology to improve the consumer journey through the drive-thru lane is by installing displays which provide consumers with information and entertainment beyond their ordering experience.

“Digital outdoor menuboards allow operators to interact creatively with guests and leverage dynamic selling suggestions,” says Dave Snider, director of systems integration for **Kenial**. “When no cars are present in the drive-thru lane, the content can be switched to full-screen ads, operating as a billboard and turning passersby into guests.”

Both customer and staff experience greatly improves through the use of digital displays, according to Meiner. These products allow employees to engage with customers at a higher level—before, during, and after the ordering process.

In addition, continued messaging can add to the average ticket of each individual car, improving overall performance metrics.

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“Digital signage can keep the customer engaged with the brand while they wait,” says Douglas Watson, president and CEO of **The Howard Company**. “Since drive thrus can represent 50-60 percent or more of quick-service sales, any upsell opportunity would deliver a big payoff in both the top and bottom lines.”

Many brands are experimenting with dynamic upselling, which incorporates individual customer data based on loyalty programs and previous visits into dynamic algorithms that create more relevant product promotions, such as a side salad or dessert.

“Dynamic suggestive selling is a great way to increase check averages in drive thrus,” Snider says. “Order confirmation systems can also be a great medium to passively suggest additional menu offerings.”

Many brands have implemented confirmation systems, which display a customer’s order so they can verify the information is correct before pulling forward to the payment window. This greatly

increases order accuracy—reducing food waste and ensuring customer satisfaction.

“The drive-thru option is only appealing to customers as long as orders are handled quickly and accurately,” says Paul Falkenbach, vice president for sales and marketing at **National Sign Systems**. “By showcasing a better brand experience in the drive thru, quick-service operators are more likely to attract customers.”

Reputation is important. Consumers are more likely to leave a bad review if they feel their ordering experience took too long, or if they drove home and found the wrong food in their bag. It is therefore critical for quick-service restaurant operators to implement systems that will help to alleviate consumer satisfaction pressure points such as these.

“Accuracy is tremendously important,” says Maurice Vincent, director of sales for **R.F. Technologies, Inc.** “It’s not worth getting customers through the drive thru quickly if they have to return because the service team messed up their order.”

According to Vincent, ensuring clear

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communication between the consumer and drive-thru attendants is a must. Implementing the right equipment and ensuring headsets, speakers, and mics are in good working order helps to ensure a customer's order is accurately understood and contributes to a positive overall brand reputation.

"In 2019, improvements in sound and digital display technology are entic-

time data and performance notifications," Remaley says. "This allows operators to isolate issues and identify opportunities to improve performance."

The ability to review drive-thru metrics in real time provides operators with the advantage of identifying staffing challenges or training opportunities relative to specific dayparts or traffic conditions—and they can access the data from anywhere,

tives is an important part of improving the drive-thru experience, because while updated equipment is critical to differentiating a brand, customers are ultimately most concerned with how they are treated by restaurant employees and whether they received the food they asked for.

"Technology for the sake of technology is not a good strategy," Remaley says. "If operators are paying for bells and whistles that they don't use or don't even know exist, what's the point?"

The technology used to improve drive-thru experience for customers and employees alike is interdependent on staff having the proper training and agency to fully use the features of that equipment.

"There's a new level of commitment, knowledge, and skill required to make use of technological advancements," Remaley says. "Technology alone is not the answer. Personal human experience and consistent performance are still essential to success."

According to Ciampi, finding a way to enhance personal interactions and humanize the drive-thru experience is another challenge operators face. Many brands are responding to that challenge by implementing face-to-face tablet ordering systems during high traffic times, in which operators and employees go car to car taking orders.

"This not only humanizes the experience," Ciampi says, "but also helps with quality control, order accuracy, and speed of service."

The ultimate goal is to use digital interfaces in order to improve human interactions. The combination of highly-trained service professionals in the drive thru with advanced systems for communication and targeted marketing creates a superior guest experience, resulting in higher traffic and conversions for operators.

"It's a misconception that drive-thru performance can't get any faster," Foley says. "It's also not true that to be fast you cannot offer friendly service. With the right tools, technology, and people on your team, it is possible to be fast, accurate and friendly—providing the optimal drive-thru experience for customers."



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ing more operators to implement digital menuboards, self-service kiosks, and mobile ordering and payment systems," Falkenbach says. "Order confirmation systems improve accuracy and better communication components improve overall speed of service."

Old-school timing clocks have also gotten an upgrade, according to Seth Remaley, senior director of sales and business development at **Mood Media**.

"Speed of service timers provide real

even if they are travelling between units.

"Drive-thru timers that consolidate reporting on the cloud are becoming more and more popular," says Paul Foley, president of **HME Hospitality and Specialty Communications**. "Being able to access the performance metrics for all stores from one central location makes it easier for operators to make necessary adjustments to improve performance where needed."

Using the data from these systems to identify performance and service objec-