A Sign of the Times

Digital menuboards offer greater communication and customization in drive thru

Digital technology continues to migrate from inside the restaurant to the drive-thru lanes. In addition to providing the same technology that allows operators to be more nimble with their menuboard pricing and changes, it also allows for customized messaging to the drive-thru customer. When used properly, outdoor digital boards can drive sales, improve speed of service, and increase loyalty and dining frequency.

Digital menuboards provide new opportunities to uniquely engage customers and play a vital role in today's innovative drive-thru quick-service restaurant operations, says Ken Neeld, CEO of **Delphi Display Systems Inc.**

"Not only can digital menuboard technology drive sales and customer loyalty through relevant and compelling content, it can increase operational efficiency by improving speed of service and order accuracy," Neeld says. "These gains can be achieved by leveraging the dynamic and adaptive capabilities of digital menus to engage customers in a more personalized way than is possible with traditional static signage."

By utilizing localized data, demographic trends, consumer preferences, time of day, and other real-time information, a digital menu system can dynamically adapt content to what is most relevant to the customer at the point of purchase, Neeld says. The result is a more personalized drive-thru experience.

Drive thrus, by their very nature, provide a unique opportunity to engage customers on a one-on-one basis from the time they enter the queue until they leave the pickup window, Neeld says. Focused customer interaction during those few minutes can create a unique and highly relevant experience. The advanced capabilities of digital pre-sell and menuboards allow operators to capitalize on the one-on-one relationship and improve customers' experience.

Neeld adds that adaptive digital menuboards can further benefit restaurants selling products with longer preparation times, such as fried chicken and pizza. By integrating the digital menuboard system into the inventory management system, the menuboard can promote and/or discount excess product before it expires thereby reducing waste and improving profitability. Additionally, products that are no longer available

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can be removed from the menuboard in real time, thus reducing frustration associated with ordering an out-of-stock item.

Looking ahead, technology advances will allow restaurants to construct a unique digital menu for each and every customer. This would especially benefit customers with food allergies, special diets, or other dietary restrictions. By utilizing various opt-in methods for capturing taste, nutritional, and dietary preferences, a digital profile can be created for each customer. When cou-

pled with technology that identifies customers in the drive thru, preference profiles can optimize the content on the digital menuboard in real time. When customers easily find products that are appealing, they order quickly, spend more on average, and are more satisfied with their experience, Neeld says.

For solution providers, the challenge lies in installing menuboard and signage technology in the drive-thru lanes at an affordable price.

Digital signage continues to get better and more creative, says Richard Ventura, vice president of business development and solutions at **NEC Display Solutions**.

The widespread use of digital technology is now filtering down to smaller brands. Digital signage in the drive thru can offer information and selling tools while incorporating each brand's message.

A hybrid model might make sense for many operators. Permanent menu items could remain on a static board while special offers and seasonal items could appear on a digital board. New laws require operators to post calorie counts on