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The Drive-Thru Fixer-Upper

Drive thru not working like it should? These tips should get it running smoothly in no time.

On a recent visit to shop his competition, operator Thom Crosby saw disappointment after disappointment in the drive thru. Bad customer service while placing and paying for his order, poorly dressed employees, and backed-up cars plagued operation after operation.

But to Crosby, the experience was more than just a bad lunch. It epitomized all that can go wrong with a broken drive thru.



Crosby, CEO of Pal's Sudden Service, a Kingsport, Tennessee–based regional burger chain, knows his drive thrus inside and out. He knows that, under full pressure, a Pal's store moves a car from the drive-thru window every 18 seconds. And through the Pal's Business Excellence Institute, Crosby works with all sorts of brands—restaurant and otherwise—to similarly maximize their own businesses.

While many quick serves focus on systemization and operational efficiencies to improve their drive thrus, Crosby warns that such moves can sometimes sideline hospitality and customer satisfaction.

“They’re not paying specific attention to the individual customer. A lot of drive thrus are set up to fail right to begin with,” Crosby says. “A lot of people think that efficiency is the trump card and they settle on effectiveness. That’s the wrong way. You can efficiency yourself to death.”

Crosby says speed and order accuracy are important, but that customer service is key to any drive thru’s long-term success. The only way to ensure that is to train and retrain staff, he says.

“In our world, every single day we have dozens and dozens of training opportunities going on for people who are already certified experts,” Crosby says. “We can show that that’s absolutely an investment that pays off: higher productivity, longevity, lower rates of mistake, faster service times, better hospitality.”

A high-performing drive thru must work like a fine-tuned machine. The smallest mistakes can quickly multiply and get out of hand with cars stacking up. The solutions for getting a drive thru up to speed are as varied as the problems, but industry insiders say many drive-thru fixes can be made quickly and inexpensively.

“It doesn’t have to cost money. It doesn’t have to be revolutionary. It doesn’t always have to have a lot of technology behind it,” says Juan Martinez, principal and founder of Profitality, a foodservice industrial engineering and ergonomics consultancy.

With industry-wide improvements in order accuracy rates, Martinez says, “speed is the new frontier” for drive-thru operators. But even with new technologies like order timers, employees can find ways to cheat the system, which highlights the need for continued staff training, Martinez says.

To improve speed of service, Martinez recommends a systematic labor review. Because a restaurant can only work as fast as its slowest link, it’s important to review the efficiency of every position on the line, he says.

A menu review is another quick and easy fix for failing drive thrus, Martinez says. In the rush to innovate, many operators add on newer products without considering how they’ll affect the drive-thru business. One product, like chicken tenders at a burger joint, can throw off an entire lunch rush with longer cook times. Martinez says operators need the discipline to ditch slower, unpopular items. That improves speed and ultimately customer service.

“If you don’t menu innovate, you die. If you don’t evolve the menu, you die. But if you innovate wrong, you kill yourself,” he says.

As it transitioned from carry-out and dine-in to drive-thru stores, Atlanta-based Wing Zone found it had to let go of some appetizers that had low hold times and long cook times, and it had to rethink its operating systems. The restaurants previously cooked wings made-to-order, but now they’re pre-cooked and dressed in one of 17 flavors to order at drive-thru locations.

“We’ve really had to reformulate our entire operating system,” says Matt Friedman, CEO and cofounder of the 85-unit chain.

Ticket times averaged between 12 and 14 minutes in Wing Zone’s traditional stores. But with new operating systems, that time averages between 2:45 and 3:30 in its two drive-thru units.

Streamlining drive-thru service is often much more challenging for smaller regional chains and independents. Investments in systemization and new technology like headsets, menuboards, and order-confirmation screens are sometimes out of reach for the smaller quick serves. But restaurant consultant Aaron Allen says even the smallest operators can make meaningful changes. He recommends making sure there’s a checklist in place for every system. It’s an admittedly simple idea, but Allen points out that checklists are used by even the most seasoned pilots, health-care providers, and law-enforcement officers.

“Even though they’ve done their jobs for years and years, they found the errors were greatly reduced when they created checklists,” he says. “That’s one thing every [quick serve] should have: checklists in place for every process. Not just in some three-ring binder, but where the employees can see it.”

Even with the best systems and protocols, the delivery always comes down to the employees, meaning the work culture and environment are key. Allen says to consider the different senses of urgency between a customer in a hurry and an hourly employee working an eight-hour shift.

“If you get paid by the hour, what’s the difference to you if it’s moving really fast or it’s not? You’re not getting tips at the drive thru,” he says of apathetic employees.

Allen says a fun and goal-focused work culture can make shifts more enjoyable for line workers and help improve drive-thru performance. “It’s always going to come down to the people,” Allen says.

The people are exactly what Checkers/Rally’s, the nation’s largest double drive-thru chain, sees as being key to improving drive-thru effectiveness. Corporate employees and managers tirelessly measure guest satisfaction and order speed throughout the 800-unit chain.

But Adam Noyes, chief restaurant operations and supply chain officer, says getting buy-in from shift leaders and employees makes a huge difference in delivery. Noyes says the best managers create a fun work environment and

reward employees. With their double drive-thru model, some Checkers stores have employees on each side compete against each other.

In the last few years, Noyes says, stores have grown more focused on speed of service since fully integrating the brand's timer systems with back-office software. Now all levels of management can easily view data on a store's sales, labor, and speed. That has put more emphasis on timing at the restaurant level, where staffers are constantly aware of order times.

Since 2009, average order times at Checkers/Rally's have dropped by more than a minute per guest, while transactions grew by about 10 percent in stores, Noyes says. But that metric also means customers are probably leaving happier. In their customer feedback system, Noyes says, customers often report speed of service as the key indicator of satisfaction.

This year, the burger chain expanded its manager bonus program to include all employees with 60 or more days of service. If benchmarks are met, employees are eligible for the monthly bonus.

"That helps," Noyes says. "But the biggest thing we see is that team members really look for leadership. When a manager sets the tone and expectation and has the team focused on it and they have fun with it, that's what gets the team energized."

While drive thrus continue to explore and experiment with new technology, experts warn that any operator looking to fix up his drive thru should not rely too much on these new tools.

Take order-confirmation screens and pre-recorded greetings, both growing in popularity at the drive thru. These tools can help streamline service, but one expert says they shouldn't be substituted for treating customers right for the few minutes they're on the lot.

"We don't see that as a negative, as long as you're adding to it the personal follow up. Just because we put all that in there, we can't look at it as a substitute for the personal touch," says Chris Tripoli, president of A'La Carte Foodservice Consulting Group.

With the mechanization of other industries, like banking and grocery-store checkouts, Tripoli says giving the customer a few seconds of individualized attention is key, whether it's suggesting an item or simply making them feel appreciated. "Those little personal touches are more important now than they've ever been," he says. "We're not getting very much service in other parts of our day. So I would stress customer service."

Tripoli says many drive-thru wrongs can be righted with changes in the menu, systems, or labor management. But sometimes a broken drive-thru calls for even more drastic adjustments.

John Miologos, executive vice president of architecture, engineering, and construction management for global retail and food design firm WD Partners, says operators should pay particular attention to layout, communication, and product delivery when surveying their physical spaces. He says the most common drive-thru design flaw is not segregating the drive thru from walk-in functions in a quick serve. Many quick serves were originally created when walk-in service was the majority of the business. Now that drive-thru business continues to dominate quick serves, he says, some operators may need to rethink their entire setup.

"The ones that work the best are the ones that understand those are two very different operational systems that have to be housed in that area, one serving the drive thru and one serving the in-store customers," Miologos says.

Drive thru dos and don'ts

Do:

- Create checklists for systems and procedures

- Constantly train and retrain staff and managers
- Offer rewards for staff and manager performance
- Ensure that drive-thru staff know the menu
- Create a fun and competitive work environment
- Make sure each job function isn't overworked or underworked
- Make menuboards and other signage simple and easy to read
- Think of your drive thru as a different segment than walk-up business
- Stick with the core menu offerings

Don't:

- Let technology trump the personal touch
- Try to sell everything at the drive thru
- Keep unpopular or slow-to-cook menu items
- Let customers sit unattended at the speaker or the window
- Sacrifice customer service for speed
- Make customers spend a second longer than is necessary on the lot
- Lose sight of what the competition is doing
- Put inexperienced or untrained workers at the window
- Jump to invest in new equipment or technology before you look at internal systems