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Final Piece of the Puzzle

Speed and accuracy are essential, but good customer service could be the key to building sales in the drive thru.



checkers

The best drive thrus run like machines. Simple goals are met over and over: Orders go out quickly, the food is delivered fresh, and the right orders get to the right cars. But in the drive thru, pressure can run high and the smallest mistakes can prove catastrophic, backing up lines and spelling disaster for both customers and the restaurant's bottom line.

With so much stress to deliver on metrics like speed and order accuracy, some employees might be tempted to forget about a seemingly secondary goal like customer service. After all, it's hard to quantify, difficult to spot, and tough to teach. But experts say genuine customer service can encourage diners to come again, while a bad service experience could be enough to convince a customer to never return.

For now, it would appear customer service is one of the last drive-thru components that is in need of significant improvement. Quick serves have invested heavily in all other areas, with pre-sell menuboard helping to speed up the process, order-confirmation boards preventing the confusion and disappointment caused by incorrect orders, and suggestive sells increasing the average ticket price.

Those operational improvements are reflected in brands' performance. Though volatile year over year, metrics for speed and accuracy have generally improved over time in QSR's Drive-Thru Performance Study. The seven benchmark brands studied this year completed orders with an average service time of 180.83 seconds. Accuracy rates for the seven brands for the most part hover just below 90 percent.

Strong customer service, however, remains elusive. In this year's Study, only 33 percent of visits to benchmark brands resulted in a "very friendly" customer-service experience, with 40.3 percent coming in as "pleasant." But industry insiders say it's hard to understate the value of giving customers something special by way of customer service—a warm welcome, a friendly smile, or a kind word.

“It’s not a transaction. This is an experience,” says Adam Noyes, chief restaurant operations officer for Checkers/Rally’s [restaurants](#). “They want to drive away feeling good about their three minutes. ... Having that connection with your guests is what I think really makes the difference in being able to steal share from your competitors.”

Operators say that smart [hiring](#) and training—and retraining—are the best ways to ensure that guests receive exceptional service. Checkers/Rally’s implemented a new automated hiring system that can detect customer-service skills early on. An [online learning](#) management system ensures that employees stay sharp. The two brands also offer bonuses to all employees, not just management. In addition to rewarding strong sales, speed, and accuracy, those bonuses offer incentives for meeting service-related benchmarks.

In the last six years, Noyes says, Checkers/Rally’s has reduced service times, as well as improved overall guest satisfaction, which includes metrics like staff friendliness. Ultimately, he says, drive-thru customers want it all.

“Guests lead very busy lives,” Noyes says. “This, many times, is an escape from work, or sometimes home. They want to be able to count on the fact that they can get their food quickly and hot. But you can’t just stop there. You’ve got to provide that friendly service, too.”

Some customers may be turned off by a drive thru that operates too robotically. But too much focus on speed can also hurt a drive thru’s quality and accuracy, says Scott Boatwright, Arby’s senior vice president of operations. “I don’t think the customers want to be herded through like cattle,” he says.

Boatwright says the roast beef chain puts quality first, not speed. But he adds that there’s no ignoring the role of good service. That means every drive-thru window needs an employee with a friendly personality and positive demeanor.

“I want to hear a smile through the speaker post,” Boatwright says.

That’s where hiring becomes key, because genuine friendliness just can’t be taught, he says. Some may be able to fake it for a while, but only up until something goes wrong.

“It’s a pressure cooker at lunch and dinner,” he says. “In those moments, you revert back to your natural tendencies and who you really are.”

Rob Savage, chief operations officer at Taco Bell, says building great customer service in the drive thru does indeed begin during the hiring process.

“We had a franchisee a few years ago at a conference tell us that you need to hire cheerleaders and teach them to make tacos,” Savage says. “We pay particular attention to selecting people who like to engage with people. That might sound like a no brainer, but in a world of these personal devices and game players, you don’t always find people that like to interact with others.

“We bring them in with that raw skill, and then we teach them our ways of doing it through our learning zone,” he adds.

Savage says that, several years ago, Taco Bell studied other top companies about tactics they used to empower employees and teach them great customer service.

“It’s not easy. We all look at it and say, well, couldn’t you just put a friendly person there,” he says. “Well you know what, first, finding that person; second, building their capability; and third, reinforcing that and rewarding

that as part of our recognition culture, all of those are important elements to bringing it to life. So you really can't take it for granted.”

There are some experts who still debate whether customer service is crucial at the quick-service drive thru. Some think that customers will forgive an employee's bad attitude so long as their order is delivered hot and fast, while others hold hospitality up along with the quality of the food. But everyone believes that great service can build loyalty, and loyalty increases the likelihood of repeat business.

“I think you build a little more loyalty to a specific store, but I think you also realize if you're on the other side of town or in another town, that you're still going to get that same level of hospitality and service,” says Thom Crosby, CEO of Pal's Sudden Service, a Kingsport, Tennessee-based regional burger chain.

Pal's has grown to something of a legend in the quick-serve arena; stores can move a car through the drive-thru window every 18 seconds under full pressure. And the Pal's Business Excellence Institute works to help an array of companies improve their performance. But for all its speed, service remains a focal point at Pal's.

“All businesses are built around human beings,” Crosby says. “And the sales transaction is based around hospitality and providing good food. I think it's vital in building repeat businesses and building relationships with your customers.”

That means no station is ever unattended at Pal's. And because orders are taken face-to-face, each customer receives a few seconds of eye contact and conversation. The service training at Pal's goes so deep that employees receive tips on how to politely end a conversation should they need to move along to the next car in line.

Crosby fears that this kind of old-fashioned service mentality is too often getting lost in drive-thru operations.

“I think there's been a pulling back away from the concept of hospitality industry-wide,” Crosby says. “I think everybody is more about speed, moving the line, and trying to beat the clock.”

But for an industry built on value, speed, and consistency, that extra little bit of service can go a long way.

“At the drive thru or at the counter, you're only limited to a few seconds of actual eyeball-to-eyeball human service,” says Chris Tripoli, president of A'La Carte Foodservice Consulting Group. “And I think that's why the industry has told itself it's not that important. When you start adding even a little bit of service, people notice. ... Service in a non-service-related expectation is a nicety, because we are such a hurried society now and we're so impersonalized. We're doing so much that's impersonal, that just that little personal touch does get noticed.”

To make the outside experience more pleasant for customers, Tripoli says, quick serves should look to indoor restaurant operations. The restaurant industry teaches waiters, hosts, and bus boys how to personalize their service, compliment orders, and dress appropriately. Many of those same tips carry over to the drive-thru lane.

“Say through your microphone what you would say at a table,” Tripoli says.

Brands that truly want to make service a priority must ensure it's embedded at all levels of the operation, he says. By its nature, service training should look different from training that focuses on speed, safety, or new products; hospitality can't be easily described in a checklist. It takes front-line employees who actually care about the work they're doing, meaning management must make sure that service initiatives aren't perceived as just another mandate from above, he says.

“The people that do the doing have to feel it’s important,” Tripoli says. “Sometimes they even have to be the ones to make the suggestions. It creates a culture at the lowest level with the people who do the work.”

If employees don’t value service and they’re rude or indifferent, it could leave more than just a bad taste in customers’ mouths.

“They will tend to let it slide once, because everybody has a bad day,” says Ohio-based restaurant consultant Jerry Delventhal. “But if they discover that that person is like that all the time, they’re going to look at going to the next guy down the road, because nobody wants to deal with a grumpy person. And unfortunately that does happen.”

Delventhal has worked with full-service and quick-service brands, though most of his current business centers on coffeehouses. He says even the most rushed morning commuters still desire more out of their coffeehouse experience than just a quick cup of Joe.

“They want it fast, they want it correct, and hopefully with a smile. And if they do get that smile, they’re more likely to come back more often,” he says.

Because of its very nature, the drive-thru operation functions differently than the dining-room business. In the drive-thru lane, crewmembers only get one shot to get the experience right, whereas dine-in employees have opportunities to tweak customer interactions during the process.

Executives at Carl’s Jr. believe that because the drive thru is so streamlined, customers at the window are most interested in three things: speed, friendliness, and order accuracy, says Eric Williams, executive vice president of operations. That means the drive thru gets a lot of backup at Carl’s Jr. Timers, scripts, order-verification systems, and even a “speed team” of employees make the whole operation run smoothly, Williams says. But that doesn’t mean service is lost.

“Our drive-thru guests expect fast, friendly, and efficient service, and our goal is to exceed that expectation,” he says.

For any quick serve, much of the challenge in the drive thru is finding a way to maintain brand identity on the fly. If a brand is known for doing something unique inside, operators say it should try to find a way of replicating that at the window. That’s a prospect many fast-casual concepts continue to face as more of them experiment with adding drive-thru service.

Take MOOYAH Burgers, Fries & Shakes, a 50-unit national chain concentrated in the Dallas area, as an example. It added drive-thru windows at two Texas stores and is experimenting to see if such an addition has potential on a larger scale. Aside from working to make sure communication and food quality are steady across the dine-in and drive-thru experiences, the brand is guaranteeing that those customers pulling up get the same level of care as those coming in, says Alexis Barnett Gillette, director of marketing.

“They should absolutely be consistent,” Gillette says. “One of the things a lot of our guests really like is when they walk in, we say, ‘Welcome to MOOYAH.’ And we’re genuinely excited and eager. So one of the things you should hear when you pull up to the drive thru is ‘Welcome to MOOYAH.’”

In MOOYAH dining rooms, employees follow up with customers, picking up trash and asking about the food. While those opportunities aren’t always present at the window, Gillette says, there are still ways for crewmembers to relate with customers by complimenting their order or even talking about their own favorites on the menu.

But personalization at the drive thru can go even further—much further, says Howland Blackiston, principal at the retail and design firm King-Casey, which worked with Burger King to birth the industry’s first combo meal in 1989. Blackiston wants to see restaurants push innovation and make the drive thru every bit as special as the dining room. That might mean making the lane more aesthetically pleasing or rolling out technologies that help speed up the process. But he also thinks hospitality can play a much larger role, too.

“Everybody likes to be treated well and have a nice experience,” Blackiston says. “You almost expect that. I think customers want that, and maybe more than ever these days. That’s very important, but it’s not innovative. That’s just necessary.”

Customer preferences, he says, play a big part in how hospitality can deliver stronger sales and even long-term consumer loyalty. He points to the way some hotel brands, like Ritz-Carlton, take note of small details, like a guest’s preferences in the mini bar or on the radio. Those get put into a database and the next time that guest stays at a Ritz, the room will be stocked with extra of his or her favorite mini-bar goods, while the preferred music genre will be playing when the guest checks in.

“Why would I stay anywhere else?” Blackiston says. “That’s really wowing the customer with service.”

But this kind of service doesn’t have to be relegated to luxury brands, Blackiston says. Quick serves could find a way to track customer favorites, and if they see that someone regularly orders smoothies, employees might suggest this month’s new smoothie flavor. Blackiston says such tracking could help brands beef up the bottom line and build a whole new level of loyalty.

“To compete, you’ve got to be polite and friendly—but I’m talking about innovation,” he says. “Why can’t we create a database of our customers? We know what they like to eat, we know what they like to drink.”