

# SMARTCHAIN

VENDOR RESOURCES / TRENDS / NEW PRODUCTS

Limited-Service, Unlimited Possibilities

## QSR

APRIL 2023

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# THE FAST TRACK

Off-premises and drive-thru programs are changing quickly.

■ BY KARA PHELPS



# Expanding Off-Premises Options

To stay competitive, operators are adapting to new guest behavior.



DoorDash

The last few years saw an explosion of growth in off-premises dining. According to The NPD Group, drive-thru orders increased by 20 percent from February 2020 through February 2022. The onset of COVID-19 and related lockdowns no doubt contributed to this behavior—after all, many locations saw dining rooms close and 100 percent of traffic routed through the drive thru. The pandemic also increased the demand for other ways to order and dine, from grab-and-go meals and mobile ordering to third-party delivery, fast lanes, and AI recognition. Today's guest behavior patterns continue to shift.

"Customers have incorporated off-premise dining into their regular habits, and restaurants have evolved their operations accordingly to meet customer needs by increasing how customers can interact with their concepts and emphasizing operational quality," says Ryan Parietti, head of U.S. restaurants at **DoorDash**.

Even though restrictions on indoor gathering have subsided and consumers have returned to the dining room, the off-premise dining experience is still an enticing one. "Many consumers still expect the flexibility of off-site dining to remain an option," says Matthew Dieden, director of product marketing at **HungerRush**.

On top of that, some restaurants dealing with current ongoing labor shortages have gone off-premises only—appealing to diners looking to get meals quickly without the additional obstacles of a short-staffed location. "Recent data reveals that

**"Many consumers still expect the flexibility of off-site dining to remain an option."**

79 percent of customers say they should be able to use technology to place food orders to lessen the labor burden for restaurants," Dieden says. "Whether or not the labor shortage improves, online ordering has become an expected feature of modern restaurants, and those who have invested in a tech stack enabling off-premises ordering will generate significantly more revenue than those that haven't."

Consumers appreciate—and expect—a wide variety of options for ordering, pickup, and dining. Restaurant operators are searching for ways to optimize their businesses for higher volumes of traffic in certain areas. "Operators are striving to be better, faster, and friendlier, while managing significantly higher volumes and more touchpoints than ever before," says Jason Bertellotti, president of **HME Hospitality & Specialty Communications**. "It's no longer just about serving customers in the lane quickly and efficiently, but also about meeting service expectations at every additional touchpoint like curbside and mobile pickup spots." Before 2020, these curbside and mobile pickup spots were less common—if a restaurant brand





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decided to implement them, they were often considered an optional perk for customers. Today, however, curbside and mobile pickup spots—and even secure food lockers—play a critical role in successful drive-thru operations.

The pandemic also saw the meteoric rise of third-party delivery services, which consumers have also folded into their everyday lives. As the use of third-party delivery increases, restaurants are adapting to better serve their customers. “If delivery service provider (DSP) pickups are done at the drive thru, as opposed to in-store, this can increase drive-thru wait times for drive-thru customers,” says Jay Burdette, senior director at **Panasonic Connect of North America**. “At the drive thru, it’s all about wait time and order accuracy. Automation, AI augmentation, and effective line-busting are ways to handle DSP pickups, separately, and they can all be part of a successful operation.”

To accommodate higher traffic, many restaurant locations are adding new drive-thru windows. “I believe the big story with drive-thru windows since COVID is the addition of additional windows per store to accommodate delivery services and customers ordering through apps. Both of these ordering platforms increased dramatically during COVID,” says Anna Ellis, sales and marketing manager at **Ready Access**. “Inline concepts that didn’t have a drive thru are adding walk-up service. Drive-thru concepts that had one window are now adding two, three, or even four.”

Ellis says the additional windows take pressure off traffic in the drive thru. They also allow restaurants to close the dining room if staffing is limited.

“Many of our clients are investing more in the drive thru, dedicating room for online orders, adding technology, finding opportunities to speed up service, and prioritizing their core products,” says Doug Watson, president and CEO of **The Howard Company**. “In addition, almost every restaurant is considering a drive thru even if they never have before.”

New store design is also changing as consumer behavior evolves. “Building on lessons learned from the pandemic,

HME Hospitality & Specialty Communications



**“Almost every restaurant is considering a drive thru even if they never have before.”**

stores are being designed with a smaller footprint than pre-COVID, and the area that is being removed is the dine-in area,” says Hector Vallejo, chief revenue officer, Specialty Fenestration Group at **Quikserv**. “Off-site and modular construction is allowing brands to accelerate store growth by expanding quickly. A compact drive-thru only location maximizes profit per square foot with multiple delivery points, including double drive-thru lanes and double pick-up windows.”

Smaller stores with a drive-thru and pickup window also allow more flexibility in terms of their location, especially in areas with limited real estate. In fact, several chains have restaurants that are walk-up and drive-thru-only with no dining areas. Chipotle’s Chipotlanes, for example, do not have menuboards. Instead, customers order through the app and simply pick up their food at the window.

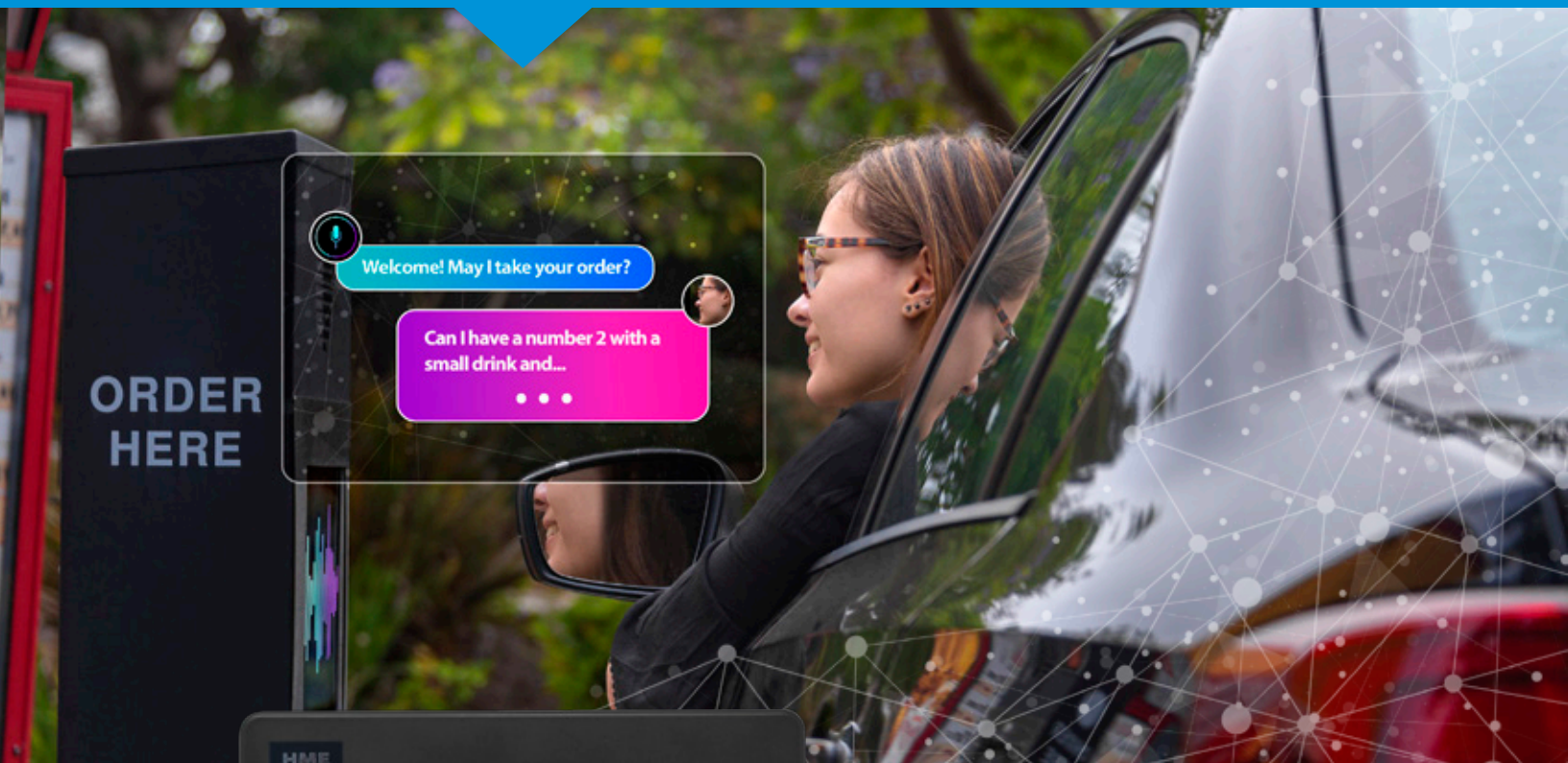
“Whether customers are ordering on

an app to retrieve their order at a designated pickup lane, or a DSP is utilizing the drive thru to deliver the order in a timely manner, the key component is still convenience and efficiency,” says Megan Zeller, senior director of business development at **Peerless-AV**. “This also increases the need for quick-service restaurants to be quick and accurate, as they are now juggling multiple sources of order placement. However, the use of mobile or DSP ordering has the additional advantage of orders being placed ahead of pickup, giving quick-service restaurants more capacity to take orders from the drive-thru or inside the establishment since they have the ability to prepare pickup requests ahead of time.”

As consumers experience the more frictionless and personalized elements of mobile and third-party ordering, they expect to see the same in the drive thru. “These order journeys should maintain the same levels of ease and convenience by leveraging technology at key touchpoints,” says Matthew Simpson, head of new product and design at **Coates Group**. “A dynamic CMS that allows for targeted messaging, identification through loyalty, and contactless payment are just a few ways in which the drive-thru can offer the same conveniences of a mobile order-

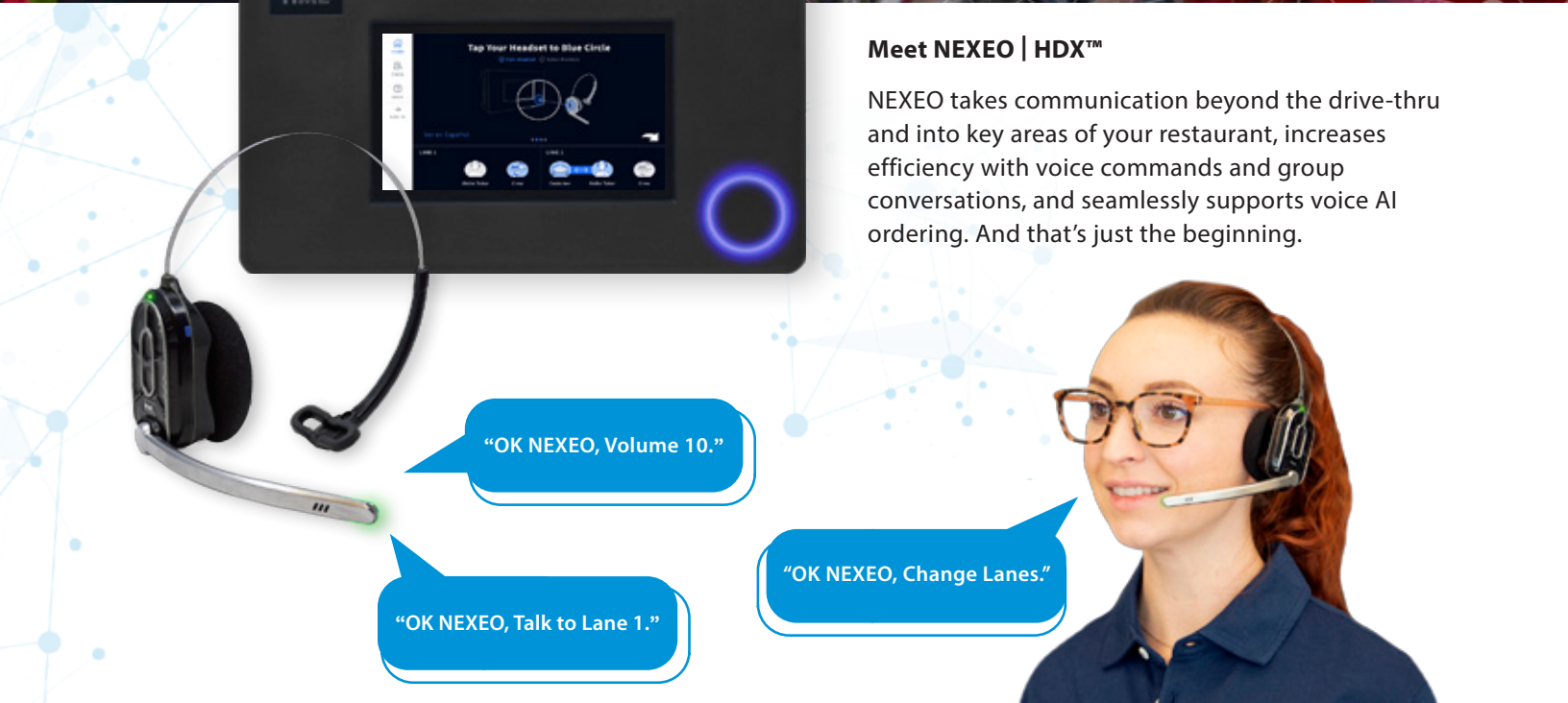


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ing experience.”

Mobile ordering can also be leveraged to improve in-store wait times. “There is a need to enhance technology to facilitate mobile orders in a drive-thru lane and in-store pickup,” Simpson says. “This eliminates the frustration of ordering ahead and still facing extended wait times during pickup.”

Consumers are now accustomed to entering stores for a short period of time, picking up their order, and leaving. They expect their order to be ready and accurate before they arrive, without waiting in the drive-thru lane. “Drive thrus are no longer the only option for rapid order delivery, and quick-service restaurant brands have had to contend with investing resources in making sure that online orders and deliveries are equally as efficient for customers,” says Chloé Bisiaux, director of products at **Acrelec**.

With the high level of efficiency required in the front of the house, top-notch back-of-house execution is more important than ever. Staff won’t have an

## “Mobile ordering and third-party delivery are here to stay.”

opportunity to fix an incorrect order if it’s routed through a third-party service, or if the customer grabs it and immediately leaves the premises. Customer satisfaction takes a dive, and the customer may request a full refund. “Restaurants have the opportunity to make errors right immediately within the dining room, but with takeout, everything needs to be right before an order leaves the kitchen,” Parietti says. “There are a number of steps that restaurants are taking to ensure this, including checking off items on receipts as they’re packaged, confirming drinks and desserts are included with pickup, experimenting with different packaging options, and ensuring that orders are fulfilled within the target wait time.”

Today’s variety of off-premises order-

ing options add operational complexity, but they also create new opportunities for brands to interact with customers. Even when customers don’t want to leave the comfort of their home or vehicle—or when they’re simply too busy to eat in the dining room—they can still enjoy a meal from their favorite restaurant. “Mobile ordering and third-party delivery are here to stay,” says Scott Mullica, director of product management at HME Hospitality & Specialty Communications. “It’s important to track and measure these touchpoints like we do with other areas of the drive-thru. Designate waiting areas for delivery drivers, track their wait times, and set up timer-to-headset alerts to notify your crew when the delivery driver arrives. The faster you’re able to get delivery drivers on their way, the better the experience for your customers and the better your reputation with delivery services. Adapting to these channels of service can be intimidating, but when executed well, it gives you an opportunity to reach more customers and connect with them in a new way.”



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# Better Tech, Better Data

New innovations are improving efficiency, order accuracy, and overall success.

The success of a drive-thru or off-premises program has always hinged on efficiency and order accuracy. Guests need to receive their order quickly, and it needs to be correct. These basics have only become more critical in recent years—and with the growth of contactless customer interaction, operations continue to get more complex, even as customers expect more seamless, per-

**“Technology-based experiences have become the norm—and expected.”**

sonalized experiences. Quick-service restaurant operators are rising to these challenges with the support of innovative technology.

“User experience is a core driver of investment, with complementary technology playing a

crucial role in reducing friction in the customer journey as people return to the same drive-thru environment but with new expectations following the pandemic,” says Matthew Simpson, head of new product and design at **Coates Group**. “To keep up with consumer demands for speed and convenience, it is important to invest in online platforms and develop a technology set for the drive thru or pickup that removes bottlenecks.”

Digital menuboards play a key role in a tech-forward drive-thru or off-premises program. They can help operators present a cohesive brand experience, promote limited-time offers, and more easily transition dayparts and price adjust-



ments. As consumers across every demographic become more tech-savvy, digital menuboards are also becoming a must-have. “Digital menuboards raise the bar among all generations because technology-based experiences have become the norm—and expected,” say Rodrick Glass, executive vice president of business development and subject-matter expert in food

and beverage for **Creative Realities** and Beth Warren, senior vice president of marketing and subject-matter expert in retail for Creative Realities and executive board member of the Digital Signage Federation.

Having signage that is simple and quick to update also ensures that restaurants can notify customers of out-of-stock items or menu changes instantly, rather



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than asking employees to verbally relay this information each time. “According to Databeat.net, digital displays capture 400 percent more views than static displays,” says Megan Zeller, senior director of business development at **Peerless-AV**. “With the increase in traffic in quick-service restaurant drive thrus, a crucial part of keeping up with this trend is creating a vibrant, easy-to-read, and appealing menuboard for customers.”

Digital signage can also expand beyond menus to relay other types of brand messaging to customers. It can, for example, provide in-store entertainment media while customers wait for their meals to help pass the time. “Additionally, having digital menuboards past the ordering point in the drive thru can be another way to increase advertising, like sharing content on the history of the brand or how certain products are made,” says Chloé Bisiaux, director of products at **Acrelec**.

While digital signage is a critical part of the equation to maintain efficiency and accuracy, a successful drive-thru or off-premises program needs an entire ecosystem of digital content to support it. Content management systems can tie into

loyalty programs to create personalized experiences for customers—while minimizing their contact with employees, as many consumers now prefer.

“Acknowledge that the average customer is more ‘digital’ than the business,” says Jeremy Brazeal, executive creative director of **Reality Interactive**. “Implement technology to use this insight to limit employee interaction to one touch.”

The data created through loyalty programs, POS systems, and other sources can also help operators gain insights into customer trends. “Customer data is a precious commodity,” says Matthew Dieden, director of product marketing at **HungerRush**. “Collecting customer data from online orders can drive new ways to connect with your customers, encouraging repeat orders and increased frequency of visits. This information can reveal what time your customers usually place online orders, how much they typically spend, which promotions are most likely to reso-

nate with them, and so on. By leveraging data, restaurants can effectively and efficiently reach their customer base.” Brands can strengthen connections with their customers by understanding how a customer prefers to be reached, at what time, and with what promotion or marketing technique—while encouraging them to visit more frequently.

It used to be much more difficult to capture and leverage off-premises customer data at the store level, given that delivery customers historically didn’t provide the same level of information needed to understand their behavior that dine-in guests supplied over time. Today, however, customers are used to providing data in the digital world, and that extends to loyalty apps, online ordering, and third-party delivery services. Operators now have an opportunity to learn much more about their customers and optimize their businesses based on their findings.

“As operators are looking for additional insights, technology platforms are adapting to meet those needs,” says Ryan Parietti, head of U.S. restaurants at **DoorDash**. “This includes access to a variety of items including customizable store reports, operational reports, information about orders like average ticket size and most popular items, details on customer reviews, or even intel on which zip codes are the most popular for their delivery business.”

Operational data is equally valuable to operators, highlighting business successes to double down on as well as opportunities for improvement that might otherwise have been overlooked. In the drive thru, for example, capturing data is about more than just tracking wait times for the sake of speed of service. “If operators have the right technologies, they can gather an abundance of actionable insights from their drive thru to enhance their operation beyond service times,” says Scott Mullica, director of product management at **HME Hospitality & Specialty Communications**. “For example, historical drive-thru reports provide a better understanding of your store’s volume trends, which can be used to determine staffing plans. Knowing volume trends can also

**“It’s all about wait times and order accuracy.”**







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help operators identify specific days or dayparts when they'll need to turn on and staff a second or third drive-thru lane."

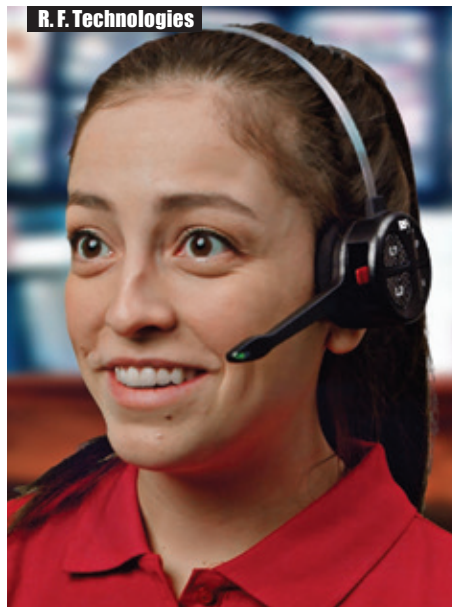
Comprehensive reporting offers visibility into high-performing and low-performing stores and staff, opening up opportunities for staff recognition and identifying areas of improvement. Operators can also better understand how seasonality, local events, weather patterns, and traffic patterns affect drive-thru demand. "Use detection methods beyond wired loops to expand vehicle tracking and gain a complete view of your operation in real time and in historical reports," Mullica says. "When you have complete visibility into what's happening in your drive thru—from parking lot entry to exit with order in hand—you gain a better understanding of your operation and of your customers' journey."

"It's all about wait times and order accuracy," says Jay Burdette, senior director at **Panasonic Connect of North America**. "Integrated timers with both loop and camera-based capabilities can provide data as far as total wait times, time from station to station, bailouts, and so on. AI-based systems can take this data in and help the owner-operator find ways to meet the increased demand."

Artificial intelligence (AI) is also beginning to appear at the point of sale, interfacing with customers and automating the order-taking process. Del Taco, for example, recently announced it will use AI-powered voice bots at several drive-thru locations to help decrease customer wait time and provide employees more time to focus on accuracy when bagging up orders.

"We're already seeing the use of AI technology and more advanced monitoring systems to help identify where gaps in drive-thru and off-premises service are and how to best improve," Bisiaux says. "AI is also used to enhance the customer journey with product recommendation, customer identification, and AI voice ordering."

In the aftermath of pandemic lockdowns and the pressures they placed on restaurants, many chains have taken the time to review every facet of their opera-



R. F. Technologies

Specialty Fenestration Group at **Quikserv**. (Air curtains are an invisible climate barrier installed to keep the outside air out and improve HVAC efficiency.)

A well-run off-premises program or drive thru is a finely tuned operation supported by the right equipment and technology. "Cameras can recognize when cars are in the dedicated off-premise ordering spots and which order it relates to, notifying staff to expedite the order—and the next generation of headset systems will enable multi-lane capabilities," says Joe Gierut, president of **R. F. Technologies**. "The result will be customers ordering by their preferred method, staff being ready to respond, and the most efficient operators gaining local mar-



Panasonic Connect of North America

**"The next generation of headset systems will enable multi-lane capabilities."**

tions and explore different ways to save costs and improve efficiencies. "As a result of these efforts, there has been a broader interest in the adoption of air curtains for all building openings, from the front and back door to the drive-thru windows," says Hector Vallejo, chief revenue officer,

ket share. For now, it's important to make sure the systems being used are scalable platforms to incorporate these rapidly advancing technologies."

The future of the drive thru and off-premises dining will be rich in innovation. "Technology is enabling restaurant operators to improve off-premises dining while also streamlining internal workflows," Dieden says. "The key for restaurants embracing technology is to ensure it all works together to create frictionless experiences. When technology is integrated correctly, it builds a connected restaurant experience that leads truly exceptional customer interactions."








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# Engagement in Line

What's the best approach to engage customers while they wait?



Customers who use the drive-thru lane, pickup window, or another off-premises dining program have distinct preferences and needs. To increase profitability, quick-service restaurant operators are searching for different ways to serve these customers—and to drive engagement and repeat traffic. Many brands are reaching customers while they wait for their orders, opening up new opportunities for positive experiences.

After a customer places an order in the drive thru or for in-store pickup, operators can start by using the wait time to confirm order accuracy. “Something operators should consider is adding order confirmation boards for customers to receive reassurance that their order has been

**“Customers are continuing to interact with restaurants they love in new ways.”**

recorded correctly, while also giving them the chance to place additional requests if they forgot to order something,” says Megan Zeller, senior director of business development at **Peerless-AV**. “According to Converse Now, digital order confirmation boards improve the average drive-thru wait time by 34 seconds by giving customers this opportunity to review their orders and allow staff to deliver an accurate order every time.”

Operators can also use signage to continue brand awareness campaigns after a customer orders. “Operators can educate on their offering, brand ethos, commitment to sustainability, or other important factors that key targets like Gen Z will affiliate with,” say Rodrick Glass, executive vice president of business development and subject-matter expert in food and beverage for **Creative Realities** and Beth Warren, senior vice president of marketing and subject-matter expert in retail for Creative Realities and executive board member of the Digital Signage Federation. “Inspire the basket with new LTOs to try, and offer an incentive to do so. Remind customers of other locations that might be convenient. Offer them incentives to have other people in the car or carpool order, engage, download the app, and so on.”

The mobile app experience can be another productive channel to develop. Brands can use loyalty apps to engage off-premises customers even while they’re on the go. “We’re seeing customer engagement and loyalty programs come into play as customers are continuing to interact with restaurants they love in new ways,” says Ryan Parietti, head of U.S. restaurants at **DoorDash**. “This is one way restaurants are looking to recognize, reward, and incentivize customers to come back time and time again.”

It’s clear that customers want apps, especially if they’re easy to use and accurately reflect everything on the menu. “A recent survey revealed that 51 percent of online orders are placed through a restaurant’s app, higher than those placed with a third-party app (38 percent),” says Matthew Dieden, director of product marketing at **HungerRush**. Security for customer information is also a key consider-



# SMARTCHAIN



These special reports in the pages of *QSR* help busy restaurant operators understand current trends & sources in a variety of areas vital to your business.

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ation in order to protect brand reputation and maintain customer loyalty.

Apps help keep brands top-of-mind among their customers, and customers enjoy using them. Through in-app activities, loyalty apps can even help keep customers from getting bored while they wait for their orders in-store or in the drive thru. “I believe that engagement with customers remotely through in-app content can be a great way to keep them entertained and preoccupied while they wait

**“[The customers’] whole purpose for ordering food this way is so they do not have to wait, so success is enabling this wherever possible.”**

for their orders,” says Chloé Bisiaux, director of products at Acrelec. “Mini-games, brand-specific advertising, reward lotteries, or free entertainment media that is provided to customers through quick-service restaurant loyalty apps would increase brand awareness, allow for greater advertising partnerships, and make their wait times less burdensome.”

Jeremy Brazeal, executive creative director of **Reality Interactive**, recommends quick-service restaurant operators consider building an engaging mobile experience and then pushing it heavily in their branding and brand marketing. “The key is to get the customer to link their phone into the process of fulfilling the order—from getting updates on the journey and each stage of it to watching their food get prepared in a fun, entertaining, and engaging way,” Brazeal says. “Ideally though, the priority of any technology implementation should be speeding up the food ordering process so there is very little need to engage off-premises customers. Their whole purpose for ordering food this way is so they do not have to wait, so success is enabling this wherever possible.”

Savvy operators should be able to mea-



sure the ROI and the overall effectiveness of their investments in this content. “Operators should adopt Build-Measure-Learn feedback loops to expand programs and content that are effective while abandoning those which are not,” says Scot Begovich, marketing director of **R.F. Technologies**. “A key to success in this area is keeping the content fresh. Stale content only makes the customer think it’s time for a change in their dining habits.” Effective communication—including being able to clearly speak with and hear the customer—is also critical.

In terms of branding, customers waiting for their orders are a captive audience.

Indoors and outdoors, opportunities for custom branding can be found on every piece of equipment, in addition to digital signage and employee uniforms. But customer engagement may suffer if it doesn’t prioritize efficiency. All content and communications directed toward off-premises and drive-thru customers ideally serves—or at least doesn’t stand in the way of—the end goal of helping them get their orders quickly.

While any wait can be made more engaging, customers recognize and appreciate when the priority stays on managing traffic volumes and improving service times. If customer engagement leads to slower times, especially in the drive thru, the effort becomes counter-productive. “If you determine that you want to engage customers as they wait—whether it be through a survey, loyalty program, or hard-to-pass promotions—make sure it doesn’t interrupt or slow down the customer journey,” says Scott Mullica, director of product management at **HME Hospitality & Specialty Communications**.

Ultimately, customer satisfaction will always be what matters most. “One thing has not changed—customers want great service,” says Doug Watson, president and CEO of **The Howard Company**. “That is not just about how quickly they get through the line and whether the team was polite. It is about the entire experience.”



Schedule dayparts for menu items to change during certain times of the day. Content and images can also rotate on digital boards.

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*Support sustainability goals when the door is open:*

-  KEEP flying insects out, chemical-free
-  PROTECT inside temperatures
-  KEEP vehicle exhaust & cigarette smoke out

**BERNER**  
AIR CURTAINS

*Save energy and create healthy, comfortable environments.*

CONTACT US TODAY 844.708.2500

## SMARTCHAIN KEY PLAYERS



### Quikserv

11441 Brittmoore Park Drive  
Houston, TX 77041  
800-388-8307  
quikserv.com

Quikserv is the leading manufacturer of drive-thru windows, ticket windows, and secure transaction systems. Quikserv supplies 45 of the top 50 global quick-serve restaurant brands with a large selection of in-stock windows, the fastest lead time in the industry, and a variety of custom options to suit every need and application.



### Ready Access

800-621-5045  
ready-access.com

Ready Access is your go-to source for drive-thru/walk-up service windows and air curtains. Designed with the largest restaurant chains for a perfect balance of durability, value, and function! Trusted market leader for over 50 years. Let our experts help find the best configuration for your restaurant.



### Reality Interactive

213 Court St., Floors 2 and 10  
Middletown, CT 06457  
860-346-2700  
realityyi.com

Reality Interactive is a multi-award-winning retail technology and design agency. The firm specializes in creating and managing innovative retail experiences using touchscreen displays, digital signage, digital media, and a full suite of interactive and creative technologies. Over the past 18 years, Reality has created hundreds of dynamic experiences partnering with some of the world's bigger brands and their agencies.



### R.F. Technologies

330 Lexington Drive  
Buffalo Grove, IL 60089  
800-598-2370  
rfdrivethru.com

Over the past 34 years, R.F. Technologies has become the full-service solutions provider to the restaurant industry, performing equipment repairs for all leading brands, maintaining a nationwide network of service technicians, and becoming a leading reseller of drive-thru equipment. Our Apex brand headset systems offer great value to chains large and small.

**QUICKSERV**

**OVER 50  
WINDOW  
MODELS  
IN STOCK &  
READY TO SHIP!**

**3-5 DAY LEAD TIME**

**WE SUPPLY 45 OF THE TOP 50 GLOBAL QSR BRANDS!**

**DRIVE-THRU  
WINDOWS    WALK UP  
WINDOWS    HURRICANE  
IMPACT    VERTICAL  
WINDOWS    AIR  
CURTAINS**

**SALES@QUIKSERV.COM - 1.800.388.8307 - QUIKSERV.COM**