

Curbside: The New Trend in Fast Casual Restaurants

AT A GLANCE

■ More than 20 percent of adults order more takeout from table-service restaurants than they did two years ago. (Source: NRA)

■ 78 percent of U.S. households purchase at least one carryout or delivery meal every month. (Source: 3M Communications)

The future of fast-casual restaurants may depend on how well operators adapt to consumers' desire to eat on the go.

According to the National Restaurant Association, more than 20 percent of adults indicated they order more takeout from table-service restaurants than they did two years ago. A 3M Communications study found more than three-quarters of U.S. households – 78 percent – purchase at least one carryout or delivery meal a month. And a Technomic Research report projected takeout sales to reach \$126 billion by 2007 across all segments.

Applebee's Neighborhood Grill & Bar has reaped the benefits of a curbside program. For the second quarter 2005, the company said Applebee's Carside To Go sales were more than 10 percent of total restaurant sales at company-operated units, up from 9.4 percent in the 2004 second quarter. Nearly 95 percent of the 1,600-plus domestic Applebee's units feature the curbside takeaway service.

Another company benefiting from curbside is Ruby Tuesday. The restaurant completed the rollout of its Curbside To Go takeout program in early 2004. Sales from the program accounted for about 6 percent of sales at company-owned units.

One fast-casual restaurant that has followed this trend is Fuddruckers, which has met the demand with a curbside service called Fudds To Go.

Curbside

Fudds To Go was developed by Long Range Systems, a paging and curbside solutions company based in Dallas and has been in use at Fuddruckers' Round Rock, Texas, location since 2004.

Fudds To Go utilizes an innovative system that doesn't require significantly invasive construction such as loop sensors, concrete posts or major electrical wiring.

"Our newest video camera solution for curbside service instantly alerts staff and monitors greet times and total service times," said Jim Livingston, Long Range Systems' vice president of sales.

The system provides reports on greeting and service times on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. Livingston said if the system is deployed throughout a franchise concept, each unit within the chain can view other stores' performance data.



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Other curbside products work, but several components must be purchased. For example, Chili’s Bar & Grill installed speakers atop concrete stands in its parking lots. Customers had to press a button to alert servers or managers, much like Sonic’s set up. But the speaker units didn’t fare well overall. Pushbuttons wore out within six months and customers crashed into the units occasionally.

Other restaurants have installed monitor and camera systems, but the system is only as successful as employees’ attention spans. When the staff becomes too busy to monitor the video, customer curbside wait times lengthen, eventually forcing them to enter the restaurant.

How it works

The Fudds To Go system monitors up to six parking spots with one camera. When a customer arrives, it pages servers and records the time elapsed until the customer leaves. The software allows managers to set goal times—such as greeting the curbside customer within 25 seconds. The software will alert a manager if this target time has been exceeded.

In addition, when the car leaves the spot, the total service time is recorded. The main screen of the curbside PC shows a running average of greet times, total service times and number of cars served. The system can even send this data to a manager’s pager periodically.

Christian Humphrey, general manager at Fuddrucker’s Round Rock location, said the new system is definitely working.

“Over the past year that we’ve been using it, it’s been growing slowly but steadily in popularity,” said Humphrey. “It’s not a huge part of our sales, but based on its

growth, we think it will begin catching on, so we want to continue to use it.”

Fuddrucker’s marketing manager Cassie McGraw said Fudds To Go isn’t going anywhere.

“We’re interested in growing it. Curbside service is a hot trend in quick-casual and we knew we had to jump on it quickly,” he said.

Although, a number of the older Fuddrucker’s locations lack room for Fudds to Go, all new locations will be outfitted with it. “But it’s a work in progress,” McGraw said. “We’re still working out some stuff, especially the name. We’re noticing some consumers don’t realize Fudds To Go is actually a part of Fuddrucker’s.”

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