

NEWS

Fast-food restaurants begin outsourcing drive-through order-taking

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PUBLISHED: January 25, 2009 at 11:01 p.m. | UPDATED: November 12, 2015 at 11:42 p.m.

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — That crackling voice taking your order at a fast food drive-through may come from a lot farther away than the restaurant: Try Texas, or even overseas.

San Diego-based Jack in the Box has tested outsourced drive-through order-taking since mid-2008 at seven of its 30 Charlotte, N.C.-area restaurants. Spokeswoman Kathleen Anthony declined to specify the locations, though workers at the Cotswold restaurant in Charlotte recently said it uses the system.

The technology is intended to improve speed, accuracy and service, freeing up restaurant employees to process orders, accept payment and address other needs, Anthony said. The chain has not reduced staffing as a result of the remote order-taking, and the restaurants can turn the system on and off as they wish, she said.

Still, it's piqued curiosity among local customers who have encountered heavy accents with order-takers, then rounded the bend to find different people handing them food.



"I had noticed it (several months ago), but I just thought the person taking the order was somewhere else in the store where we couldn't see them," said Elizabeth Banks, a Charlotte teacher and mother of three who takes her 15-year-old daughter and her daughter's friends to Jack in the Box for Oreo milkshakes most Friday afternoons. "It never occurred to me they might be out of the country."

At one point the girls asked the order-taker, "Where are you?" There was a pause, Banks recalled. Then, the person on the other end said, "Texas."

"I really don't think that's where they were," Banks said.

The Jack in the Box test orders are routed to a Texas call center operated by Bronco Communications, a company specializing in fast food order-taking, Anthony said. Some may be routed outside the U.S., she said, but she wouldn't specify where.

Companies began trying remote ordering in 2005. As with outsourcing in other industries, technological advances — namely high-speed Internet — made it possible. When customers pull up to the menu, a call center worker takes the order on a computer. The order pops up on a screen inside the restaurant.

Even where people have grown accustomed to seeing bank and computer questions directed overseas, international order-taking is rare in the realm of cheeseburger combos and large Cokes, said Sherri Daye Scott, editor of QSR Magazine, dedicated to the quick-service restaurant industry.

A greater number of restaurants, including McDonald's and Wendy's franchisees, have tried centralized order-takers within the United States. None has introduced the technology nationally, in part because they've found it difficult to prove it saves money, Scott said. The parent company of Hardee's has conducted a limited test, too.

Other chains said they have not tried it and don't plan to at this point, including Burger King and Taco Bell, spokespersons for both said.

The technology has the potential to eliminate language barriers between Spanish-speaking employees and English-speaking customers, said Kate Mosteller, marketing director of Massachusetts-based Exit 41, which focuses on off-site order taking. Yet time zones and regional dialects can also present hurdles.



"You want someone who's friendly and articulate and who can understand ... different nuances," Mosteller said. "(Otherwise) you're going to know you're (being routed) somewhere else, and that's exactly what you don't want to do."

Jack in the Box's Anthony declined to discuss the results of the Charlotte trial, noting that the company doesn't speak in depth about its tests. "It is something we're testing, not something we're necessarily committed to at this point," she said.

Though the local run is wrapping up soon, Jack in the Box will continue to try the approach in other markets "here and there," Anthony said.

Customers such as Banks say the system can sound a bit distant: After all, fast-food order takers aren't always the easiest to hear even when they're around the corner, let alone around the world. But it hasn't posed any other issues, and the speakers are very polite. Then again, Banks said, that was the case with the old method, too.

"It would be nice to understand what the rationale was behind (the change)," she said. "It seems like an awful lot of trouble."

Even so, she noted, it hasn't bothered her family so much that they've stopped visiting for milkshakes. "We just kind of laugh about it when we go through there: 'Oh, there's a guy in 'Texas' again.' "

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