

# Customer Perceptions of Drive-Thru Service

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*The rapid growth of off-premise dining and, consequently, drive-thru service, presents the challenge of building customer loyalty in a highly competitive marketplace. In this study, customer perceptions of drive-thru service associated with quick service restaurants were examined. Results suggest that service time appears to differ among quick service restaurants, even those within the same chain. Employee courtesy was rated positively at all restaurants, as was food quality. The implications of these results for restaurateurs who offer drive-thru service are discussed.*

Lifestyle changes in recent years have generated an increased demand for many time-saver services, including meal preparation.<sup>1</sup> The desire for speed and convenience is reflected in the dramatic growth of off-premise dining.<sup>2</sup> On-premise customer traffic grew only 2 percent between 1982 and 1989, compared to a 38 percent gain in off-premise dining. Drive-thru service has emerged as the largest contributor to off-premise growth at quick service restaurants, accounting for 33 percent of orders.<sup>3</sup>

Consumer perception that fast food restaurants are no longer as fast as they used to be,<sup>4</sup> however, finds operators scrambling to speed up service in a highly competitive market comprised of less than loyal customers. The industry, attempting to disassociate the "fast food" concept from "junk food" by using the term "quick" service, puts an even greater premium on speed.

Innovative drive-thru technology appears to be one solution to the speed problems of quick service restaurants. The drive-thru's popular today have come a long way from their roots in the Pig Stand drive-ins of the 1920s.<sup>5</sup> Employees using automated windows, remote headsets, and computerized registers with video readouts to food and beverage preparation areas have replaced the car hops of the '50s. Double booth drive-thru's help prevent traffic bottlenecks occurring during preparation of special or unusually large orders, while computerized order boards allow customers to enter their own requests.<sup>6</sup> Burger King and Rally's are testing

video drive-thrus that provide face-to-face communication and permit customers to double-check orders and bill totals displayed on the screen.<sup>7</sup> Cafeterias are beginning to capitalize on the drive-thru trend as well.<sup>8</sup>

The quest for speed also has led to the emergence and steady growth of drive-thru only operations.<sup>9</sup> By returning to the original fast food basics of limited menus, low prices, and no frills, speedy service, these freestanding kiosks are considerably more economical to build and operate.<sup>10</sup>

Consumers are not interested only in speed, however. Food quality, consistency, service, and price are also part of their value perception.<sup>11</sup> According to a recent CREST report, more than half the quick service customers select a restaurant based upon the service offered. Good service was ranked second only to quality of food as the major reason for choosing a fast food restaurant. Service now is viewed as a major influencer of the initial choice to visit any restaurant, as well as whether or not to return.<sup>12</sup>

Quality is determined by the customer's perception in any service encounter.<sup>13</sup> In the 1990s, the vocabulary of that perception may mean quality is equated with hassle-free performance, and convenience with time control.<sup>14</sup> Although each restaurant's concept of service quality is unique, Martin suggested that excellent service is a combination of two major factors: procedures, which are the technical systems involved in delivering products to the customer, and conviviality, which is the server's ability to relate graciously to the customer.<sup>15</sup>

The purpose of this study was to examine customer perceptions associated with the drive-thru service at quick service restaurants; specifically, perceptions of speed of service, courtesy of employees, and quality of food were examined.

### **Students Are Targeted For Data Collection**

Students in hotel and restaurant management and in dietetics at Kansas State University purchased food at the drive-thru window of 12 quick service restaurants and completed a questionnaire evaluating their experiences. Date, time of visit, and name of restaurant were recorded. Time of arrival at intercom, employee response, arrival at pick-up window, and departure also were recorded. Students rated speed of service, courtesy of staff, and quality of food using a four-point scale ranging from 1, poor, to 4, excellent. Students described the condition of the parking lot, readability of the menu board, and quality of intercom reception; they also evaluated employee courtesy upon arrival at the intercom, during payment, and upon receipt of order.

Programs in the Statistical Analysis System were used for data analysis.<sup>16</sup> The general linear model analysis of variance

procedure was used to determine if elapsed time and ratings for speed of service, courtesy of staff, and quality of food differed by restaurant or time of day.

Data were collected from 85 visits to 12 restaurants representing eight different restaurant companies in Manhattan, Kansas. Most students (80 percent) ordered one to three items per visit. The most frequent visiting times were between 10 a.m. and noon (20 percent) and between 6 and 8 p.m. (18 percent).

### **Speed of Service Differs at Drive-Thru's**

Table 1 shows average elapsed time during the drive-thru process at the 12 restaurants. Total elapsed time (time between arrival at intercom and departure with food from pickup window) ranged from 2.27 to 5.07 minutes, with an average of 3.32 minutes. This compares favorably with an informal survey reported in *Restaurants & Institutions*<sup>17</sup>, in which the average total elapsed time for drive-thru's of three chain operations was 3.22 minutes. Interestingly, the industry's goal is 30 seconds from the time the order is placed until it is received.<sup>18</sup> Some drive-thru operations adhering to a limited menu concept are paring average service times down to the 30 to 60-second range.<sup>19</sup>

Results of analysis of variance indicated time spent waiting for employee response at the intercom differed significantly ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) by restaurant; restaurants C and E, which were not part of the same chain, were significantly slower than most other restaurants. No significant differences were found between restaurants for total elapsed time, time spent waiting for employee interaction upon arrival at the drive-through window, or time between arrival and departure. In addition, time of day did not have a significant impact for any of the elapsed time categories.

### **Fast But Friendly Service Is the Goal**

Speed of service, employee courtesy, and food quality were rated using a four-point scale and results are summarized in Table 2. In most cases, all three variables were rated as good or excellent.

Results of analysis of variance indicated speed of service ratings differed significantly ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) among restaurants; as might be expected, restaurants with longer service times (Table 1) tended to have lower speed of service ratings. No significant differences were found for ratings of employee courtesy and quality of food among restaurants; ratings, however, were significantly lower ( $p \leq .05$ ) during the 8 to 10 p.m. time period, possibly suggesting fatigue after a busy meal period. McMahan and Schmeizer suggested that the brevity of the interaction between employee and customer in a typical fast food encounter makes the quality of that interaction all the more important.<sup>20</sup> In a drive-thru setting, the sense of personal touch is even more difficult to convey due to the intermediary of the intercom.

**Table 1**  
**Average Elapsed Time (Seconds) During Drive-Thru Process**

Time Spent Waiting				
restaurant	total elapsed <sup>1</sup>	employee response <sup>2</sup>	window arrival <sup>3</sup>	window departure <sup>4</sup>
	mins	← seconds →		
A	4.02	11	94	136
B	2.75	21	54	90
C	5.00	79	81	140
D	4.37	1	111	150
E	3.68	60	56	105
F	3.60	16	9	161
G	2.68	6	55	100
H	2.27	14	74	48
I	5.07	13	153	138
J	2.45	7	76	64
K	2.48	3	79	67
L	3.18	4	66	121
average	3.32	17	73	109

Number varies from 2-14 responses per restaurant.

<sup>1</sup> time between arrival at intercom and departure from pickup window

<sup>2</sup> time spent waiting for employee response at intercom

<sup>3</sup> time spent waiting to arrive at window

<sup>4</sup> time spent waiting to depart with order

### **Inconveniences May Influence Customer Loyalty**

In Table 3, inconveniences occurring during the drive-thru process are described. Payment delays accounted for 49 percent of inconveniences; product delays 32 percent; and missing or incorrect food items, 19 percent. In 50 percent of the cases in which product delays occurred, nothing was said or done to compensate for the customers' inconvenience. An apology or explanation was given 35 percent of the time, and an explanation combined with receipt of free beverage or food was provided in only 15 percent of the incidents.

Ten respondents drove away before realizing their order contained an error. For those who noted the error while still at the drive-thru window, the incorrect item was either exchanged or a discount given. Receipt of correct items was ranked as the most important fast food service variable in the 1990 CREST survey.<sup>21</sup> The inconvenience caused by inaccuracy can

**Table 2**  
**Customer Ratings of Speed of Service, Courtesy,**  
**and Food Quality of Drive-Thru Restaurant<sup>1</sup>**

restaurant	speed of service <sup>2</sup>	courtesy		quality of food
		mean <sup>3</sup>		
A	2.7	3.2	3.2	3.2
B	3.2	3.3	3.0	3.0
C	2.2	3.0	3.7	3.7
D	3.2	3.2	3.0	3.0
E	3.0	3.0	2.5	2.5
F	3.3	3.3	3.7	3.7
G	3.1	3.3	3.5	3.5
H	3.5	3.2	2.7	2.7
I	2.0	3.0	3.3	3.3
J	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5
K	3.9	3.4	3.9	3.9
L	3.2	3.4	3.2	3.2

<sup>1</sup> varies 2-14 responses per restaurant

<sup>2</sup>  $p \leq 0.05$

<sup>3</sup> Scale from 1, poor, to 4, excellent

permanently damage a restaurant's reputation in the eyes of a consumer, negating any benefit from improved speed.<sup>22</sup> Fifty-one percent of the CREST respondents indicated that poor service would influence their decision to return to a particular quick service restaurant.<sup>23</sup>

### First Impressions Are Important

Students were asked to provide their initial impression of the restaurant upon arrival. Comments indicated menu board readability, quality of intercom reception, and parking lot condition were adequate to good. The condition of the parking lot was most often described as clean and in good repair, and problems with intercom reception were noted most frequently.

Impressions of employee courtesy during the drive-thru process ranged from a scripted performance to a more friendly approach. Comments were similar between restaurants and stages of the drive-thru process (greeting, payment, and receipt of food). Less positive comments on courtesy were given more often between 8 to 10 p.m. than at many other times during the day, again suggesting fatigue or perhaps preoccupation with closing procedures.

**Table 3**  
**Inconveniences Occurring In Drive-Thru Process**

<b>Types of inconvenience</b>	<b>%</b>	
payment delay	30	49
product delay	20	32
item missing or incorrect		
1 item missing	7	11
1 item incorrect	5	8
<b>Handling of inconvenience</b>		
product delay		
nothing said or done	10	50
apology or explanation given	7	35
explanation provided and free beverage/food	3	15
item missing or incorrect		
item exchanged or given discount	2	16

### **Well-Trained Employees Can Keep Customers Coming**

Results of this study suggest that speed of service at the drive-thru appears to differ among quick service restaurants, even among restaurants within the same chain. Employee courtesy was rated positively in all restaurants; however, the time of day during which the interaction occurs may influence its perceived quality.

Several implications for restaurateurs who offer drive-thru service can be drawn from this study. Employees who are assigned to work at the drive-thru window become the primary link between the company and the customer seeking convenient service. They thus have a great deal of influence on the restaurant's reputation and the customer's decision to return. The need for consistent, thorough training for drive-thru personnel is critical. Accuracy as well as courtesy are key service components. Customers who receive an incorrect order may be less forgiving, especially if the mistake is not discovered until arrival at the dining destination. In addition, standards may need to be established for drive-thru service, especially in relation to the amount of time this service takes.

Results of this study suggest that additional research is needed on factors affecting customer service from the restaurant drive-thru. Customer-generated information can help restaurateurs assess the quality of services offered.

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