

Operators Reap Benefits of Drive-Thru Tech Enhancements

By Julie Ritzer Ross



One of the wireless headsets now used at Jack in the Box company restaurants as part of a drive-thru technology overhaul.

(Mar. 27) Jack in the Box, the chain of more than 2,000 quick-service restaurants, attributes improved order accuracy, speed of service and employee efficiency to a recent upgrade of headsets and speakers used in the drive-thru lanes of its approximately 900 company-owned units.

Such a move typifies what appears to be a trend among operators to expand their roster or deploy new iterations of technology in a bid to improve service in the drive-thru lane, which may generate more than half of a chain's total sales.

For some chains, San Diego-based Jack in the Box included, this means replacing analog communications systems with digital ones. For others, including Checkers Drive-In Restaurants and Church's Chicken, it involves tying timers to point-of-sale systems to better measure drive-thru performance and to understand the factors behind faster or slower service.

A number of chains, such as McDonald's, Arby's and Jack in the Box, are trying to accelerate transaction speeds and boost customer convenience and feelings of security by using contactless credit and debit card readers in their drive-thrus. And on a less conventional front, some operators, such as 16-unit Wendy's franchisee Miami Management Co. Inc. of Cincinnati, have turned to remote call centers to handle drive-thru orders.

Jack in the Box's new drive-thru technology comprises the HME Wireless IQ digital communications system from HM Electronics Inc. of Poway, Calif. Officials of the chain pointed to several motives for the migration, which in addition to improving diners' overall experience through faster service and the receipt of the correct menu items included decreasing drive-thru equipment maintenance costs. Also figuring into the equation was a desire to make the wearing of headsets more comfortable for employees, noted Jeff Schroeder, division vice president, operations support.

"As an organization, we are always striving to enhance service to diners, both inside our restaurants and in the drive-thru," Schroeder noted. "However, the sound quality provided by the analog communications system for the drive-thru did not allow us to maximize our potential there. Neither did the fact that with our old headsets, employees had to have bulky belt packs around their waists and needed to push a button to speak with people in their cars."

The system interfaces with the chain's order-taking and confirmation application, supplied by Delphi Display Systems of Costa Mesa, Calif. Wall-mounted base stations in each location house radio and audio routing controls. Underground conduits connect the speakers on stores'

menu boards or speaker posts to the base stations. While Wireless IQ users have two choices of headsets — a cordless Odyssey IQ model worn on the head or a belt pack worn at the waist — Jack in the Box selected the former because it satisfied the requirement for comfort and hands-free communication.

A three-month test of the digital communications system in 50 stores kicked off early last year. The pilot revealed an eight-second improvement in speed of service in the drive-thru lanes. "That may not sound like a lot, but when it comes to customer satisfaction in the quick-service sector, it really is," Schroeder noted. He added that although it was not possible for the chain to quantify order accuracy enhancements, a review of feedback shared by customers through its "Voice of the Customer" program showed marked change for the better.

"With 'Voice of the Customer,' guests are invited to call a toll-free number on their POS receipts to rate their visit to Jack in the Box on several factors, including whether their orders were correct," the executive said. "During the test, there was far less feedback about order inaccuracies."

Based on these results, a full-scale rollout of the digital communications technology followed. Physical problems at some of Jack in the Box's older locations posed the primary implementation challenges, as several locations had cracked concrete surfaces that merited repair and/or rusty conduits that needed to be replaced before the technology could be installed.

Training requirements were minimal because of the system's overall intuitiveness, Schroeder indicated. For example, multilingual voice prompts — in English, Spanish and French — guide employees through the order-taking process, while voice-synthesized prompts automatically alert staff members of battery status at various intervals throughout their shifts. A similar component keeps employees informed of diagnostics- and performance-related issues, and a built-in message repeater plays up to two different promotional messages or greetings.

Schroeder declined to reveal the expenditure involved in deploying Wireless IQ, but officials of HM Electronics pegged the average price of the system at \$3,500 to \$6,500 per restaurant, depending on the number of communicators required as well as on drive-thru access and configuration. An optional maintenance plan runs \$75 per store, per month.

JITB's Schroeder noted that speed of service and order accuracy improvements after the rollout "are consistent with the test results." Given that, he said, the chain "should see an increase in sales over the previous year once the technology has been in place for a full 12 months."

Schroeder attributed a large portion of these enhancements to the heightened sound quality Jack in the Box enjoys with a digital rather than analog system in place. Unlike its analog counterpart, the digital configuration yields multiple communication channels, permitting as many as four crewmembers to communicate with customers simultaneously. It also offers access to a private channel that allows crew members to talk amongst themselves and coordinate the preparation of individual items within orders while other employees are actually taking orders or interfacing with customers in another way.

"Noise and outside interference are normal when order transmission and receipt occur over analog 'lines,' but that doesn't happen with digital spread spectrum — plus, a digital noise cancellation feature eliminates even more background noise," Schroeder said. "All this means

crew members can hear customers better and vice versa, so orders come out fast — and right — the first time."

The wireless, hands- and button-free design of the headsets speeds things up as well, because employees now can perform two jobs — for instance, filling drink cups and speaking with a customer or supervisor — at the same time. With fewer moving parts on the headsets, the system is also less costly to maintain, Schroeder observed.

"All in all, the upgrade has been a great move for us, from a consumer and employee experience standpoint," he said. Given the outcome of the project, Jack in the Box is making the system available to its franchisees. Several have adopted it, and many have made inquiries about it, according to Schroeder.

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