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Here's how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted drive-thru operations at quick-service restaurants

The annual study of drive-thru performance of 10 major brands also took a look at how restaurants are implementing COVID-era precautions

Joanna Fantozzi | Oct 01, 2020

Market research agency and mystery shopping company SeeLevel HX has released its 20th annual QSR Drive-Thru report, a breakdown of drive-thru performance from 10 major quick-service brands. This year, the study took a look at a brand-new factor in analyzing drive-thru operations of major brands: the

COVID-19 pandemic. The study broke down the percentages of brands surveyed that followed specific COVID-era safety protocols, from employees wearing masks and gloves, to how they handled contactless pickup.

Although the study did not break down the data by brand, it did reveal certain trends in COVID-era safety precautions. Unsurprisingly, 91.3% of employees were wearing masks when study participants ordered from the drive-thru windows over the course of the study, which ran from June through August. Conversely, 78% of drive-thru employees were *not* wearing gloves during customer interactions. The safety precaution that was abandoned by most employees early on in the pandemic when SeeLevel researchers noted that unless you're changing gloves after every single customer, they pick up germs just as easily as hands do.

One of the more surprising results of the study, SeeLevel CEO Lisa van Kesteren said, was that only 12.3% of operators had COVID-related signage detailing the safety precautions the companies were taking during the pandemic.

“That jumped out at me because putting up a sign is easy,” van Kesteren said. “But some of it might have been that it's the drive thru and not dine-in. [...] a lot of customers said that the number one thing they wanted from restaurants was a sign to make sure they're doing things [...] it makes them feel much more comfortable coming back.”

Another COVID-19 safety precaution that had a mixed response from operators was the use of a plastic barrier between the employee and customer, which only 58.7% of operators used. According to SeeLevel, an employee would either hand customers their food over or under the partition so that there was a transparent barrier to protect both parties from aerosol droplets.

One of the biggest changes operators were discussing during the peak of the pandemic was implementing a limited menu, whether because of supply-chain issues or to compensate for having fewer employees working the line and drive-thru windows. However, according to the study, only 9.1% of restaurants had a limited menu, and some of those notified customers that they were limiting the menu.

The most crucial aspect of COVID-19 protections, van Kesteren said, is how operators handle contactless pickup. There are multiple ways of doing contactless pickup at the drive-thru.

According to the study, 80.1% of employees just handed the order to the customer, while only 16.4% followed van Kesteren's suggestion of placing the order on a tray before handing it to a customer. Only 3.5% of operators placed the order on the window or implemented a different strategy altogether.

“Contactless is the new KPI; it's here to stay,” van Kesteren said. “Contactless is hard; it requires having a credit-card holder you can put outside the window, and you have to put the food on a tray, which can be hard if there are drinks on it. [...] It also can take much longer. [...] The worst [and least safe] is probably handing the bag directly to the customer.”

Join SeeLevel CEO Lisa van Kesteren and Nation's Restaurant News Associate Editor Joanna Fantozzi at Restaurants Rise powered by MUFSSO on Thursday, Oct. 8, as they delve into the latest data and insights in fast-food drive-thru performance and COVID-19.

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