

Digital Divide

New signage technology is improving the drive-thru experience for customers.

Quick-service restaurants see more than 60 percent of their daily revenue coming from drive-thru ordering, according to Brian McClimans, vice president of sales for **Peerless-AV**.

“In 2019, there will be a mass adoption of digital signage,” he says. “More than 10,000 drive-thru lanes will be implemented with outdoor digital menuboards.”

According to data from Nielsen, the digital signage market is set to grow nearly 10 percent by next year. A particular portion of that growth will be seen through the installation of new drive-thru menuboards and order confirmation screens. CJ Mays, chief operating officer of **Uni-Structures**, attributes this growth to initial implementation by brands such as McDonald’s and Dunkin’, who led the way with digital drive thrus in their next-generation stores.

“Outdoor digital signage is here,” says president and CEO Doug Watson of **The Howard Company**. “Digital drive thru menus are being installed in every city.”

As with the indoor digital menuboard, there are some key benefits to implementing new displays within drive-thru areas. For example, offerings can be rotated automatically for different dayparts or updated at a moment’s notice to correspond with seasonal or limited-time offers.

“The use of digital signage for menuboard solutions is critical as the restaurant industry continues to grow,” says Garry Wicka, head of marketing at **LG Electronics USA**. “Displaying crisp, accurate colors with immersive detail in order to accurately depict food to customers is crucial for quick-service restaurants in particular.”

Whereas static menu materials can be expensive and time-consuming to



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replace—and as a result may oftentimes display outdated offerings or incorrect prices—implementing dynamic displays in the drive thru contributes to a consistent brand image, regardless of how the customer chooses to transact. When both the indoor and outdoor menuboards are digitized, operators can ensure that menu messaging is consistent and up-to-date.

“Quick-service operators spend a great deal of time and money to offer a strong brand identity inside their stores,” McClimans says. “However, there is often no attention being paid to the brand identity in the drive thru. Digital signage is helping brands to focus more on their customers’ drive-thru experience and create something different from competitors.”

A challenge that operators often face

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with any sort of drive-thru display is outdoor placement and its vulnerability to the elements—rain, sunlight, direct heat, and humidity are a danger to old-school paper and plastic menuboards in particular.

Although digital menuboards should be equipped with cooling fans and moisture chambers, most newer models come with standard weatherproofing to protect

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equipment against the elements, saving operators the cost of continued replacement and repair.

“There are now cost-effective products that hold up well outdoors in all kinds of weather and are aesthetically pleasing in the drive-thru lane,” Mays says.

In addition, the costs of digital displays have decreased in recent years, so the initial investment is more approachable for

to increase consumer traffic, upping sales and relieving pressures on the indoor counter. In a 2017 study commissioned by Samsung and conducted by Forrester Consulting, digital menuboards were found to significantly increase the volume of drive-thru customers served per week.

“Operators need to see a return on investment that extends to the unexpected benefits that are aiding their businesses,”

which resulted in greater profitability for the respondent restaurants.

There are an array of options available for digital drive-thru solutions, and it is important for operators to first determine the respective needs of their brand, their staff, and their customers before implementing a particular product. Once the hardware is in place, operators will additionally be able to implement various softwares and automation features to ensure drive-thru displays are running efficiently and communicating with other systems.

“New trends in cloud-based and on-premise technology provide better flexibility and more customization options,” says Manolo Almagro, managing partner for **STRATACACHE**. “Hybrid solutions allow operators to leverage the best of both models.”

Drive thrus are a space of convenience for customers, so it is important for brands to develop a content strategy that is both engaging and quick to consume.

“The software that runs restaurant digital signage allows for inputs from multiple sources and output on a single monitor system,” Watson says. “One sign can have menus, wayfinding, weather, LTO’s, local information, and order confirmation.”

It can be beneficial for brands to use their drive-thru screens display more than just menu offerings—additional entertainment-value content can appease guests during longer wait times and help to distinguish a brand as being more considerate of the consumer experience.

According to Hal Truax, vice president of sales for Crimson AV, digital signage is the single most effective and customizable medium through which quick-service operators can reach their patrons.

Digital drive-thru displays provide guests with relevant and compelling information regarding the choices that are available at the establishment, and are a long-term investment in engaging customers with the brand. Implementing digital menuboards in the drive-thru space is a must for quick-service operators, regardless of whether they have been running their business for years or are new to the game.

“If I was opening a restaurant today,” Watson says, “it would have digital signage.”



“Being able to update menus and prices, provide caloric information, and make fast changes for promotions benefits restaurants through increased customer interaction.”

smaller establishments, including single-unit operators.

“In 2019, operators can expect to see continued evolution of display technology with the proliferation of LED 4K screens, which are more readily available and affordable in the commercial market,” Wicka says. “And there will be higher performance all around thanks to increased internal processing power and system integrators.”

The implementation of digital signage in drive thrus has also been shown

Wicka says. “Being able to update menus and prices, provide caloric information, and make fast changes for promotions benefits restaurants through increased customer interaction.”

In addition, the Forrester study found a nearly 6-percent decrease in wait times and significant improvement in order accuracy, which reduced food waste by 5 percent. Furthermore, the digital signage showed an improved conversion rate—2 percent—for promotional menu items,