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Order system helps hearing impaired

More than 30 customers each week use drive-through device at Culver's on 96th Street

By Julie Cope Saetre
Star correspondent

For most, a quick trip to a restaurant drive-through for a cup of coffee or a burger is a convenience, but for the deaf and hard of hearing, these fixtures aren't user-friendly.

One area franchise changed that setup. Culver's, a Wisconsin chain of more than 370 individually owned restaurants in 17 states, offers a program called OrderAssist at its Northeastside location on 96th Street as well as its Greenfield branch.

OrderAssist lets the deaf and hard of hearing order at the drive-through window by using a buzzer system.

Customers use the buzzer to alert employees that they need assistance, then they pull up to the service window, where they can receive an order form to complete. The cost for the order is written down for the customer.

Jeff Meyer, owner of the 96th Street and Greenfield locations, installed OrderAssist nearly two years ago. The system costs \$1,500, including installation, and a tax credit may be available.

"I thought to myself, 'If I was deaf, what would be beneficial to me, to help me feel more comfortable in coming into the establishment and enjoying a peaceful meal?'" Meyer said. "And to me, I would enjoy this. . . . It's pretty basic, but the concept is unique, and people utilize it."

More than 30 customers use the system each week at the 96th Street location, Meyer said.

George Martin, Fishers, is one of them. He noticed a restaurant sign calling attention to the service.

"(I) was shocked and happy to see that a restaurant was doing something to make ordering through the drive-through accessible for their deaf and hard-of-hearing customers," Martin said in an e-mail. "After that, I became a regular customer. I also told many of my deaf friends, who were also surprised and pleased."

OrderAssist is the brainchild of Patrick Hughes Jr., president of Inclusion Solutions, a Chicago company specializing in systems that increase business access for customers with disabilities. When a consultant mentioned the lack of accessibility for the deaf and hard of hearing at drive-through restaurants, Hughes launched a survey to gauge interest in potential customers.

"In one month, we got 6,400 responses," Hughes said, "and I have to say there were tears. It was like no one had ever asked them before."

That doesn't surprise Peter Bisbecos, director of the state's Division of Disability and Rehabilitative Services, part of the Family and Social Services Administration.

"When people think about access, what they usually think about is physical access. . . . They don't think about communications issues," Bisbecos said.



Deaf and hard-of-hearing customers use a buzzer at the drive through to let Culver's employees know they need assistance. Jeff Meyer, who owns the restaurant along 96th Street on the Northeast side, said he had the system installed to make hearing-impaired customers feel comfortable and welcome. - STEVE SANCHEZ / The Star

"Places have gotten better over time, but that's an area where there still needs to be a lot more work done. It's a learning process for people."

As Hughes studied the market, he found some drive-through touch-screen technology but considered it cost-prohibitive for many small restaurants and individually owned franchises.

"If you bring in a \$20,000 system, nobody's going to be interested . . . but if you can bring in something that's practical, and the deaf community's happy with (it), then you have a winner," he said. "That's, in my opinion, what we've developed. A low-cost, low-tech, really simple, back-to-the-basics one-on-one communication."

Culver's became Hughes' first OrderAssist client, agreeing to make the system available for purchase by its franchisees.

Meyer became one of the chain's first owners to jump on board. While he's glad the service attracted new repeat customers such as Martin, he insists monetary gain is neither the motivating factor, nor the most important result.

"I'm looking at this to be a system to help people come in and feel welcome and to have a seamless transaction where they don't feel pressured. . . . If it was just two people coming in here and utilizing the system, that's fine."

Bisbecos hopes other area businesses would be open to such an approach. "Just being aware of a situation that might arise and being prepared to address it, you're well ahead of the game."

Additional Facts

ABOUT DEVICE

» **What it is:** Buzzer tells drive-through restaurant staff that a hearing-impaired customer needs help.

» **Local sites:** Culver's restaurants at 7105 E. 96th St., Indianapolis, and 1846 N. State St., Greenfield, use OrderAssist.

» **Need:** About 260,000 Indiana residents have some hearing difficulty.

» **Contact:** To learn more, call Inclusion Solutions at (773) 338-9612 or visit www.inclusionsolutions.com

Source: Inclusion Solutions
