

WEB EXCLUSIVE

## Culver's ButterBurgers Reaches Out to Disabled Patrons

Culver's new OrderAssist system gives better drive-thru access to hearing impaired community. By Mark A. DeSorbo

Howard Rosenblum and most of his friends in the hearing impaired community always park and go inside a quick-serve restaurant because it's easier than dealing with the drive-thru. They are missing out on the convenience, but avoiding a potentially humiliating and stressful situation most feel.

"Imagine the possibilities if this untapped population were to find out that the quick-serve restaurant industry made their products available to them in the most convenient way possible," writes Rosenblum, a Chicago-based attorney for Equip for Equality Inc., a nonprofit organization that implements the federally mandated Protection and Advocacy (P&A) System in Illinois.

Rosenblum, who co-founded and chairs the Midwest Center on Law and the Deaf, agrees, saying that it is surprising that the estimated 28 million people who are deaf and hard of hearing in this country remains a somewhat untapped market by the quick-serve restaurant industry.

Findings in a survey conducted by Inclusion Solutions in 2004 show that quick-serves could be missing out on opportunities that Rosenblum is alluding to.

Among 6,422 respondents, 79 percent were deaf, while another 17 percent considered themselves hard of hearing. Still the survey indicated that 75 percent of respondents were frequent or daily patrons of quick-serve restaurants.

The survey also indicated that 32 percent of respondents never used drive-thrus because of their disabilities. Seventy-eight (78) percent had difficulties placing an order and 42 percent have left the drive-thru line out of frustration.

The survey also evaluated potential solutions, with 95 percent of respondents expressing that they would like to see quick-serves install electronic ordering systems. Seventy-eight percent said they would like to see restaurants install call buttons that allows customers to communicate that they need assistance and pull ahead to place the order in an alternative way.

As far as frequenting restaurants with augmented drive-thru capabilities, 94.4 percent said they would likely or highly likely visit a restaurant that improved drive-thru access for persons who are deaf or hard of hearing.

The possibility of increasing business among the hearing impaired community was only part of Craig Culver's motivation when he purchased drive-thru order assist tools for each of the eight Culver's restaurants he owns in the Madison, Wisconsin area. Personal reasons also factored in.



“I grew up with a father who was pretty much deaf from the day he was born,” says Culver, CEO and founder of the Culver’s restaurants, which has more than 370 locations in 17 states. “When I first looked at it, I thought pretty much what everyone else would think. What’s the return on it? But then I thought that there are a lot of people out there that this would help.”

So Culver decided to invest in making life easier for some of his customers. To do so, he chose the OrderAssist system from Chicago-based Inclusion Solutions.

Via a bell, OrderAssist alerts restaurant personnel that a driver would like to place an order without communicating through the drive-thru speaker box. Instead, customers are given a printed menu at the drive-thru window. With the menu in hand, they can either point to what they want or tell the drive-thru employee directly without fear of sound distortion of background noise. The OrderAssist program is also available inside Culver’s eight stores. Each system costs approximately \$750.

“It’s just doing the right thing,” says Culver, “Whether it gets the use or not, it’s saying the right thing and that’s why I’m doing it. And this is not just for the deaf or the hard of hearing. This works perfectly for people who might be too embarrassed to go through drive-thrus not just because of being deaf or hard of hearing, but also not knowing English that well. This allows them to feel a lot more comfortable.”

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Roger D. Claussen, activities director at the Wisconsin School for the Deaf in Delavan, lauds the OrderAssist system and gives presentations on it’s usefulness to students and the deaf and hard-of-hearing community.

“This is empowering the deaf community because it provides us equal access,” Claussen told *QSR* by telephone through a video relay interpreter. “This is an extension to our community, and it would make more people aware of our community. For the deaf, it’s an invisible handicap.”

“It’s not rocket science to make the quick-serve restaurants accessible to everyone. Installing some means of communicating a food order or alerting the employees that a driver will require accommodation is all that it takes,” Rosenblum says. “Inclusion Solutions have come up with a creative and cost-effective solution that aids restaurants in meeting their obligations under the Americans with Disabilities Act.”

Rosenblum believes a system like OrderAssist is a better choice than a sign instructing drivers to move forward because OrderAssist makes employees aware that the driver is deaf or hard of hearing. “This immediate alert and awareness makes a huge difference in terms of how employees react and treat deaf and hard of hearing drivers,” Rosenblum adds.

Ultimately, says Patrick Hughes, president and founder Inclusion Solutions, it comes down to solving a silent customer service issue.

“Our plan is to make it a central part of a drive-thru,” he says. “This is a customer base that needs some additional assistance, and we cannot forget that there are people who need that connection, that human contact.”