

The Long-Distance Journey of a Fast-Food Order

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SANTA MARIA, Calif. — Like many American teenagers, Julissa Vargas, 17, has a minimum-wage job in the fast-food industry — but hers has an unusual geographic reach.

"Would you like your Coke and orange juice medium or large?" Ms. Vargas said into her headset to an unseen woman who was ordering breakfast from a drive-through line. She did not neglect the small details — "You Must Ask for Condiments," a sign next to her computer terminal instructs — and wished the woman a wonderful day.

What made the \$12.08 transaction remarkable was that the customer was not just outside Ms. Vargas's workplace here on California's central coast. She was at a McDonald's in Honolulu. And within a two-minute span Ms. Vargas had also taken orders from drive-through windows in Gulfport, Miss., and Gillette, Wyo.

Ms. Vargas works not in a restaurant but in a busy call center in this town, 150 miles from Los Angeles. She and as many as 35 others take orders remotely from 40 McDonald's outlets around the country. The orders are then sent back to the restaurants by Internet, to be filled a few yards from where they were placed.

The people behind this setup expect it to save just a few seconds on each order. But that can add up to extra sales over the course of a busy day at the drive-through.

While the call-center idea has received some attention since a scattered sampling of McDonald's franchises began testing it 18 months ago, most customers are still in the dark. For Meredith Mejia, a regular at a McDonald's in Pleasant Hill, Calif., near San Francisco, it meant that her lunch came with a small helping of the surreal. When told that she had just ordered her double cheeseburger and small fries from a call center 250 miles away, she said the concept was "bizarre."

And the order-taking is not always seamless. Often customers' voices are faint, forcing the workers to ask for things to be repeated. During recent rainstorms in Hawaii, it was particularly hard to hear orders from there over the din.

Ms. Vargas seems unfazed by her job, even though it involves being subjected to constant electronic scrutiny. Software tracks her productivity and speed, and every so often a red box pops up on her screen to test whether she is paying attention. She is expected to click on it within 1.75 seconds. In the break room, a computer screen lets employees know just how many minutes have elapsed since they left their workstations.

The pay may be the same, but this is a long way from flipping burgers.

"Their job is to be fast on the mouse — that's their job," said Douglas King, chief executive of Bronco Communications, which operates the call center.

The center in Santa Maria has been in operation for 18 months; a print-out tacked to a wall declares, "Over 2,540,000 served." McDonald's says it is still experimental, but it puts an unusual twist on an idea that is gaining traction: taking advantage of ever-cheaper communications technology, companies are

creating centralized staffs of specially trained order-takers, even for situations where old-fashioned physical proximity has been the norm.

The goals of such centers are not just to cut labor costs but also to provide more focused customer service — improving the level of personal attention by sending Happy Meal orders on a thousand-mile round trip.

"It's really centralizing the function of not only taking the order but advising the customer on getting more out of the product, which can sell more — at least in theory," said Joseph Fleischer, chief technical editor for Call Center Magazine, an industry trade publication.

McDonald's is joined by the owner of Hardee's and Carl's Jr., CKE Restaurants, which plans to deploy a similar system later this year in restaurants in California.

Not everyone is sold on the idea. Denny Lynch, a spokesman for Wendy's Restaurants, said that the approach had not yet proved itself to be cost-effective. "Speed is incredibly important," he said, but "we haven't given this solution any serious thought."

Mr. Lynch said that Wendy's would need concrete evidence that call centers worked. For example, could remote order-takers increase sales by asking customers to order dessert?

Then there is the question of whether combining burgers, shakes and cyberspace is an example of the drive for efficiency run amok — introducing a mouse where the essential technology is a spatula.

"This is a case of 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it,' " said Sherri Daye Scott, editor of QSR Magazine, a trade journal covering fast-food outlets, which refer to themselves as quick-service restaurants.

But the backers of the technology are looking to expand into new industries. The operator of one of the McDonald's centers is developing a related system that would allow big stores like Home Depot to equip carts with speakers that customers could use to contact a call center wirelessly for shopping advice.

Jon Anton, a founder of Bronco, says that the goal is "saving seconds to make millions," because more efficient service can lead to more sales and lower labor costs. With a wireless system in a Home Depot, for example, a call-center operator might tell a customer, "You're at Aisle D6. Let me walk you over to where you can find the 16-penny nails," Mr. Anton said.

Efficiency is certainly the mantra at the Bronco call center, which has grown from 15 workers six months ago to 125 today. Its workers are experts in the McDonald's menu; they are trained to be polite, to urge customers to add items to their order and, above all, to be fast. Each worker takes up to 95 orders an hour during peak times.

Customers pulling up to the drive-through menu are connected to the computer of a call-center employee using Internet calling technology. The first thing the McDonald's customer hears is a prerecorded greeting in the voice of the employee. The order-takers' screens include the menu and an indication of the whether it is time for breakfast or lunch at the local restaurant. A "notes" section shows if that restaurant has called in to say that it is out of a particular item.

When the customer pulls away from the menu to pay for the food and pick it up, it takes around 10 seconds for another car to pull forward. During that time, Mr. King said, his order-takers can be answering a call from a different McDonald's where someone has already pulled up.

The remote order-takers at Bronco earn the minimum wage (\$6.75 an hour in California), do not get health benefits and do not wear uniforms. Ms. Vargas, who recently finished high school, wore jeans and a baggy white sweatshirt as she took orders last week.

The call-center system allows employees to be monitored and tracked much more closely than would be possible if they were in restaurants. Mr. King's computer screen gives him constant updates as to which workers are not meeting standards. "You've got to measure everything," he said. "When fractions of seconds count, the environment needs to be controlled."

Speed and sales volume are not the only factors driving remote order-taking. CKE Restaurants, for instance, wants to improve customer service. It plans to start taking remote orders in September at five Carl's Jr.'s restaurants in California, with a broader deployment after that.

CKE said its workers were strained doing numerous tasks at once — taking orders, helping to fill them, accepting cash and keeping the restaurants clean.

Accuracy problems at the drive-through "are a result of the fact that the people working them are multitasking to the point they forget details," said Jeff Chasney, head of technology operations for CKE.

Mr. Chasney said the new system could help lower barriers in language and communication. Often, in California in particular, he said, the employee may primarily speak Spanish, while the customer speaks only English — a problem that can be eliminated with a specialized call-center crew.

"We believe we raise the customer-service bar by having people who are very articulate, have a good command of the English language, and some who are bilingual," he said.

Some 50 McDonald's franchises are testing remote order-taking, some using Bronco Communications. Others are using Verety, a company based in Oak Brook, Ill. (also the home of McDonald's), that has taken the concept further by contracting workers in rural North Dakota to take drive-through orders from their homes.

A spokesman for McDonald's, Bill Whitman, said that the results of the test runs had been positive so far, but that it had not yet decided whether to expand its use of the technology.

The system does sometimes lead to mix-ups and customer confusion. The surprised customer will say to the cashier, "You didn't take my order," said Bertha Aleman, manager of the McDonald's in Pleasant Hill. For the last seven months the franchise has used the Bronco system to help manage its two drive-through lanes at lunch.

Ms. Aleman said that, over all, the system had improved accuracy and helped her cut costs. She said that now she did not need an employee dedicated to taking orders or, during the lunch rush, an assistant for the order-taker to handle cash when things backed up. "We've cut labor," she said.

The call-center workers do have some advantages over their on-the-scene counterparts. Ms. Vargas said it was strange to be so far from the actual food. But after work, she said, "I don't smell like hamburgers."

