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America's Fast-Food Chains Are Making a Big Pivot—Back to Humans

BY SOHAIL KHAN 11 SEPTEMBER 2026, 5:47 PM



McDonald's and Burger King are boosting training to improve hospitality; 'Our restaurants seem rushed, impersonal, sterile.'

Published on: Sep 11, 2026, 17:47:49 IST
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McDonald's wants its crews to stress hospitality throughout a customer's visit.

It turns out that service with a smile has never gone out of style.

After spending millions of dollars on digital kiosks and mobile-ordering systems, fast-food chains are discovering a lot of customers just want somebody to take their order at the counter and do so in a friendly way, according to executives, market-research, and industry documents reviewed by The Wall Street Journal.

Convenience and speed aren't good enough for today's fast-food customers, and McDonald's needs to improve how it offers friendly service to diners to attract them, said Tiffanie Boyd, McDonald's global chief people officer. The company is making one of the biggest hospitality pushes in its history next month, she said.

"Food is important," Boyd said. "Price is important, but experience has also become much more important than it used to be."

McDonald's aims for workers to emphasize hospitality throughout customers' visits, delivering energetic greetings such as "Enjoy your meal!" and "See you soon!," according to a recent internal training document, a copy which was viewed by the Journal.

Wendy's is making service improvements part of a broader strategic overhaul. Chief Executive Bob Wright is also reviewing the company's trials of artificial intelligence in drive-throughs to determine whether it is serving customers and restaurant operators.

"The best service experiences feel natural to the customer," Wright said.

Some fast-food diners have cut back on restaurant spending after years of rising menu prices. Others have shifted to chicken, beverage and other competitors that offer friendlier service and fuller staffing, customers and market-research firms said.

Screens and a lack of friendly workers has turned off customers such as Carolyn Blue, an attorney from Charleston, S.C., and lifelong McDonald's fan. She said she detests the shift toward app and kiosk ordering at locations in her area.

She now goes more regularly to Arby's and Chick-fil-A, where she said the service is better. "It breaks my heart," said Blue, who misses McDonald's fries. "We just won't go back."

McDonald's and other fast-food chains aren't ripping out their kiosks and suspending mobile ordering. Rather, they are rethinking the role that digital offerings play in their operations and nudging employees to assign higher priority to customer service, not just rely on kiosk ordering.

At Burger King, managers are being instructed to double-check that orders are made the way customers want, ensure front counters are staffed and respond to diner complaints as part of an enhanced customer-service program.

Starbucks also has been stressing improved service in an effort to regain customers, along with spending on training, labor and better-looking cafes.

Going digital

A decade ago, McDonald's was an early mover among U.S. fast-food chains investing in self-service kiosks, digital menu boards and app ordering. Franchisees installed thousands of the touch-screen kiosks, integrated mobile ordering and redesigned their restaurants for a more modern, streamlined look.

Executives have said that the ordering advances helped increase customer spending and reduce counter lines. The chain's leaders said the effort helped free workers to deliver food to tables and better serve customers.



Ordering apps and kiosks have helped boost customer spending but haven't been universally popular.

Yet many customers began to feel that hospitality had gone by the wayside, with workers focused on preparing delivery orders and keeping drive-throughs moving.

Some diners bristled at having to order from kiosks, saying that many fast-food counters no longer had people readily staffing them. In some cases, customers' only interaction with restaurant workers might be taking their food after it is placed on the counter.

"Many guests say their experiences in our restaurants seem rushed, impersonal, sterile and cold," the National Operators Association, a McDonald's franchisee group, said in a recent survey.

Surveys from market-research firm Technomic have found that consumers give Chick-fil-A top marks for service, with the southern chain staffing its drive-throughs with tablet-toting workers to help guide customers while they are waiting. Wendy's, Burger King and McDonald's received lower marks. Younger people tend to be more comfortable ordering digitally, but Technomic said that a growing percentage of Gen-Z fast-food consumers prize friendly service.

Human touch

In June, McDonald's outlined a new global strategy promising "great tasting food, served with a smile, at a good value." The company appointed a new U.S. president to lead the effort, called McDonald's Next, and has started briefing operators on the new standards and training.

"We want to coach teams to ensure greetings connect with customers through authentic hospitality," the company's internal training document said.

As part of its "Make it Golden" initiative, McDonald's has looked across retailers for examples of excellent customer service to emulate, and expects

the hospitality coaching and training to be a multiyear effort, Boyd said.

“There’s nothing more important in securing a follow-up visit than the experience from the current visit,” she said.

McDonald’s said that later this year it will begin retraining its more than two million global restaurant workers, company employees and suppliers, targeting higher standards for hospitality and other functions. The company is scripting new guidelines for employee interactions with customers—asking workers to check on patrons in restaurant lobbies and before they depart, and they no longer need to ask customers if they are using the McDonald’s app, according to the training documents and owners. Hospitality will become a more important metric in grading franchisee performance, Boyd said.

Burger King has unveiled a new restaurant prototype that includes placing a portion of the ordering kiosks at the side of the lobby, and U.S. president Tom Curtis said the chain wants franchisees to continue staffing counters and serving patrons.

“They want a friendly face,” Curtis said of the chain’s new restaurants. “We have to lean in to that because that’s evaporating in the fast food space.”

Jesda Gulati, a 44-year-old IT manager from St. Louis, said he dines at Chick-fil-A more often lately because of its strong service, but does appreciate it when he finds a McDonald’s that brings food to his table.

“It makes waiting for food less irritating,” said Gulati, who eats fast food several times a week.

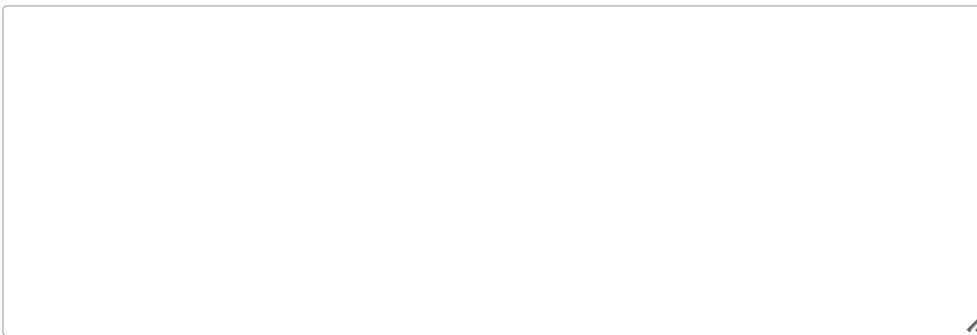
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