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Restaurants turn to robots to take orders through social channels, digital assistants



Tricia Contreras · March 13, 2017



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Gone are the days when ordering food for pickup required standing in line at the [restaurant](#) and waiting for your number to be called. As more eateries adopt new digital technologies, even orders placed over the phone are becoming passe. [Digital ordering](#) grew 18% last year and now accounts for almost 2 billion foodservice visits, according to research from the [NDP Group](#), and some



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[Chatbots](#) and digital assistants let customers place an order by 'chatting' with a robot, either through a platform on their own app or website or through a social media platform like Facebook or Twitter.

"We are seeing more restaurants adding chatbots to their ordering capabilities largely because it is a technology that consumers are already using. While some restaurants have their own ordering app with chatbot capabilities, we are seeing more restaurant companies explore the use of pre-existing messaging tools as chatbot platforms. This takes out the extra step of downloading a stand-alone restaurant app for mobile ordering," said Robertson Allen, a consultant with [The Hartman Group](#).

In addition to letting consumers use an app they already have instead of downloading a restaurant's app -- freeing up valuable smartphone real estate -- chatbots appeal to consumers because they "simulate a human conversation and create a more fun context around the food ordering experience," Allen said. "Unlike other online ordering systems, they provide an experiential layer that makes the process feel less impersonal and purely transactional."

[Wingstop](#) launched social ordering for Facebook and Twitter in June of last year, using technology developed through a partnership between online food ordering platform [Olo](#) and conversational intelligence platform [Conversable](#). To start an order, customers can tweet "order" or "#order," or direct message Wingstop via Facebook Messenger. The chatbot uses a "decision tree" to assemble the order and customers can then pay through Olo or go to a secure page to enter payment information.

Conversational ordering is "one of the biggest innovations in ordering technology today," Olo Senior Director of Marketing Jackie Berg said. For Wingstop it was a "natural evolution of the digital ordering platform," and allows the chain to engage a customer base that is already spending a lot of time on social platforms.

Nearly half of Wingstop's customers are millennials, and conversational ordering has seen the most use from customers in that demographic and the younger Generation Z.



We read everything. You get what matters. adopters of mobile messaging technologies in general," Allen said. "It's not surprising that companies like Taco Bell and Pizza Hut, whose marketing efforts have been more oriented to younger consumers, are the ones that are most aggressively exploring the possibilities of chatbots in ordering and in other areas," he said, naming two other brands that have launched conversational ordering capabilities. Taco Bell teamed with workplace messaging platform Slack to launch its [Tacobot](#) last summer, around the same time Pizza Hut rolled out conversational ordering for Facebook and Twitter.

Tech-savvy consumers are leading the charge, and diners across demographics are slowly starting to embrace conversational ordering, creating an environment that Conversable co-founder and CEO Ben Lamm likened to the "2008 timeframe when the iPhone first came out. Not everyone and their grandma is using it yet."

As more consumers take to the technology, restaurant brands are looking for ways to one-up one another with increasingly advanced chatbots. Interest in voice ordering capabilities has been rapidly rising, according to Berg, who said at the recent CES consumer technology conference it was "the hottest thing ever." Several brands including [Pizza Hut](#), [Dominos](#) and [Starbucks](#) have already enabled voice ordering through digital assistants including Amazon's Alexa and Google Assistant.

While allowing customers to place an order by talking emphasizes the favorable aspect of conversational ordering that mimics human interaction, adopting such a young technology can also open the door for more errors, which can quickly erode customer satisfaction. Responding to questions about user experience issues with its digital assistant, Dom, Dominos CIO Kevin Vasconi said artificial intelligence technology still has a ways to go before it can seamlessly perform a complicated task like taking a food order. "While we would love people to go through that selection process in a logical linear fashion, people don't always order food that way," Vasconi told [CIO.com](#) last year.

"We still have a long way to go for artificial intelligence to be believable and completely functional in everyday contexts like those that chatbots enable," The Hartman Group's Allen said. "While consumer tech has advanced in many other



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reported last month by [Motley Fool](#).

For reasons such as these, Lamm said he urges the brands that work with Conversable to phase in conversational ordering gradually, beginning with text-based systems before introducing voice ordering. Rolling out the technology in stages lets brands shape their strategy and adjust as they learn more about how consumers are using conversational ordering.

This ability to learn more about customers and their habits is one of the greatest benefits of conversational ordering for restaurants, Lamm said. Even when an order isn't completed, the system has a record of the interaction that brands and software engineers can "unpack" to see how customers behave, he said. "What's so great with conversational ordering is we can understand the contextual intent of what [customers] are asking for."

Using these findings to fine-tune conversational ordering will improve the technology, which will no doubt entice even more brands to add chatbots to their operations.

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