



Key findings from the latest QSR drive-thru report

A front-seat view into drive-thru preferences



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Introduction

The restaurant industry continues to see a splintering of QSR (quick service restaurant) consumer preferences among all the different channels that enable them to order and pay for food.

We surveyed 1000 respondents for our 2026 QSR drive-thru report to better understand those preferences and learn how to leverage new and existing restaurant technology for QSRs effectively.



6 insights shaping the drive-thru experience



1 **Speed is currency**

Consumers reward fast, consistent chains with patience — which puts more emphasis on throughput tech.

2 **New tech takes a back seat to familiar tech**

People are comfortable with mainstream tech like apps, loyalty and digital menus, but trust and comfort drops when tech feels “new” — think AI voices, lockers, robots.

3 **People want more human touch**

The biggest adoption blockers are human preference, security concerns and broken tech, so automation needs a human aspect to fall back on.

4 **AI ordering isn't attractive... yet**

People doubt AI's credibility, so success depends on proof of accuracy and easy correction.

5 **The economy is still a huge factor**

Visits decrease in a struggling economy — raising the bar for better values, deals and rewards — while tech failures can cost you loyalty.

6 **Functionality wins during checkout**

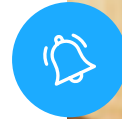
Point of sale experiences that prioritize reliability, confirmation and recovery (order edits, payment success and quick refunds) are preferred over novelties.



Meet consumers where they are

84% of respondents are getting their food to go in some manner, so it's important to offer a diverse range of options that match consumer habits.

Drive thrus are the leading preference of QSR diners — beating takeout and dine-in combined — but it's clear dining in is still meaningful and restaurants still need strong in-store experiences.

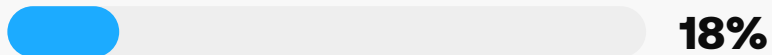


Where customers get their meals

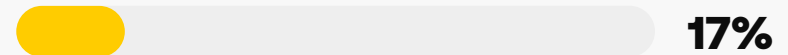
Drive thru



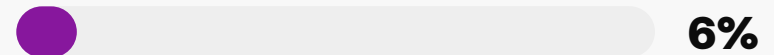
In-restaurant takeout



Dine in



Curbside pickup



Long lines equal lost revenue

As some QSRs continue to struggle with labor shortages and related service delays, we asked diners how many cars in line would cause them to leave in favor of another restaurant. **The dealbreaker was five.**

It's important to note how loyalty and brand conditioning shifts a consumer's likelihood to leave the line.

Consumers have strong "service memory" and budget time based on their expectations of the chain..

The bottom line? Faster payments and better ordering accuracy make a QSR more desirable. Tech that improves speed and accuracy doesn't just help in the moment — it builds future loyalty.



54%

of people will skip or leave a drive-thru if they see a line up to 5-6 cars long

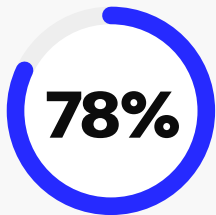
86%

are more likely to stay if they've had a previous good experience



Closing the tech gap

The number one benefit consumers expect from technology is speed and convenience. Most people are open to new tech when it feels like an enhancement, not a replacement — and tech with the lowest learning curve wins.



of consumers surveyed use restaurant apps in some way

Our study found kiosks and digital menu boards are broadly acceptable, but comfort drops sharply for AI voice ordering and pickup lockers. People adopt tech when it reduces uncertainty. A smart move is to start with familiar tech, then layer automation once trust is established.



The power of human touch

The biggest barrier to using technology when ordering at a fast food restaurant? Human preference.

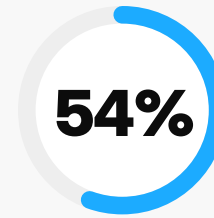
One of the reasons most people are slow to adopt technology is app resistance. Having to download another app is a point of friction.

While ordering inside with a person remains highly competitive, mobile ordering is becoming a true contender. Mobile ordering for pick up is now a core habit for a large segment — bigger than curbside or kiosks. Kiosks are used, but not dominant and only helpful for certain occasions.

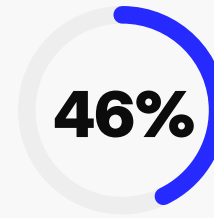
When it comes to AI drive-thru ordering, adoption lags but shouldn't be counted out.

Around 18% haven't experienced AI ordering and 18% have no preferences at all, suggesting that they can be won over with good execution.

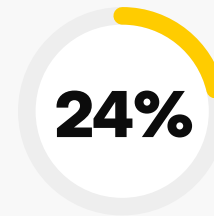
For now, QSRs that back their automation with staffed support are making the most impact. Consumers also show concerns over security, accuracy and reliability. Tech that's offline or unreliable can sink a QSR, and many people doubt new tech can deliver consistently.



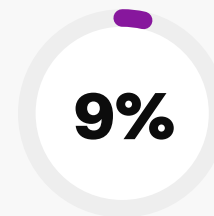
prefer humans because it feels more personal



prefer interacting with a real person



say AI isn't accurate enough



prefer AI over humans



The cost of rising prices

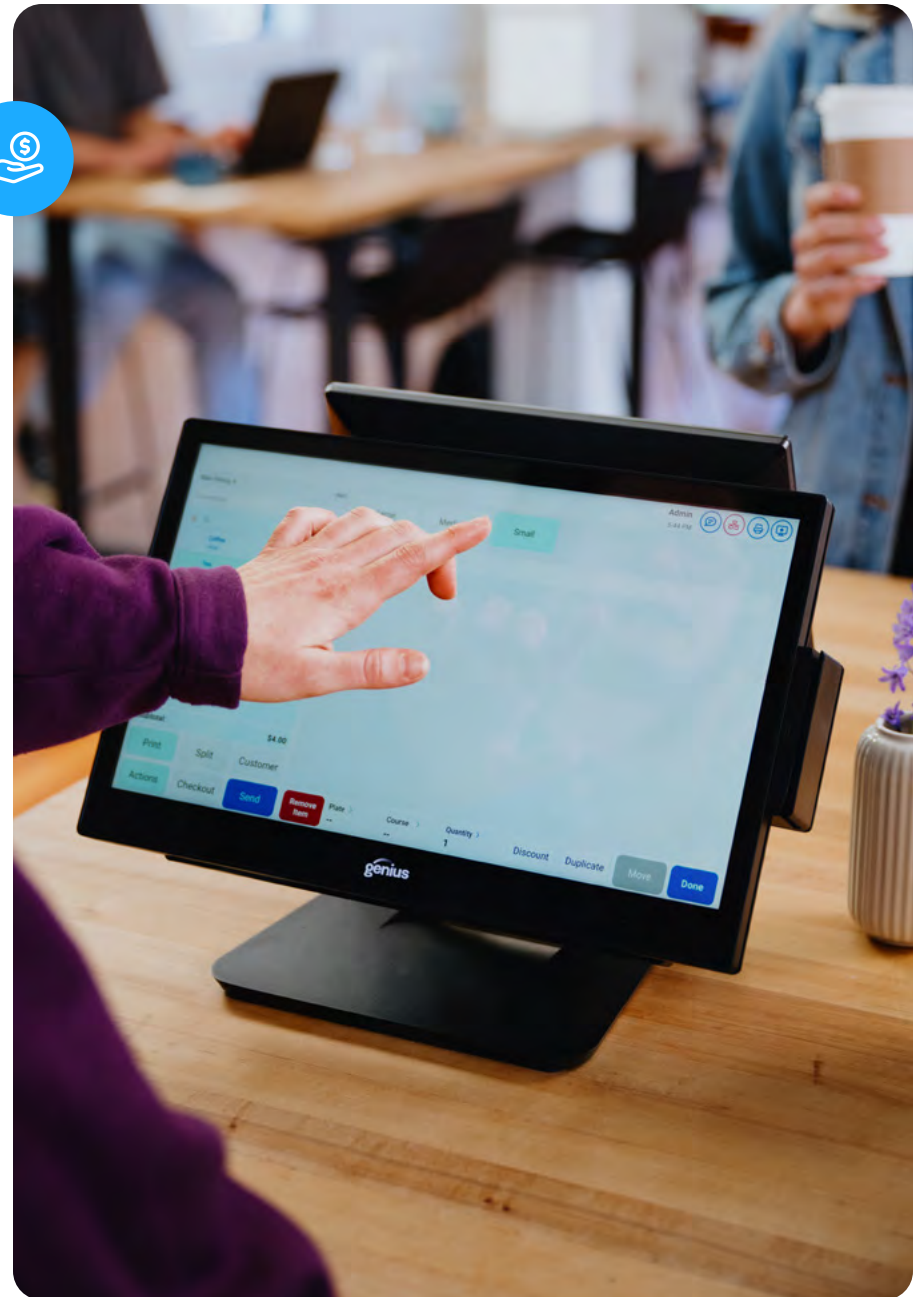
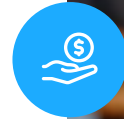
QSRs need fast ordering pathways and high impact merchandising to attract and retain consumers in today's economy.

40%

of respondents visit less per month because of price increases

Only 20% say they haven't changed habits, meaning that most consumers are adapting their behavior based on inflation. To battle that, restaurant tech needs to support value discovery, not just speed.

Frustrating experiences with tech can also start to feel like a waste of time and money.



Build a better consumer experience

QSRs need a complete view of consumer preferences and pain points in order to create experiences that meet or exceed expectations.

Where experiences fall short

- Inaccurate orders or missing items
- Inability to edit or fix orders
- Payment failure in apps or at kiosks
- Slow, unresponsive or unintuitive interfaces

How do QSRs win over consumers?

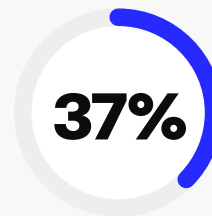
Payment simplicity is repeatedly implied. After all, fast checkout is part of “fast food.” Another common request is friendly, readily available human support. They want human fallback when tech breaks.

Our study shows that trust in tech accuracy is moderate. Not high, but more reported they trust tech than not. Overall, trust is still earned store by store and likely improves when consumers repeatedly see their order is right — further confirming the “service memory” idea.



Better rewards, bigger orders

Nearly half of consumers surveyed know what they want and stick to it when ordering at a QSR, but we found digital menu boards and app offers can still steer basket mix.



of consumers change their order after seeing promo



Key findings

The report is clear — it's never been more important for QSRs to offer a seamless, omnichannel experience and serve the wide-ranging preferences of today's consumers.

The good news? The right tech can help alleviate many of the pain points identified by this survey.

Simplify complexity, deliver consistently

Meet Genius™, our centralized solution for point of sale, kiosks, drive thru, loyalty, payments and more. No more juggling vendors and eating integration costs. With Genius, you can also tailor the tech to meet your needs now and build on them in the future — with capabilities ranging from mobile ordering to AI upselling — without starting from scratch.

Front of house, middle of house, back of house — **it's all in Genius.**

Ready to transform the drive thru experience from the kitchen to the curb? Learn more about Genius at globalpayments.com



Source: Global Payments proprietary survey

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