

Chain Leader

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Olympic Records

Taco Bueno's electronic timers help improve the speed of the drive-thru lane.

By Mary Boltz Chapman

Athens is not the only place that's abuzz with the Olympics. So are cities in Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas. Though the excitement is contained to Taco Bueno units.

The fast-casual Mexican chain held its own Drive Thru Olympics, awarding prizes to general managers whose restaurants saw the most improvement in drive-thru speed. It measured each transaction with a new system of timers that are connected to headquarters. As a result, Taco Bueno saw record sales volumes, and drive-thru rates only continue to improve.

"One of our big business imperatives is to focus on speed of service," says Peter Belcher, director of operations systems and support for the chain. "You get greater sales with a greater number of cars."

The company was in the process of rolling out the timers chainwide, hoping to finish by this year's first quarter. Executives decided to accelerate the installations in time for the contest and completed them by year-end 2003.

This is actually the second time Taco Bueno held the Drive Thru Olympics. Last year, mystery-shopper results determined the winners. "The difference was, this year we measured every car, every day," he says.

How It Works

A loop-detecting device in the drive-thru lane is tied into the cashier's headset. The system can measure how long it takes the order taker to greet the customer, take the order and serve the food once the car is at the window. Taco Bueno measured the time each car was at the window itself, feeling it was a fair comparison. "If you use overall time, the number of cars in the lane can change the time," Belcher says

The timer is prominently displayed at the window. If the order is not complete at 45 seconds, the numbers turn red. At 60 seconds, it beeps.

For a 7-week period ending in March, corporate tallied daily results and sent them to general managers so they could track progress and rally their teams. To ensure customers weren't being rushed or staffers weren't making mistakes, mystery shoppers also evaluated each unit.



Taco Bueno's drive-thru timer turns red when it reaches 45 seconds and starts beeping when it hits 60 seconds.

SNAPSHOT

Concept

Taco Bueno

Headquarters

Carrollton, Texas

Parent Company

Jacobson Partners, New York

2003 Systemwide Sales

\$121 million

2004 Systemwide Sales

\$125 million*

"Managers would hold assistant managers accountable," Belcher says. "The financial incentives were part of it. But our people really grabbed onto it."

Taco Bueno recognized the winners at the General Manager Conference, awarding plaques and checks to managers in four regions. The overall winner, Kinh Hua, lead his Plano, Texas, unit's staff to reduce average drive-thru times by 41 seconds.

Counting the Ways

Chainwide, drive-thru times improved by more than 14 seconds, and 98 percent of the units showed some improvement. Nine percent improved by more than 30 seconds, 30 percent by more than 20 seconds, 48 percent by more than 15 seconds, and 65 percent by more than 10 seconds.

In mid-March, during the second half of the contest, Taco Bueno set an all-time sales record: weekly average unit volumes exceeded \$21,600. "Since the end of the contest, we have surpassed that record more than five times," Belcher says.

Belcher adds that drive-thru times have continued to improve since the contest ended. "We expected it to fall off a bit," he says. "It did fall off for about three weeks, but it's currently running about 2 seconds better than during the contest."

Taco Bueno began accepting credit cards systemwide at the same time the contest began, which Belcher says also helped the drive-thru times. The chain had tested credit cards earlier, but it slowed the drive-thru down. Recently, however, it converted to high-speed Internet access for the back office. This enables units to process a card in three seconds. "With the time we used to spend fumbling for change, it actually is quicker," he says. "We're just happy it didn't hurt the time."

Units

127

Average Check

\$5.65

Expansion Plans

10 units in 2004, 12 to 15 in 2005

**Chain Leader estimate*



Taco Bueno CEO Stephen Clark (l.) awarded plaques and checks to Drive Thru Olympics winners at the company's annual General Manager Conference. The winning GMs were Anne Smith, Tulsa market; Alex Mahbub, Fort Worth market; Kinh Hua, Dallas market and the overall winner; and Dushan Karunarante, Oklahoma City market. Also pictured are vice presidents of operation Kevin Lewis and E.J. Nazarpour.