

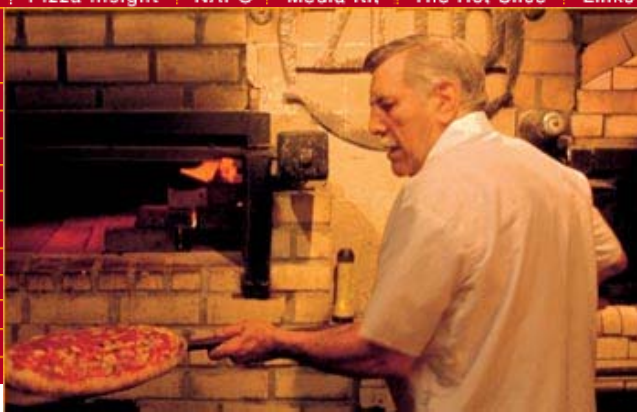
Pizza Today

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Techno Savvy

Mandy Wolf Detwiler

Call center, online ordering takes pressure off LaRosa's Pizzeria in-store staff.

The delivery business seems pretty cut and dried -- order comes in via telephone (or, more recently, online), is filled by a company and shipped or delivered in person. But there are proven ways to increase how efficiently and effectively deliveries are made, and the pizza industry has begun to take notice.



Nearly 15 years ago, LaRosa's Pizzeria implemented its One Number system. The concept is simple -- customers call an easily remembered and much advertised number regardless of their location and their orders are then dispatched to the correct unit for completion. Behind the scenes, however, is a complex call center that employs nearly 300 people, fields nearly 80,000 calls (of which 70 to 75 percent are transaction-based) and seats up to 130 at peak call time.

On call

The One Number system was implemented in response to the rising market share of the national pizza chains, which had become LaRosa's biggest competitors in the Cincinnati-Northern Kentucky-Eastern Indiana area in the late 1980s. Papa John's and Little Caesar's had stepped up their game, Pizza Hut had already topped out at 40 local locations and had captured nearly 22 percent of the market share, and LaRosa's, with 18 percent of the share, began looking toward the future.

Management made a series of calls on a Friday night to both corporate and franchised stores. The calls were recorded and played back for the group of franchise owners. "If the answer came, 'Thanks for calling LaRosa's Hyde Park. Hold please' and if that hold was five minutes, they let the tape run for five minutes. They were sitting in a conference room for five minutes of silence with this whole group and everybody nudging in their seats," says Pete Buscani Jr., executive vice president of marketing for LaRosa's.

After a few of those calls and, worse, customers being hung up on, "everybody really saw the need to upgrade the customer service."

The One Number program was created by oneSystem Inc., a POS and call center systems hardware company based in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. The LaRosa's call center opened in 1990, and "between five and seven years later it had more than doubled the business," Buscani says. The call center became a unique selling point for the company, and once again brought it to the top of the Cincinnati pizza game with its consistency, customer service and ease of use.

"We had to figure out strong points of difference for us, and when we got into delivery, delivering the entire menu was a big point of difference because everybody else was just doing pizza and soda pop," said Michael LaRosa, company president. "In the '90s, when we were striving to improve service, the call center was a huge point of difference because that positioned us to have one simple-to-remember phone number. Everybody else had one for each location.

"The way that we answered the telephone and serviced our carryout and delivery guests stood apart from the competition. We had professionally-trained order-takers who were focused on just getting that order right."

Centralizing the ordering system also allows store-level employees to focus solely on in-store dining customers and filling the call center orders, which are sent by ticket through a computer system. Phone customers do not have contact with the store-level employees.

"It's an easy number to remember in Cincinnati," Buscani explains. "In fact, my last measurements (found that) 67 percent of the market unaided can tell us (when asked) 'What is LaRosa's phone number?' and they can play it back, which is unheard of."

New wave

Today, the oneSystem program of the late 1980s is still in use, but is becoming increasingly outdated and expensive to maintain. Pam Fulks, executive director -- One Number and information technology, says LaRosa's is looking at purchasing and implementing an updated version. A vendor has not yet been chosen for the system overhaul. "It's old technology," Fulks says. "There are many manual processes that we go through all the time to support the business, and it is getting to the point where we can't keep the pace that we need to be able to meet the demands of the customer with these dynamic menus and the limited-time only offers. It takes a tremendous amount of people and time and energy to manage that.

"The language that it's written in, it's very expensive to make changes. It's just a very cumbersome system at this point. But it's served us very well."

In the future, the company plans to look for a new call center system able to handle increased Internet traffic and non-traditional ordering methods. But Fulks says that despite LaRosa's increasingly

technological advances, it is still focused on branding and maintaining its neighborhood pizzeria approach. "We really want to be able to touch the customer in many different ways and have them touch us. I think opening those avenues is key to what we want to do with this new technology. And it's not just technology -- it's really reorganizing the company to focus in that area."

Beyond the phones

Obviously, LaRosa's isn't one to simply be complacent with its accomplishments. In 2002, the company went live with its Web site, hoping to obtain 10 percent of its total orders per week online. The company also implemented an aggressive email campaign that reflects the pizzeria's brand, encourages repeat ordering, tells customers about special offers and tracks consumer online interest.

Today, it receives about 5.5 percent of its pick-up and delivery orders online, and that number is growing. Once the web-based order is placed, it is routed through the company's Boudinot Avenue headquarters and routed to the appropriate store just as the phone orders are.

Guests to LaRosa's interactive Web site can view the menu, inquire about donations for events and even have pizzas shipped. An e-mail marketing campaign also gave the company's online ordering a boost. Personalized letters from Michael LaRosa and monthly email messages tutored customers to the online ordering system and helped increase overall online orders.

And in the coming months, fans of text messaging (small messages sent via cellular telephone) can receive special offers over their mobile phones in a partnership with Cincinnati Bell. The test program will be advertised via in-store marketing and some external promotions. To avoid the messages being viewed as cellular spam, customers will have to text message a request to a special number and will receive the offer in return.

Mandy Wolf Detwiler is managing editor at PIZZA TODAY.

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