

Moaning about McDonald's

I used to be very happy with McDonald's. It's not the height of luxury, but it's clean, quick and you know what you're getting. I worked there for four weeks before University and was allowed to have whatever I wanted for lunch for free. Every day for four weeks I had two Big Macs, a banana milkshake and coke - lovely! And I never got bored of it.

Now at 52, I'm a less frequent McDonald's customer, but their new serving system and this week's experience at a McDonald's outside Cambridge may have been the last straw.

The system used to be that you go to one of the tills, tell the member of staff what you want, pay them and watch while they get it for you. It was not a long interaction, but the same person looked after you from placing your order to getting your food.

Now, you have to go to a computer terminal to order, pay by card (no cash accepted unless you know the trick of going to a separate unstaffed till and try and get the attention of a member of staff to take your cash). The terminal prints you an order number and you walk over to a different screen and stand around with a herd of other customers, waiting for your number to move on the screen from "being prepared" to "ready to collect". This does not mean it is actually ready collect, you continue to wait until someone appears with your food, calling out your number.

This week I placed the family order via the terminal - it included a tea for my wife, and a McPlant without bun for my vegetarian son who is allergic to sesame seeds. I was number 86. After a wait the numbers in the 80s moved from the "being prepared" to "ready to collect" and then various people appeared over time calling out the number of the order they had. Then one of them pressed a button and deleted all of the 80s from the "ready to collect" screen, including mine! After waiting another five minutes we were well into the 90s, so I asked a member of staff what had happened to 86? She went backstage and returned to say that they were looking into it. A couple of minutes later someone else arrived with my order. I took it in triumph to my family sat at a table. They opened the bag and informed me that there was no milk for the tea, no ketchup for the chips and no napkins. Back I went to the collection point and asked for these. Then back to the table, to be told by my son that his McPlant was in a sesame seed bun! So, back again to the collection point and a different member of staff who took the box away and came back with a McPlant without bun that they found lying around with a label on it ready to go. All the staff were very nice and polite, as was I.

McDonald's presumably changed to this system after a time and motion study said introducing computer terminals and a numbers system would result in an even quicker service. But the outcome is that customers are now just numbers and there is no single person looking after you.

Then, to cap it all, when I sat down, I saw that my banana milkshake had a sticker to peel off to see if I had won a prize. Would my bad mood be transformed by an instant win? I peeled off the sticker and it told me to download the McDonald's app and enter a code number to see if I had won anything.

I have three apps on my phone: WhatsApp for group conversations, an app to turn on the church boiler and an app to turn on the church burglar alarm. If I downloaded the apps of every retailer I buy from, my phone would be clogged up with loads of apps and I'd be a slave to my mobile. No thanks McDonald's. If you think that a phone app is the way to create a personal connection with me, you are sorely mistaken!

Compare that with the cafe I go to twice a week on my way to work. I say hello to the staff as I enter. I sit down and start reading my Church Times newspaper. Five minutes later my full English breakfast and mug of tea arrives. It comes without mushroom and tomatoes because they remember my order without me having to place it. When I leave, I pay in cash, and they wish me a lovely day. The soundtrack to the Cheers TV series says "you wanna be where everybody knows your name". I don't think I've ever had occasion to tell the cafe staff my name, but I certainly feel at home there, and there's not a screen or app in sight. McDonald's is too big to match that personal service, but replacing the human contact they did have with computer screens and numbers is a change for the worse.

Adrian Vincent
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