

Ethnographic Study of Ordering at Dunkin Donuts

Abstract

This study depicts the process of placing an order at Dunkin Donuts in Hayden Hall. I chose to focus on this particular activity because I enjoy stopping at Dunkin Donuts in between classes, however the line at this particular restaurant location gets extremely long. Since this Dunkin Donuts is the primary location on campus, it often has long lines and therefore makes it difficult to order something in between classes. I focused on this Dunkin because it is one of the more popular “restaurants” on campus which I think could benefit from the use of technology. During the observation my intention was to see how a system could be put in place to minimize wait time at this location so customers could stop in and place an order in the ten minutes they have between classes.

Introduction

The activity observed here was simple meal or drink ordering at Dunkin Donuts in Hayden Hall. The basic overview for this activity is relatively simple. A customer who would like to place an order at Dunkin gets in line, browses the menu to decide what they want, orders and pays once at the front of the line, then waits to collect their order. There are minimal artifacts included in this task, but the significant ones are the money or credit/debit card used to pay for the order, the food and/or drink purchased, and a receipt. The majority of the customers engaging in ordering at Dunkin were Northeastern students. The principal for this study is to determine if wait-time deters customers from placing an order. The idea behind the observation was to determine how a new process could be put in place to make the current ordering process quicker and more efficient thus allowing students to place an order in between classes.

Preliminary Findings

During the observation, most people took the same approach to placing their order. I started my observation at 11:00am on Tuesday and remained there until 12:00pm. I chose to use this time frame because I know there is a break between classes at 11:30am. From previous experience I know the line gets extremely long when there is a break between classes. When I first started my observation there were only about 2-3 people in line. This continued until around 11:25am when a steadier stream of customers were coming in and out of the restaurant. There is one main door to this Dunkin Donuts but it also serves as a passage way between Hayden Hall and Richards Hall. Therefore there were not only customers coming in from outside but also coming in through the two buildings. Some customers simply passed by the Dunkin without a second glance, while others got in line or surveyed the line. By 11:35am, the line was about 20 people deep and remained that way until around 11:50am. As far as the process of placing an order, it was pretty easy to follow and I did not notice anyone who was unsure of what to do. During the time I was there I noticed several “regulars” who did not even glance at the menu when placing an order. By observing customers I got a good look into what the process entails, but in order to get more detailed information for my cause, I wanted to speak to a few individuals. I conducted two unstructured interviews with these customers, meaning I went into the interview with a goal in mind (determining if customer had time to place an order between classes) and let the interviewee lead the discussion from there.

Interview Results

Two interviews were conducted with individuals who placed an order at Dunkin Donuts in Hayden Hall to get a better idea of customer's thoughts on the process. Before each interview I obtained verbal consent from the customers that they were willing to participate in my study. The first interview conducted was with a female who was currently a sophomore here at Northeastern. She was waiting in line when I interviewed her (around 11:35am) and she mentioned she was a frequent customer at this particular Dunkin Donuts. My main goal with this interview was to determine if she had time to wait in line and what would deter her from placing an order at Dunkin Donuts. The first question I asked her was how often she came to this Dunkin and if there was any time in particular she liked to come. She told me she came about three or four times a week and it was typically after her first morning class, around 10am. She only had classes three days a week, and on those days she liked to stop in at Dunkin for a coffee. The most significant thing I learned from this interview was when she said "I try and stop at this Dunkin almost every day when I am on campus, but sometimes I can't wait in the line if I want to get to class on time". I asked her what she thought about an order kiosk and she said she had used one before in her local grocery store and that she would be willing to try it if it would shorten the line at Dunkin and allow her to grab her coffee in between classes.

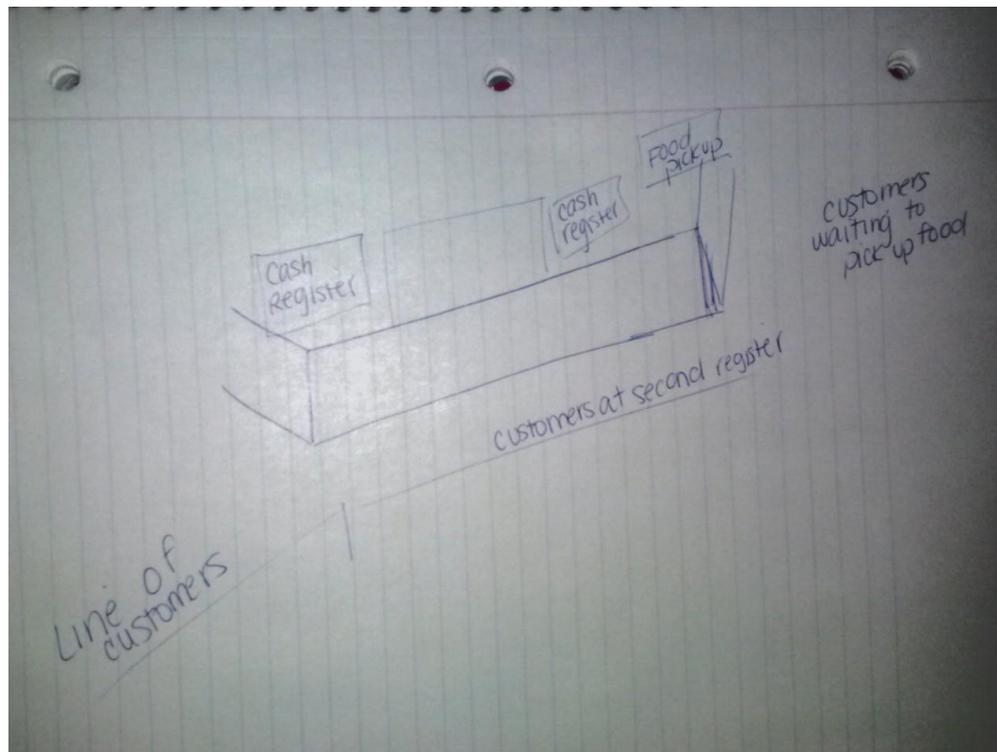
The second interview I conducted was with a male student who was waiting to receive his order. He was a senior here at Northeastern and he was also a regular at this Dunkin. The objective in this interview was the same as the former, determine his thoughts about placing and receiving an order. It was around 11:45am when I conducted this interview and I asked the student how long he had waited in line before placing his order. He said "the line moves pretty fast, so I was only here about ten minutes". His typical order was a bagel with cream cheese and a coffee and he also liked to visit this Dunkin in between his classes. What differed with him was he said he would be willing to wait in the line no matter how long it was so he could get his coffee, even if it meant being late to his next class. I followed this by asking if he thought others reacted similarly and he said yes, he knew several people who would be willing to wait in the long line, no matter the cost. He said when he was a freshman, he probably would have been more reluctant to stand in line, but now as a senior he was more than willing to wait. I asked him what he thought about an order kiosk and he said he might use it, depending on how easy it was to place an order.

The overall conclusion from these two interviews was that this process was relatively efficient given the high demand. From my observations, during the rush period between classes I noticed that there were several people who stepped out of line and never placed their order. I also noticed that several students came into the Dunkin or were passing through between the two buildings, surveyed the length of the line, and then left. Since I was there at a period in between classes, I deduced that people were stepping out of line or not getting in line at all because they knew they would be late to their next class.

Discussion

Before moving into a discussion of the activity, let us first look at a detailed description of the activity taking place. The activity starts when someone decides they would like to place an order at Dunkin Donuts in Hayden Hall. They then proceed to wait in line while browsing the menu and once they are at the front of the line, an employee takes their order and puts it into the computer system. Variations might occur here in that some customers do not need to browse the menu and know exactly what they will be ordering when they step in line and some customers have the intention of placing an order, but do not do so due to the perceived wait-time. After placing the order with the cashier, the customer pays the employee and is given a receipt detailing their order. The customer then moves out of line to wait for the employees to make their order. Once the order is made, the employee calls out the order and

the customer picks it up and leaves. At 11am when I first arrived the wait time was minimal, five minutes at most to place the order, pay, and receive the order. As it approached 11:30am, the wait time increased to about fifteen minutes and as the rush died down, the wait time went back down to about five minutes. On average, customers waited in line for around ten minutes. As mentioned above, during the rush period there was an average of about 20 people waiting in line. Once the rush was over there was at most five people waiting in line and in several instances there was no one in line. During the rush there were a few customers who under anticipated the wait time and were forced to step out of line before placing an order, most likely because they had a class to go to. Another major variation observed was paying via cash or a credit/debit card. Those who paid with cash typically spent a bit longer placing and paying for an order because swiping a card versus counting out cash is usually a bit faster.



My overall observation of this process was it was rather efficient given the ratio of staff to customers. This Dunkin had two registers open during the period between classes and they were able to move the line rapidly. A lot of customers knew exactly what they wanted and during the time frame I was there I did not witness any mistakes. There were six employees working while I was there – two were operating cashiers, three were making drinks, and one was making food orders. The employee making food orders left the kitchen to walk down the line of customers asking if anyone was ordering food. If they were, the employee would write that down and start making the food because that typically takes longer than making a drink. For the most part, the process was as efficient as it could be without the help of another technology.

Conclusion

The observation and analysis of this task has shown how everyday customers go about placing an order at Dunkin Donuts in Hayden Hall. It has outlined the detailed process of the activities required to place and purchase an order. The aim for this study was to see how a technological system could be put in place to minimize the wait time at Dunkin Donuts and allow customers to place an order between

classes. It is one of the most popular restaurants on campus and observations show their ordering process is close to as efficient as it can be without the help of a technological system. Since the majority of the customers here were students, I can conclude that an order kiosk would probably be easily accepted. College students typically are on average between 18-22 years of age and are usually rather tech-savvy. After speaking to a few individuals, I have discerned that they are rather adamant about placing their order at Dunkin and there are few things that would deter them from doing so. They also told me they had trouble making it to class on time when placing an order at Dunkin in between classes. This is how I think a few ordering kiosks could be beneficial at this Dunkin Donuts. If customers were able to place and pay for their order on the kiosks, wait time might decrease by a few minutes thus allowing students to make it to class on time and still purchase something from Dunkin. This might not help customers who are willing to wait in line anyways, but it might attract those customers who either step out of line or who do not get in line in the first place due to its length. This kiosk would be most efficient during rush hours, but still useful when the restaurant is not extremely busy. After conducting interviews and observations, the overall conclusion is that a technological system could be put in place to improve efficiency and shorter wait time so students are not deterred from placing an order.