McDonald's drive-through voice ordering

IMPLEMENTED 2021–2024 · RETAIL AND HOSPITALITY · US · BAND E · REVERSED
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McDonald's tested AI voice ordering with IBM at more than 100 US drive-throughs from 2021. In June 2024 it told franchisees the technology would be switched off by 26 July 2024, with no wider rollout.

ABOUT THIS SYNOPSIS

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NOTICE WORDING LAST UPDATED 16 NOVEMBER 2026

AT A GLANCE

No measurable effect: withdrawn after a test.

AI used: Voice AI order taking: speech recognition and conversational AI at the drive-through, developed by McDonald's and IBM.

Implemented: 2021–2024. Grade: band E, No measurable effect, Reversed.

Headline result, as reported: Voice ordering test at more than 100 US drive-throughs ended in 2024 without expansion, per Restaurant Business

1 · The case

The facts, as reported by the 5 sources listed at the end. Where a source is silent, the field says "Not reported".

Organisation

McDonald's. Fast-food restaurant chain based in Chicago, with about 14,000 US restaurants in 2021, per Restaurant Dive. The test covered more than 100 US drive-through restaurants. Canvas block: 4. Operations and process. Also 3. Customers and proposition, 6. Data and technology.

Business challenge

The challenge. McDonald's said the goal of the test was to determine if automated voice ordering could speed service and simplify operations. Nation's Restaurant News reports that McDonald's was aiming for order accuracy of 95% or more before wider adoption.

How it was addressed. McDonald's bought the voice technology firm Apprente in 2019 and

Who implemented it

IBM (Software vendor): Bought McD Tech Labs to help develop and scale automated order taking.

Technology (SEAM pillar E)

SEAM types: T5 Custom / fine-tuned models. Deployment: Not reported. Vendors and products: IBM, Automated Order Taker (AOT).

Where it was built in: At the drive-through ordering point in more than 100 US restaurants; the system took spoken orders where possible and employees stepped in when needed.

What changed

Before: employees took drive-through orders. During the test: a voice system took orders where possible in more than 100 restaurants, with employees stepping in. After: the technology was to be removed from the test restaurants, and McDonald's said it would decide on a future voice ordering solution by the end of 2024. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

What it cost

Not reported

What it saved

Not reported. A BTIG analyst told CNBC in June 2024 that the system as designed did not save franchisees money over having a person in the drive-through. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

Governance and control

The decision to end the test was announced to franchisees by the chief restaurant officer of McDonald's USA "after a thoughtful review". In the 2021 pilot employees stepped in on about 20% of orders, by McDonald's account as reported by Restaurant Dive. Accuracy target, test criteria and customer safeguards: Not reported by McDonald's.

S2 · Accountable owner · Claimed
The memo ending the test came from the chief restaurant officer of McDonald's USA, per Restaurant Business and CNBC. [1] [2]

A1 · Safe use · Not reported
Not reported.

A2 · Human in the loop · Claimed
In the 2021 pilot computers took orders when possible and about 20% of orders required employee intervention, by McDonald's account as reported by Restaurant Dive. [4]

A3 · Monitoring and assurance · Claimed
McDonald's reported 85% order accuracy in 2021 and said it ended the test "after a thoughtful review"; a BTIG analyst said accuracy remained in the low-to-mid 80% range. [1] [2] [4]

A4 · Vendor AI · Claimed
McDonald's sold its voice technology unit to IBM in 2021, then ended the IBM partnership on order taking

A5 · Agent controls · Not reported
No agents described.

A6 · Standards and regulation · Not reported
Not reported.

What worked, what did not, what is unproven

WORKED

– McDonald's said there had been "successes to date" and that the work gave it confidence that voice ordering will be part of its restaurants' future.

– The 2021 pilot at 10 Chicago restaurants saw 85% order accuracy, by McDonald's account as reported by Restaurant Dive.

– IBM said the technology was "fast and accurate in some of the most demanding conditions" and that it was in discussions and pilots with other quick-service restaurant clients.

DID NOT

– The test ended without any expansion, per Restaurant Business, and the technology was to be shut off in all test restaurants.

– A BTIG analyst wrote in spring 2024 that accuracy remained in the low-to-mid 80% range and operating costs were high, as reported by CNBC.

– Customers shared videos of wrong orders, including bacon added to ice cream and hundreds of dollars of chicken nuggets, per the BBC.

UNPROVEN

– The accuracy the system reached across the test restaurants: McDonald's published no figure after 2021.

– The cost of the test and any effect on service speed or staffing: Not reported.

– Which voice ordering solution McDonald's chose afterwards: Not reported in these sources.

Timeline

2019 McDonald's buys voice technology firm Apprente, from which it creates McD Tech Labs [4]

Jun 2021 Voice ordering pilot at 10 Chicago drive-throughs announced, with 85% order accuracy [4]

Oct 2021 McDonald's announces sale of McD Tech Labs to IBM and a partnership on automated order taking [4]

Jun 2024 Memo tells franchisees the IBM test will end in more than 100 restaurants [1]

Jul 2024 Deadline of 26 July 2024 to switch the technology off in all test restaurants [1]

2 · Grade and SEAM assessment

MarLuc's opinion, made on the evidence above. How cases are graded: marluc.co.uk/case-studies/how-we-rate

Level of change and impact

Claimed: Not applicable. Grade: E, No measurable effect. Proof: Reversed. Level of change: Not graded.

No level assessed: band E, a test that ended without rollout and with no published result. We

The SEAM view and lessons learnt

The join that mattered was between a new technology and a high-volume front-line process with a clear quality bar. Reported accuracy stayed in the 80s against a reported aim of 95% or more, and the test stopped short of rollout. McDonald's kept the test contained to about 100 restaurants and ended it by a set date. For a larger organisation, the transferable point is to fix the pass mark and the cost case before a test starts, and to be ready to stop.

1. Set the accuracy and cost thresholds for rollout before the test begins.
2. Keep a test small enough to switch off cleanly.
3. Publish what the test showed, so the next decision rests on evidence.

Evidence

Score 1 of 4. Self-reported and press: McDonald's and IBM statements and a franchisee memo obtained by Restaurant Business and CNBC; accuracy since 2021 comes from an analyst note, and no evaluation is published.

Evaluation method. Self-reported company figures and press reporting: company statements and a franchisee memo obtained by trade press, with one analyst note; no evaluation of results published.

Sources disagree. Restaurant Business and CNBC report a shut-off no later than 26 July 2024; Nation's Restaurant News quotes McDonald's as ending the partnership "beyond this year". Restaurant Business calls the test two years old and Nation's Restaurant News two and a half years, while Restaurant Dive dates the first pilot to June 2021. The BBC says the trial was announced in 2019. Restaurant Business and CNBC say more than 100 restaurants; Nation's Restaurant News says about 100.

Status. Closed: McDonald's said the technology would be shut off in all test restaurants no later than 26 July 2024.

3 · Original sources

Read these in full. To challenge a fact or a grade, use the contact form at marluc.co.uk or the link on https://marluc.co.uk/case-studies/mcdonalds-ibm-drive-through-ordering

[1] Restaurant Business: McDonald's is ending its drive-thru AI test (June 2024)
https://www.restaurantbusinessonline.com/technology/mcdonalds-ending-its-drive-thru-ai-test

[2] NBC News (CNBC): McDonald's to end AI drive-through test with IBM
https://www.nbcnews.com/business/business-news/mcdonalds-end-ai-drive-test-ibm-rcna157603

[3] Nation's Restaurant News: McDonald's is ending its AI drive-thru test with IBM
https://www.nrn.com/quick-service/mcdonald-s-is-ending-its-ai-drive-thru-test-with-ibm

[4] Restaurant Dive: McDonald's will sell McD Tech Labs to IBM (October 2021)
https://www.restaurantdive.com/news/mcdonalds-will-sell-mcd-tech-labs-to-ibm/608978/

[5] BBC News: Bacon ice cream and nugget overload sees misfiring McDonald's AI withdrawn
https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c722gne7qngo

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