

CASE STUDY: DASHBOARD DINING

by Ken Miller

Revving up the drive-thru experience.



The fast-food drive-thru has become an American cultural icon on par with the muscle car and the burger itself. And its status is confirmed each and every day as millions of us drive up to the “big board”, shout our needs and wants into a speaker box, then drive around the dark side of a building to see our food passed to us through a teller window.

This ritual has become even more frequent these days, as our commutes lengthen and our kids’ schedules get more activity-crammed. Now, time taken for a meal is equivalent to the time taken to drive from band to soccer practice, or about

15 minutes on a leisurely day. No doubt about it, eating in the car is about as relaxing and comfortable as turbulence in coach class—but without the tray table.

To say that the entire experience is somewhat inelegant is an understatement. And of course, it was never meant to be elegant. We’re a fast-fueling nation, just stopping long enough to pound down the burnable calories we need to make it through the day. But, the entire event is a lot less gracious than it could be.

So, exactly what’s wrong with the dashboard dining experience? And what can package innovation do about it?

That’s the focus of this article, another installment of this “Insight for Innovation”, column, where I try to illustrate that every category and every consumer experience, no matter how entrenched, has a potential innovation story to tell.

To write this piece, I conducted ethnographic research with a handful of mom/kid groups as they engaged in actual, full-on dashboard dining occasions. Fieldwork Research did a great job recruiting this for me. I was right there, in the car, for all aspects of the experience: The drive, ordering, set-up, consumption and clean-up. As well, I spent some non-car time with each mom and kid group to get behind what motivates (and manipulates) the behavior I witnessed.

I’d be the first to say that my research wasn’t exhaustive. Nevertheless, it did surface some key leverage points for innovation in the dashboard dining experience. These leverage points (or “platforms”, as I call them) are worth addressing, not just because they generate dissatisfaction among >

MODULAR MEAL TRAY CONCEPT

consumers but because they represent tangible and lost business opportunity for QSR (quick serve restaurant) operators. Here's the top (and bottom) line.

A family eating in a moving vehicle is the closest thing to a three-ring circus I've ever seen in the marketplace. It takes a contortionist's flexibility, a trapeze artist's balance, a juggler's timing and a ringleader's orchestration. And, as is often the case in routine, age-old behavior, no one seems to mind.

That's because the goal is to fuel up, not to spend quality time together. The high-wire act reinforces the uncomfortable rush everyone feels in getting to the next stop on the activity train. Rather than help consumers relax and enjoy the few moments they have to eat, QSR packaging seems to escalate the pace and anxiety.

Let's break the occasion down and study the cycle dynamics.

> SORTING IT OUT

It seems as if take-out packaging at QSRs is designed more to get food home safely than it is to eat it in the car. Multiple bags and multiple drinks are all dispensed from the window with a smile, but there's no organizational rhyme or reason. Why can't the food be passed along as cohesive meals, rather than as a bunch of food items packed haphazardly in huge sacks? Perhaps if orders were identified by meal when ordering, items could be grouped that way.

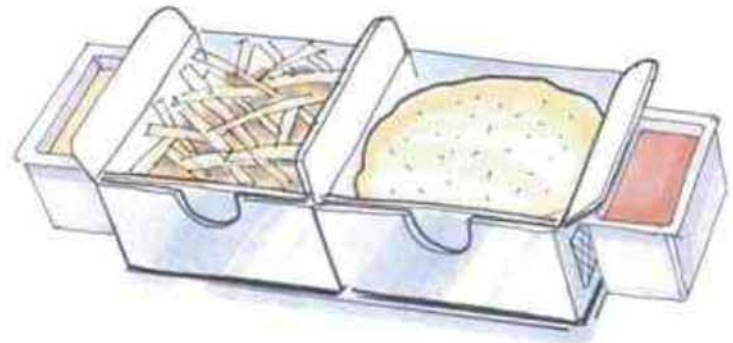
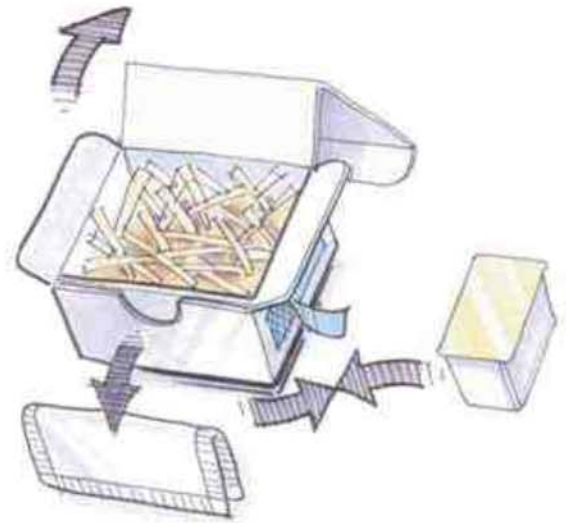
Why does this matter? Because when they receive the multiple bags, drinks and trays, mom and kids have to take the time to sort it all out. They root through the bags and boxes looking for what they ordered. They pass items around the car at dizzying speed.

This chaotic activity results in all kinds of misfortune, from grease marks on the car's headliner to small potato farms under the seats. And it wastes time, contributing to the occasions' already frenetic pace. By the way, moms say that the items they order are not exactly the ones they get about 20 percent of the time. That may have something to do with the typical fast-food speaker system, which makes the one on the New York City subway sound like hi-def. But I digress...

Mom is prepared for this circus. An audit of the cars I rode in shows they're pre-stocked with all kinds of tools to smooth out the bumps. I saw cloth towels and blankets standing ready to blot up the inevitable mess. There are loads of extra napkins, paper towels, tissues and wipes to de-grease the paws. A few moms told me they only buy cars with black interiors so that stains don't show. Clever.

> SETTING IT UP

Once all of the items are properly distributed, everyone in the car makes use of their local environment to create their own "set-up" in preparation for eating. As you might imagine, the



> This "modular meal tray" holds meal items together for quick distribution, easy dipping, lap-top comfort and quick disposal. Double-stick tape connects standard shaped boxes, and lets the dipping cups ride side-saddle.

car's interior environment is shared, and so is the food-eligible real estate. So, mom and kids look to establish their own equilibrium state with their food items.

Mom's got fries in her lap. Kids are squirting ketchup into drink tray crevasses (with modest success). Dipping cups and nugget boxes are balanced on the console. Packaging is skating away at every short stop, and each curve in the road invites everyone to hold on—to their food. This is quite a balancing act.

Bags are placed on the floor to take the rapid accumulation of trash. But, there's still food in there! Fries hang out at the bottom of the bag to stay warm, and because there's no place to >

SALAD PACKAGING CONCEPT

dump them out. The drink is the only meal component with a pre-ordained place to rest—the cup holder. But fairly often, more than one drink per eater creates problems.

Those who order chicken nuggets are lucky. They have a box that can balance on one knee, with a fold-out lid that can hold dipping sauce or a squirt of ketchup. How gracious! Those partial to burgers (we'll talk more about order constraints shortly) either peel the wrap around the burger to manage the finger grease, or spread the wrap on their lap to catch falling bits. You can't have it both ways.

> GETTING IT DOWN

Now for the moment of truth: Eating. Mom has it the worst, of course. She has the task of operating heavy machinery along with a chicken wrap and a parfait. She orders the chicken wrap rather than a salad because she can hold it and the wheel at the same time. "Two, three bites and it's done." While she would prefer a salad, they "don't work in the car".

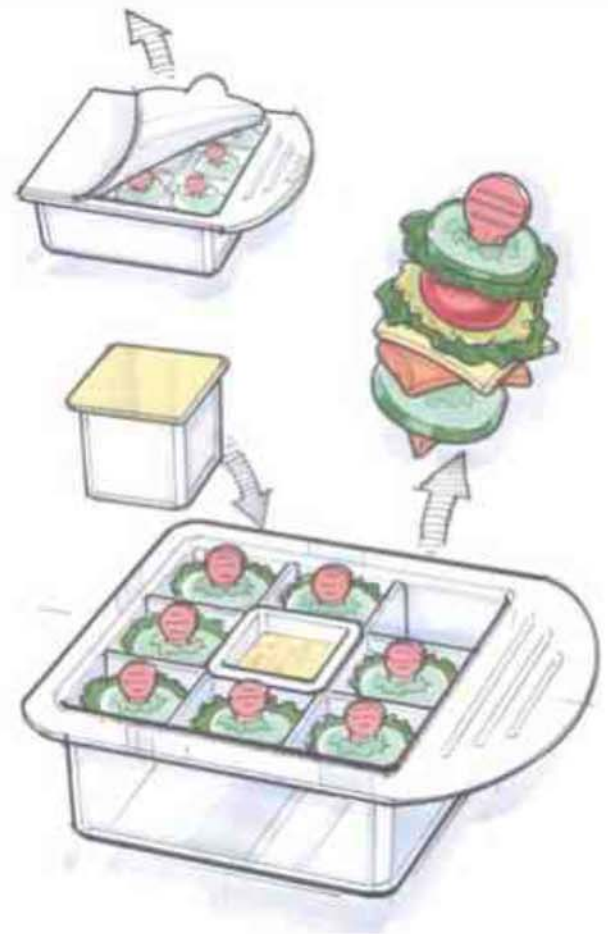
Kids are balancing their burgers and chicken nugget boxes in their laps with a shake in one hand and text messaging with the other. They dig into the trash bag on the floor and sift through the old wrappers, lids and boxes to secure the golden treasure—a fist full of fries.

Eating is frenetic, and there's not too much talking going on. These folks are task-driven, with little time to get this job done. It's unfortunate because moms and kids don't see each other that much. This is one occasion where they are in close quarters and could spend a few moments of quality time together. But, all the rapid-fire unpacking, juggling, eating and repacking undermines that opportunity.

Kids have learned that mom doesn't like ketchup squirted on anything in the car, and most certainly not on the back of the front seat. So ketchup is often off limits, and kids resort to dipping out of little cups. But they love it. They dip fries, chicken nuggets and anything else that will fit. And some things that won't (namely, their burgers).

So why don't those burgers have ketchup on them already, along with all kinds of other drippy, leafy, crunchy toppings? Because mom won't allow the big, sloppy, piled-high burgers in the car. Too much stuffing to fall out and disappear—likely, for a few months.

It's time to raise a potential business issue for QSR operators. Consumers seem to avoid ordering certain items they really want, and often request special preparation because some items are unmanageable in the car. As it turns out, they don't order the more expensive stuff that they would in the restaurant. No big, stacked burgers and no salads. These items would wreak havoc in confined, moving spaces.



> Now salads become a viable choice for the car, with an easy-grip tray and skewered salad bites separated by a paperboard grid. With a dipping cup in the center, eating a salad in the car is a convenient pick-and-dip affair.

And, they give up extras like baked potatoes and soup. No utensils allowed! Instead, they make do with a one-handed snack wrap for \$1.39 and a few kids' meals. Plus, they ask to omit much of the mess-creating toppings. Hold the fun stuff! That means a likely lower ticket per visit, and a less satisfying consumer experience, as well. It's interesting to note that some of the items families avoid consuming in the car tend to be the healthier choices. Existing packaging has trained them through trial and error to simply pass up what they really want.

This is more than a customer satisfaction tragedy. It's a lost revenue opportunity on each occasion, and in occasion frequency. My guess is that the average drive-thru ticket is less than it should be, and I believe that ingenious and inexpensive package innovation could >

help fix that. Not to mention the incremental cost of exception processing every time someone wants a burger with nothing on it. How much of the QSR business runs through the drive-thru? Someone reading this article knows the answer.

> CLEANING IT UP

Well, we've been eating for eight minutes, and it's time to clean up and press on to the next activity. A seemingly endless array of boxes, dipping cups, sleeves, lids, cups, wrappers, trays and napkins need to find their way into mom's central trash depository (the big bag). Not likely. Fry sleeves end up under the seat, with a few fries, too. Open dipping cups must be gathered from every horizontal surface. Because all of the meals came in parts, there's no way to consolidate trash, meal by meal, for a single deposit. So the bag is passed around and around, and each trash element is placed individually in the bag.

By this time, the car smells like a deep fryer. That's not a bad thing, unless you've just binged on everything fried, and you've had enough. Moms say the car can smell that way for a few days, until the next visit. Efforts to subdue the odor range from leaving the windows open all day to Febreze-ing (my apologies—and congrats—to P&G) the whole interior. Most moms agree, "it's an issue".

> WORKING IT OUT

It's safe to say that a number of innovation opportunities present themselves throughout the dashboard dining experience. While there's a lot going on that we can't cover here, I would distill the opportunities down into two key innovation platforms:

1. How can QSR operators leverage packaging to delight consumers with a more relaxed, comfortable drive-thru and eating experience?

- How can the ordering and distribution of food be more convenient, orderly and neat?
- How can the meal set-up process more closely replicate the in-restaurant experience to improve relaxation and comfort?
- How can consumption in the car be less frenetic and less messy?
- How can clean-up be quicker, neater and more orderly?

2. How can QSR operators leverage packaging to boost revenue and reduce costs on every drive-thru occasion?

- How can consumers be encouraged to order exactly what they want, assuming those items will generate a higher ticket?
- How can they be induced to order those items with all the "good stuff" toppings to reduce exception processing?

- How do we ensure that accomplishing these tasks builds consumer satisfaction and loyalty?

This article attempts to illustrate tangible business opportunities. While we can't solve them all here, I've asked Carson Ahlman, an independent industrial designer, to work with me to create a few packaging concepts that can address a couple of the above opportunities. Think of them as "thought-starter" sketches rather than refined solutions. They are pictured in these pages.

I know what you're thinking. What about costs and manufacturing constraints? These are critical considerations, and there are thoughtful and thorough ways to establish parameters and size impacts early in such a project. Modeling the upside can tell you what kind of lift in trial and loyalty you need to see in order to make money on an innovation investment. Building such models often requires real-world testing with early-stage innovation solutions. Be sure to capture some customer satisfaction measures, too.

Successful innovation takes place when a strong methodology teams with creativity and know-how to help focus, inspire and guide concept development. With a coherent design strategy, your team can reach consensus on what really matters to the consumer, and where there are gaps in your offering. This is how transforming fresh insight into a cohesive design direction can be a "dashboard" for innovation success. **BP**

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