

Callender's boosts holiday catering, cuts associated labor using online ordering

By Julie Ritzer Ross

MISSION VIEJO, Calif. (Dec. 18) The Marie Callender's Restaurant & Bakery chain, based here, said an Internet ordering system supporting 112 units is bolstering a holiday catering business that offers complete soup-to-nuts meals for off-premise consumption.

Chris Yeh, Marie Callender's director of restaurant services, said the proprietary online ordering system from TakeOut Technologies, also based here, is contributing to the higher number of Holiday Feast orders being rung up this year, compared to 2006. It is also reducing the amount of time restaurant personnel spend processing telephone orders, he indicated, estimating that more than 1,500 man-hours were saved during the first three weeks of the catering promotion that began Nov. 1.

Yeh said the results garnered from the system, which is being used in all 90 Marie Callender's corporate restaurant locations as well as at 22 franchised stores, "far exceed" initial expectations. He added that more than 40 percent of Holiday Feast transactions completed as of Nov. 21 were executed online, and of those orders, 21.5 percent were placed after hours.

The TakeOut Technologies system has permitted Marie Callender's to cultivate the business of time-strapped customers who might otherwise have bought prepared meals elsewhere, Yeh opined. He said the technology that integrates seamlessly with Marie Callender's own website does that by giving such busy people the ability to place orders around the clock, seven days a week, not just during store hours.

"Given the success of the program," which ends on Dec. 31, "we hope to expand the service in 2008 to include orders from our core menu, as well as for our Family Take Home Meals and party platters," Yeh noted.

Other chains also are leveraging TakeOut Technologies' tool. Among them are Claim Jumper, Zpizza, Pasta Pomodoro, Grill Concepts, Pat & Oscar's, Max's World, Café Rio and Super Mex.

TakeOut Technologies chief executive Matt Martha said a total of 1,500 individual restaurants now have the system in place, but he declined to reveal the total headcount of restaurateurs using the system or the number of online orders being processed on their behalf.

As with most companies that have deployed the TakeOut Technologies' system, Marie Callender's uses a "basic online ordering" package that Martha said costs between \$50 and \$100 per month, per location for chains with 50 or more stores.

To order Holiday Feast meals online, consumers log on to the operator's website at www.mcplies.com and click a "Holiday Feast" URL that takes them to a store locator page. Customers choose the store from which they would like to pick up their meals and click the "order online" link beneath its name. They then are directed to the TakeOut Technologies landing page, where they can create a new account, review the menu or enter a password and user name to reach the ordering screen.

Once online orders have been completed and submitted via the landing page, order confirmation is emailed to customers, and order notification is both faxed and transmitted via email to the appropriate stores within two to three minutes. To prevent slip-ups and lost orders, TakeOut Technologies' customer support department monitors transmissions and verifies receipt through an order transmission management system. When order transmissions fail, the system sends text and email alerts to the support team and primary store contacts. Members of the support team then contact stores directly to troubleshoot and resubmit orders, if necessary.

The vendor also offers an optional service through which an automated telephone confirmation call is made to a store each time an order is routed to it.

To maintain brand consistency, the appearance of the landing page replicates the look of all other pages on Marie Callender's Web site.

To launch basic online ordering, the operator provided to the vendor a complete menu, along with a list of participating



The ordering interface seen by Marie Callender's customers when they order catered holiday meals online. Menu-item details pop up as users drag their mouse over the general description, and a calendar interface permits guests to place orders days or weeks ahead of the desired pickup date.

stores and their pertinent contact information, including telephone and fax numbers, addresses and driving directions for customers. TakeOut Technologies handled the programming and Web page design, as well as the placement of a URL from the www.mcpies.com store locator page to the Take-Home Feasts online ordering page. The implementation process took two to three weeks, including testing by the vendor, the parties involved said.

Marie Callender's currently is considering the idea of migrating from this setup to one in which the online ordering component would be integrated with the point-of-sale, or POS, system in each store. Martha said startup fees for integration services, executed entirely by the vendor, range from \$3,000 to \$8,000. He added that the system currently is integrated with POS software from Micros, which is used in a majority of Marie Callender's stores, as well as with systems offered by Aloha, Positouch and Xpient.

In deployments where the online ordering technology is integrated with the client's POS system, orders placed online are queued by TakeOut Technologies' system and associated with a given restaurant location. The restaurant's store/location XML order application polls the server via hypertext transfer protocol over secure socket layer, or HTTPS, every few seconds and requests any pending orders, Martha said. He explained that an automated order download is initiated, and orders are parsed before they are moved into the online order queue within the given store's POS system for processing.