AI Could Take Your Next Drive-Through Order. Taco Bell Parent Yum Brands and Nvidia's Partnership Explained

Source: Queenie Wong, *Los Angeles Times*, March 21, 2025

Fast food customers might find themselves talking to an artificial intelligence voice the next time they order tacos or pizza at a drive-through.

Yum Brands Inc., the parent company of Irvine-based Taco Bell and other popular fast food chains such as Pizza Hut, KFC and Habit Burger & Grill, has teamed up with tech juggernaut Nvidia to advance the development of AI in the restaurant industry.

The fast food giant, based in Kentucky, announced the partnership this week at Nvidia's GTC conference, the chipmaker's annual developer conference. Billed as the Super Bowl of AI, the event attracted thousands to San Jose.

Restaurants have been experimenting with technology, including AI voices and robots that could shape the industry's future. The race to release new AI tools has raised familiar questions about whether technology will replace certain jobs or create new ones. With food delivery apps making it easy to order meals from various restaurants without leaving the house, the competition continues to heat up.

"Over the last five years, the world's accelerated into digital. The restaurant industry is no different," Joe Park, chief digital and technology officer of Yum Brands, told an audience at a GTC session Tuesday. Digital sales make up more than 50% of the company's total sales, up from 19% in 2019, he said.

How are Nvidia and Yum Brands teaming up?

The world's largest restaurant company plans to use Nvidia's technology to power more AI agents that can take orders at drive-throughs and call centers, according to a news release from Yum Brands. AI-powered tools can also analyze a vast amount of data to improve drive-through efficiency and back-of-the-house labor management.

Yum Brands, which has its own technology platform, is also using AI to assess a restaurant's performance and generate action plans for restaurant managers as they learn more about why certain locations perform well.

Nvidia offers products that allow businesses to build or speed up the development of AI systems that can converse with people and perform tasks.

Yum Brands started piloting AI tools at some Taco Bell and Pizza Hut restaurants in the United States. The company plans to roll out AI solutions in 500 restaurants across Pizza Hut, Taco Bell, KFC and Habit Burger during the second quarter. The company has more than 61,000 restaurant locations.

Yum Brands said it isn't sharing the location of its pilots and didn't disclose the terms of the partnership. Nvidia didn't respond to a request for comment.

How can AI improve fast food ordering?

By making fast food ordering even faster. AI could speed up the time it takes for a person to order food at a drive-through or call center, especially during big events like game days when demand could surge at popular restaurants.

Park said at GTC that AI could also improve the customer experience because "the voice AI is always positive, has the right tone of voice, has the right word selection, can upsell consistently."

On average, the total amount of time a customer spends in a drive-through is 5 minutes and 29 seconds, according to a 2024 drive-through study by Intouch Insights. The study, which involved shoppers placing orders at the drive-throughs of fast food restaurants, found that only 4% of visits involved AI technology, but the total time spent was faster by 29 seconds.

The use of AI for ordering food is still experimental.

Yum Brands said its digital and technology strategy aims "to better serve its franchisees, providing them with better, faster, cheaper and safer technology while delighting consumers and maximizing shareholder returns."

Has Taco Bell experimented with AI before?

Yes. Last year, Taco Bell said it rolled out voice AI technology in more than 100 of its drive-throughs across 13 states and planned to use them in hundreds of locations.

"Benefits include easing task load for team members, improving order accuracy, providing a consistent, friendly experience, and reducing wait times, while driving profitable growth for Taco Bell, Yum! Brands and their franchisees," Taco Bell said in its news release.

What about other restaurants?

Wendy's, White Castle, Panda Express, McDonald's and other fast food restaurants have also been trying out AI-powered voice ordering.

The pilots don't always go off without a hitch. Some customers have complained on social media, posting videos about problems they've encountered with order accuracy at drive-throughs with AI voices. As restaurants train these AI systems, they're anticipating they'll get better over time.

Last year, McDonald's ended its partnership with IBM and planned to remove AI ordering from more than 100 restaurants, according to an internal email obtained by trade publication Restaurant Business in June. The fast food chain suggested it still thought AI drive-throughs would be part of the future and it was looking for a new partner.

Possible Response Questions
- What are your thoughts about AI's movement into fast food restaurants? Explain.
- Did something in the article surprise you? Discuss.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a "move" made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.