

# Repairs & Maintenance

Bob Gougler

## IT'S ALL ABOUT THE STATS

Why drive-through timers are a game changer for QSRs

My passion is baseball. Some of my business travel is decided by what games I can attend near my clients.

My television programming, reading and Pinterest favorites are skewed toward this great sport. I will go to great lengths to avoid social media to not encounter game spoilers. And one of my bucket list items is to visit all the U.S. professional baseball stadiums.

Learning about the rich history of this sport is fascinating. For me, the statistics are the most intriguing part of the game. As a boy, I would spend hours memorizing stats from my prized collection of baseball cards. In those days I followed the RBIs of the great players or the ERAs of awesome pitchers. Now, with modern baseball, I watch the "save and hold" categories, on-base percentages and so much more.

## Applying Stats at the Drive-Through

So how does baseball relate to drive-through timers? Remember the 2011 movie "Moneyball" starring Brad Pitt? The movie was about Billy Beane, the General Manager for the Oakland Athletics. The Athletics was a small market team that struggled to compete with the big market teams such as the New York Yankees, Boston Red Sox and LA Dodgers. Beane found his competitive advantage by leveraging statistics to transform his team from one of the poorest in the league to a serious contender and one of the most consistent franchises.

Enter the drive-through timer, one of the tools used by the Billy Beanes of the quick-serve restaurant industry. This technology collects data from the source and is used to quantify drive-through performance. By measuring the seconds between triggers and analyzing the data, operators are learning to be competitive by evolving in higher efficiency and increasing productivity.

## Timer Basics

Most drive-through crews see the timer as a graphical display hanging on the wall providing a visual of their efficiency. That is true, but to management teams, the drive-through timer is much more. It is a computer that gathers information from a series of pulses received on vehicle detector boards (VDBs) housed in the timer and headset base stations. System applications are easily configurable, producing graphical reports to track specific operational goals. Most systems are now network accessible and give management real-time access for multiple stores.

Ping! A car arrives at the speaker post, triggering an electrical impulse that starts the timer. This impulse is generated when the metal from the vehicle is detected by the pre-formed loops installed in the concrete pad during the construction of a store. (When a loop installation

is needed after the concrete pad is in place, it is done by making a 5-inch-deep saw cut in the concrete and placing a loop wire kit into the cut, which is then sealed with an epoxy sealant.) The loop wires at the speaker post or the service window travel into the building and are directly connected to the VDB inside the timer and base stations.

The timer runs like a stopwatch, accounting for each second it takes the customer to be greeted, to place and confirm the order, and the amount of time they remain in the queue as they proceed to the service window. (A properly functioning order confirmation display can help shave seconds off this process by providing a visual reference for the customer.)

The customer arrives at the service window and pings another loop installed in the concrete. Now, the timer is measuring performance at the service window.

As the car drives off the pad, the timer has collected the data and stores it in the back office for the operator to analyze. (With the new trend toward mobile orders and payments, imagine how much time is saved.)

### Maintenance Considerations

You now have a high-level understanding of how the whole timer process comes together. But what about maintaining your timer equipment? Unfortunately, there are no preventive maintenance best practices for timer issues. Most problems are just related to IT and aging equipment.

Symptoms of your equipment defaulting are often seen as polling issues, which can come from an error with the back-of-the-house software or even from outside parties. Another symptom is “ghost cars” or “timer run-on,” when your display is counting but there is no vehicle in the lane. Newer timer models are designed to remove ghost cars from polling data.

When—not if—a timer system component throws you a curve ball, it is most likely the controller unit, a display unit or, in some of the older units, a printer issue. VDBs rarely default. With a quick call to an industry drive-through service provider, you can easily replace components at the store level. (Insider’s note: Most service providers have “advance exchange” programs to get your component in-house quickly; however, most charge any additional fees to participate in the program. A few vendors include this helpful service without fees).

One last place your timer might strike out is at the loop. In Phoenix, pavement can reach temperatures above 150 degrees, while Michigan faces sub-zero temperatures. Whether your technology is subject to sun, salt, ice or snow, regional climates play a big part in failures. The lifespan of a loop is around five to seven years. (Hint: Watch for cracks in the pavement and breakdown of the epoxy. When you find them, it won’t be long before you’ll hear a little static in your communicators.) When the loop is exposed to the elements, the fix is to have your service provider rework your saw-cut, replace the loop and reseal the opening.

### Potential Payoffs

In the QSR industry, many brands claim the drive-through contributes 60 to 75 percent of a store’s revenue—and all of that is based on the premise of conveniently filling a customer’s order with both speed and accuracy.

Does a timer provide a good return on your investment? If you install a timer, how will you apply what you learn through the sets of statistics collected by this tool? Is there such a thing as too much data?

Timers are computers, so you can customize your program to display only the data you want, in the way you want to view it. As an example, suppose you want to eliminate “greet time,” when your customer is at the menu board before they are greeted. The system can be programmed to collect and store data weekly, versus daily. Maybe what is important to your operation is the number of cars during a certain window, average total time or just service time. Simply program accordingly.

All this data shows you how to trim seconds off the interaction you have with your customer. However, you might wonder if rushing your customer through the drive-through is the best form of customer service. For your business, it may be better to slow down and spend time with customers, ensuring their experiences in your drive-through are also casting a positive light on your brand. Another consideration is the type of timer system you select. Some are cloud-based, allowing competition between stores in real-time. This is great for morale, but is it necessary for what you are trying to achieve?

The drive-through timer is the ultimate stopwatch to check your processes and hit home runs with business goals, but the company management style ultimately decides if you’ll actually use the data. Efficiency and effectiveness come with vastly different definitions that depend on which team you play for in the hospitality business.

Bob Gougler is the CEO of Wayne Communications, a national drive-through logistics company. Along with his mastery of baseball statistics, he is well known by many in the QSR industry for providing Wayne clients with smart solutions.