

GROWERTALKS

Inside Look

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A Jumbo Hot Dog With Pickle & Mustard Only and Cheese Fries

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That's my go-to order whenever I go to Portillo's.

If you're not familiar with Portillo's, it's a Chicago-based fast-food restaurant that serves local favorites like Chicago-style hot dogs, Italian beef (with or without sweet peppers and giardiniera) and Maxwell Street Polish sausage (pronounced correctly as "sah-sage). They've got locations all around Chicagoland and have even branched out to other states. You can also order vacuum-packed hot dogs online and have them shipped to you.

Whenever my sister and her family come back for a visit from Seattle, the first thing they want is Portillo's. You cannot live here or visit without getting a hot dog from Portillo's. It's impossible. (Unless you're in the River Grove area, which in that case you'd get Gene & Jude's. Or the Weiner's Circle if you're in the city.)

The other thing Portillo's is famous for (besides their chocolate cake) is their drive-thru. It is a well-oiled machine of friendly order takers with tablets and headsets. It's like the Seinfeld "Soup Nazi" without the scary awkwardness. Everyone knows their role. You follow the pattern and you get delicious cheese fries at the end. All in (usually) just a few minutes.

The reason Portillo's drive-thru is so good is because the company has spent decades studying the traffic patterns and order trends, using that data to optimize its drive-thru so that it can handle every order in a matter of minutes, even during peak times. Yes, it has a speaker box, but they realized that having one place to order during high traffic periods was causing a bottleneck. Having staff outside walking TO your car to take your order and payment from a tablet sends the order to the kitchen sooner so that by the time you drive up to the window, another worker hands you your food. And they get it right because the person who took your order puts a Post-It with a number on your windshield so that the window person knows which order goes with which car.

What Portillo's does is really the concept of Lean Flow, which is what this month's cover story is about. I spoke with Gary Cortes of FlowVision, who gave examples of how you can look at your greenhouse design, the tasks involved with each process and where the bottlenecks are, and from there use the data to adjust the process to make it more

efficient. That's why I kept thinking of Portillo's drive-thru as I was writing this story (it could also be I was hungry, too):

- The flow of product in and out of the greenhouse (like orders going in and out of the kitchen)
- Splitting up the team into value-added and non-value-added jobs (food maker, order taker, food runner, etc.)
- The location for specific tasks with the right tools (right next to the car with a headset and tablet to place the order and take payment)
- Calculating how much time it takes for each task (a consistent menu allows you to know how much time it takes to make each food item)

It's about efficiency, yes. But being faster is meaningless if the stuff going out the door is all wrong, too. Having a smoother process allows your staff to be more diligent when it comes to their specific task, ensuring that every order is correct. Everyone has their role, and when they work in tandem, it's a well-oiled machine. Read it and to see some examples of common greenhouse layouts.

We also have other features on efficiency, including how to keep your energy bills low and how climate control companies are pushing their systems forward to address what growers want and need.

Do I ever deviate from my traditional Portillo's order? Sometimes. Sometimes I add sport peppers to my jumbo hot dog just to mix it up a bit. (NEVER with ketchup. That's heresy.) Sometimes I order the Polish sausage. Sometimes when I want to get really crazy I order their chopped salad. Whatever it is, I always know that in that drive-thru I'm part of a highly coordinated workflow process that rewards me with my favorite cheese fries. Who knew efficiency could be so delicious? **GT**