

Order Up! Dingmenu disrupts online ordering for independent restaurants

When a new infectious respiratory disease started making the news in early 2020, Evan Kraham knew he would need to be quick on his feet. His Italian ice shop, Cecillie's Gourmet, had become a staple in Coral Springs, Florida, since opening its doors in 1995. But when it became clear that COVID might halt indoor dining at restaurants and establishments like Cecillie's, even community pillars could shutter for good from drastically diminished revenues.

Kraham decided to be proactive before Florida instituted a business lockdown. He stopped welcoming customers inside the store, began offering curbside pickup and eventually built a takeout window to ensure that patrons and employees remained safe. Word got around to his customers about the changes, and a surprising thing happened.

"I quickly gained a reputation for being the safest place around, and my sales doubled," he says. "Things got crazy."

But that business boom came with its own problems. During regular times, Kraham's employees could manage customers who walked in to purchase one of the 48 flavors he offered. Curbside pickup, though, meant a dramatic surge in the time and labor needed to take orders. When customers pulled up to his shop, someone would need to go out to the person's car to take the order, come back in to fill and bag it, ring it up and



deliver it to the vehicle. At the same time, other patrons were ordering by telephone, which demanded another person just to field phone calls.

Technology's pros and cons

He needed a technological tool to streamline ordering and keep up with surging sales. Though he had a website, it wasn't set up for online takeout and curbside pickup sales. Sure, he accepted online orders from websites like Uber Eats and DoorDash, which helped speed up the ordering and purchasing process, but those platforms took a big bite out of his income. Online ordering platform commissions can reach 30% of each order's total.

"These apps have really taken advantage of the situation where customers are staying home," he says. "They're killing restaurants and places like mine with their fees."

Customers may place their orders through a link on the restaurant's existing website or in a text message sent by the restaurant.

Authorities in several municipalities feel the same way as Kraham. From New York City to Los Angeles, urban areas instituted temporary fee caps on ordering and delivery apps during COVID to help restaurants avoid being gouged and stay solvent.

Kraham took another route. He went to his friend Steve Popkin, a successful software entrepreneur and loyal Cecillie's customer, to create a better solution.

"With service providers like GrubHub and Seamless, who needs enemies?" Popkin says. "I knew there was a better way for independent restaurants to make money online than what the big-name platforms offer."

Shaking up the status quo for independent restaurants

Within months, Popkin unveiled Dingmenu. Aimed at small food businesses struggling to stay afloat during

COVID, Dingmenu makes it easy and cheap for establishments like Cecillie's to start taking online orders and keep more money that comes from them.

Customers may place their orders through a link on the restaurant's existing website or in a text message sent by the restaurant. Patrons can also scan a QR code printed in an ad or on a business's front window with their smartphone. Clicking the link opens the interactive ordering system and posts a bookmark to the restaurant's menu on the customer's home screen.

For restaurant owners, Dingmenu is a no-brainer because it takes neither sales commission nor ongoing subscription fees from its customers.

Instead, restaurant owners pay a one-time \$99 setup fee to create their branded online menu. Restaurant customers who place a takeout or curbside pickup order through Dingmenu pay a small \$0.99 fee. The app also supports online ordering for restaurants offering in-house delivery to patrons. Leading payment processor Stripe handles the transaction and assesses restaurants its standard credit card processing fees of 2.9% plus \$0.30 per order.

That's it—there are no term contracts, hidden fees or cancellation

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penalties. And since Dingmenu is a web-based platform, businesses don't need any special devices or even POS systems.

Popkin says this new model for restaurant ordering puts power and money back in restaurant owners' hands.

"Dingmenu is standing up for independent restaurants and saying enough is enough with outlandish fees and unbearably competitive listings," says Popkin. "We knew the time had come to disrupt the status quo in online ordering, and we think Dingmenu does exactly that."

Now using the platform for a few months, Kraham says Dingmenu orders have been increasing daily.

Besides allowing him to keep more money in his pocket, it's also helping him realize operational efficiencies he couldn't have imagined. He now doesn't have to schedule an extra person to take phone orders or run back and forth to waiting cars. It has also cut by half the time he needs to receive and fill orders. And customers are getting better service with easier ordering.

"Dingmenu does everything I need it to do," Kraham says. "It helps us run more seamlessly. It's a smart tool for my business, and customers love it." **TR**