

DOMINO'S CEO DOESN'T WANT A ROBOT MAKING YOUR PIZZA

Ritch Allison discusses the pizza chain's experiments with driverless delivery, the limits of automated food prep and the reason a digital assistant might take your next order



ILLUSTRATION: MARK WEAVER; PHOTO: DOMINO'S



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Ritch Allison, the chief executive of Domino's Pizza Inc., is sure of one thing: Pizza will endure. Almost everything about how a pizza is made and transported to the customer, however, is undergoing a high-tech shift.

Mr. Allison is overseeing the world's largest pizza chain as it seeks to transform its operations in the rapidly changing quick-service restaurant business. The company that first popularized pizza delivery in the U.S. in the 1960s now faces competition from Grubhub Inc., DoorDash Inc., Postmates Inc. and other delivery companies that have vastly increased to-go options for diners.

Domino's has maintained that it won't outsource delivery and will instead invest in its operations to make them more efficient and better for customers. Technology is central to this effort. Domino's tested self-driving delivery vehicles built by Ford Motor Co. in Michigan and Miami, and will use a custom driverless fleet of cars made by autonomous-vehicle startup Nuro Inc. to shuttle pizzas in Houston later this year. In Australia and New Zealand, a Domino's division began testing artificially intelligent cameras that photograph and grade each pie on different criteria, essentially performing a quality audit and, in theory, preventing a subpar pizza from reaching the customer's door. And in the U.S., the company's voice-recognition system, "Dom," is automating telephone orders in about 40 stores.

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Mr. Allison, 52, took on the CEO role last year after four years running the company's international division as president, which includes 10,000 of its 16,100 company- and franchisee-owned stores. He spoke with The Future of Everything about the role of robots in pizza making, the use of customer data and the vehicles that might one day deliver your dinner.

A Digital Assistant Will Take Your Order—and Sell You More Food

We're looking at "Dom" as a way to, first and foremost, answer every phone call. On the peak periods of our business, Friday nights and Saturday nights, we are missing some business because we're just so busy we're not answering all the phones. It's also going to allow us to do a better job of offering our customers relevant products and frankly, over time, will give us an opportunity to drive [bigger orders].

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With our digital ordering platforms, we can test and build those things over time. It's very difficult to do that across tens of thousands of customer service representatives.

Data Will Help Write Menus

We look at what customers choose to purchase from us over time, and we're tweaking the menu, adding things, taking things off constantly, based on those demand patterns over time. We

launched a line of artisan pizzas, which we all thought tasted great. But the demand wasn't there, and so we pulled them off the menu. Customers told us that they really wanted the option of ordering salads, but didn't necessarily care for our salads. So we completely revamped and relaunched a line of salads.

Robots Will Help—But Not Replace—Human Pizza Makers

We've got robots that place dough balls on trays. Historically, it had been done by humans. We've been speeding up the process of cooling dough down. Just like if you make dough at home, when you mix the flour, water, oil, salt, everything together, that dough comes out of your mixer warm. Well, it comes out of ours warm as well. We've been installing [automated chillers] in our supply chain centers to do that faster and more efficiently. We bring fresh dough into our stores, and we make to order every pizza that we send out to our customers. That's the last thing I want to do, is have robots make pizzas. We'll certainly drive more automation in our supply chain centers, and there's AI that we can bring into our stores for things like labor scheduling. But wow, I really want to keep the magic of that pizza making. A third or so of our business is customers coming in and picking their food up. There are many things that we can be more efficient at in our stores before we think about having a robot make our food.



Domino's uses robots to place dough balls on trays. CEO Ritch Allison says that the company will use more automation in supply chain centers. PHOTO: DOMINO'S

Pizza Will Arrive at Your Door. A Delivery Guy Might Not.

The least efficient thing that we do is to put four or five pounds of food in a 5,000-pound machine that was designed to protect four or five adults in the event of a catastrophic collision driven by a human being. You've seen us working on autonomous delivery. [The driverless vehicle we're testing with Nuro is] a little smaller than a golf cart, with compartments that open up, which

could be heated, could be chilled, can be configurable to our product. We've got to push aggressively to bring down the cost of delivering products over time. We've still got to see how [drone delivery] unfolds. In some settings, potentially out in a more rural environment, that could make some sense. But it's pretty challenging to do it in an urban or even a suburban environment. I'm not sure that residents are going to be too excited about drones with cameras flying over their houses all the time either.

This interview has been condensed and edited.

Forward Thinking is an interview series from The Future of Everything where noteworthy figures from business, culture and technology reveal what lies ahead.

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