

Subway Restaurants and Customer Orders

An Ethnography

[ABSTRACT]

I decided to study customers ordering sandwiches at a Subway restaurant. There are many different decisions and actions that people perform while they are ordering, likely without even knowing they are performing them. I have been to many different Subway shops in various different locations and have seen this prior to starting my ethnography. With that said, I knew it would be a great process to analyze with this assignment. In particular, I observed people on 9/19/2013 from 9:15AM to 10:30AM at the Subway in Ryder Hall, as well as on 9/22/2013 from 7:30PM to 7:45PM at the Subway near my home in Rhode Island. I spent less time at the Subway near my house since it was primarily just to ensure that the process was nearly identical at both locations. The following observations are from the Subway located in Ryder Hall though, since the assignment dealt with a student center.

[INTRODUCTION]

When customers enter a Subway location, some enter already knowing what they would like to order. Other people do not and occasionally ask for suggestions. Regardless of this, many people utilize various gestures to help indicate to the employee what they would like. These gestures include pointing, shaking their head, as well as various other forms of body language. When customers go to Subway, they want a quick and simple meal that does not take very long to get. This is because they are often hungry or need to grab a quick bite between classes. The people I observed were almost always students or faculty members here at Northeastern and were usually in a rush to get somewhere.

[INTERVIEWS/OBSERVATIONS]

During the period of time that I spent at the Subway restaurant, I interviewed a few different people. The first was a fellow student that had dark hair and was approximately the same age as myself. When I asked him why he chooses to go to Subway over other alternatives on campus, he stated that he "... enjoyed being able to get a sandwich rather quickly and it is right near all of my classes." He also mentioned how "... the ordering process is so simple, yet the sandwiches are extremely customizable." I asked him what improvements he could see in the ordering process, and he suggested "Possibly, a way to order the food in advance and then just pick it up without having to go through the line."

Another interviewee was a faculty member from Northeastern who has an office in the Behrakis Health Sciences Center. She was probably in her mid-to-late forties with light brown hair. I asked similar questions to those that I asked the first person, and received predominantly the same answers. One difference though, was that she actually liked the interaction with the employees at Subway, stating that "I think it would be very impersonal ordering any other way and I don't like that." She mentioned how she liked that "Subway is practically right next door to where I work." This resonates the idea of being able to obtain a quick meal because it reduces the amount of time spent traveling to and from the restaurant.

During a brief lull in business, I asked one of the Subway attendants what their thoughts were on improvements in the ordering process. She responded rather excitedly stating that "... a website would be really nice." She continued to say that "Many times we have issues with language barriers and that slows down the process for all of our other customers. If we had a system that we could use to build sandwiches with all of the information needed up front, it would save us time." I was able to ask her one last question before a number of customers arrived anxious to start ordering. The question that I asked was whether or not customers gestures such as pointing to the decals and shaking their head in conjunction with a verbal response helped the employees with understanding the customer. She said that "it usually does."

[PROCESS]

Upon entering, the customer would enter the line and wait for the next available employee.

Once an employee was available, the customer was asked how they could be helped today. The customer then responded naming the type of sandwich they would like. If the customer did not mention the type of bread they would like, then the employee asked them. Most customers already knew the answer, but I saw a few instances where the customer did not know what types they could choose from. In that case, the employee referred the customer to a decal that they have posted on the glass in the store. This graphic decal had images of the various available options and text imposed over the different types that listed the name of that option. When a customer would decide what type they wanted they pointed, and occasionally touched the decal in a location that indicated which one they wanted. The pointing appears to help the employees determine the correct option that the customer wants because the decals are transparent. The employee then grabs the bread and asks whether they would like a six inch or footlong sandwich. Most customers decided without any hesitation because they already knew the process. Other customers struggled with which size they wanted and usually represented the size that they wanted with their hands, often inaccurately displaying the six inch size as closer to three or four inches while the twelve inch sub was approximately correct. The employee would then proceed to put the basic meats on and ask if the customer wanted “Any cheese?” on the sandwich. I most frequently heard responses that were either specific types of cheese listed off from another decal or simply “No.” Once that question was answered, the customer was again presented with another question: “Is it toasted?” This was always a yes or no response from my observation.

If the sandwich was toasted, then the employee would put it in the toaster. Once it was done, it would be moved down further along the line of employees who would then assemble the sandwiches with vegetables. If the sandwich was not toasted, then it was automatically moved down. The workers that at the vegetable area asked customers what “toppings” they wanted. Again, most customers knew what they desired, but others who were sometimes less fluent with the language did not know what they wanted or struggled with the words for the vegetables. In this area, there was also a graphic decal that listed the available options and had text imposed over the images with the name of the vegetable. Customers frequently used this as a guide while they were ordering, often even going in the order the items were listed on the graphic while pointing at the item. Once the desired items were added, the employees would ask what sauce the customer would like. There was another graphic for the sauces, but only listed their colors since it is more difficult to actually show what the sauce looks like. Once again, customers pointed to the item and stated the name, or simply responded “No.”

At this point, the sandwich was built and it was time to pay. While customers were walking further down the “assembly line” to the cash register, the employees would cut the sub in half using a knife if it was a footlong and wrap it for the customer. The cashier asks the customer what they ordered and would charge them accordingly. I noticed that occasionally the cashier asked the employees instead, or the employees would just automatically tell the cashier what was ordered. The customer would pay the amount due, take their sandwich, and leave. Although this sounds like a very lengthy process, it usually happens in about five to ten minutes.

[ARTIFACTS]

While I sat and watched the interactions, I saw many different artifacts that were vital to the process. The following are the artifacts that I saw in order of chronography for each order:

- Loaf of bread
- Meats (if any) for the sandwich
- Cheese (if any)
- Toaster and Toaster Tray
- Vegetables/Toppings
- Sauces
- Knife (for cutting sandwiches)
- Cash Register

- Payment (Cash or Credit/Debit Card)

There were many different ways that these objects were manipulated as seen in the description of the process used by the Subway restaurant that I observed.

[CONCLUSION]

Overall, from this experience, it appears rather obvious that an electronic ordering system is very capable using modern day technologies. There are also multiple concerns with such a system such as how vulnerable it is to exploits. Regardless, it is nevertheless possible to create such a machine that would basically allow users to construct their sandwich virtually through a graphical interface consisting of many widgets to represent the choices a user would normally be presented. Based on the gestures observed, a touchscreen interface would be the best implementation since it would mimic the natural instinct of pointing towards what you would like. The best interface would likely guide the user through the process in the exact same steps except with touch buttons, radio buttons, and/or check-boxes for selecting items. In order to fulfill that interaction desire that was also demonstrated, they could have pictures of the Subway employees on the screens with dialogs for help or recommended sandwiches. Based on their gestures when ordering, it appears that users would be very open to this option since it would increase the efficiency at which they can receive their order. In all honesty, ordering systems such as these have been implemented in other countries but for whatever reason have not been largely adopted here. From this study, it appears that most people are willing to accept ordering through interacting with a machine instead of via human interaction.

Here are some of the pictures that I captured while I was ordering at Subway prior to observing other people ordering:



(Subway in Cumberland, RI)



Here are pictures of the Subway in Ryder Hall (photos taken from Northeastern Dining Facebook Page):

