



TACO BELL

Subscription Commerce Tracker[®]

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Taco Bell on how the right subscription program can deliver growth

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Subscription eCommerce sales set to reach nearly \$28 billion by the end of 2021

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How the rise in subscription food and restaurant services can drive sales and loyalty

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What's Inside



Subscriptions were on the rise even before stay-at-home orders, widespread shifts to remote work and the need for social distancing popularized them further. Many experts also are convinced that even as aspects of pre-pandemic life resume, working from home could be here to stay — along with continued growth in the subscription commerce market. The subscription model benefits both merchants and consumers, offering businesses recurring revenue and customers the services they desire. The demand is evident: Netflix, for example, **generated** nearly \$25 billion in revenue last year, a 24 percent year-over-year increase, while enjoying an operating profit of \$4.5 billion, up 73 percent over 2019. The company reported that it has 209 million subscribers worldwide as of 2021.

Entertainment is just one avenue for subscriptions, however, and the popularity of the model has soared as consumers seek new ways to treat themselves. There is a subscription service for every wish, including beauty products, coffee, food, alcohol and even flowers. Recent data **revealed** that about one-third of United States consumers have enrolled in a retail subscription box, spending an average of \$57 per month. Ten percent spend more than \$100 monthly on product or digital subscriptions, and 71 percent have or plan to enroll in a monthly product subscription.

The model continues to expand within the food industry as well. The pandemic indirectly helped struggling products such as meal kit and direct-to-consumer (D2C) food subscription services, and now these sectors are finding their footing on a path to greater growth and innovation. Restaurants, which face even more competition coming out of the pandemic, are embracing the feature, as are supermarkets.

AROUND THE SUBSCRIPTION COMMERCE SPACE

Restaurants have become the latest **entrants** into the subscription services market in their aim to win greater loyalty among customers. Quick-service restaurant (QSR) Taco Bell has launched a new subscription feature at its locations in Tucson, Arizona, where customers can get one taco per day via the chain's app for a monthly fee of between \$5 and \$30. The Taco Lover's Pass is in play until Nov. 24 at participating locations. Taco Bell is not the only QSR trying to entice customers to come by more often: Panera launched a monthly coffee and tea subscription service last year, and Burger King and McDonald's both have debuted subscription features. There's evidence that paid loyalty programs work, with one 2020 survey finding consumers 60 percent likelier to spend more on a brand after becoming subscribers. Free loyalty programs, by contrast, increase spending likelihood by less than one-third.

Grocery stores also are adding subscription upgrades to their loyalty programs as competition **intensifies**. This past summer, Albertsons,

the Idaho-based chain that operates stores in 34 states, including Safeway, Shaw's and Star Market, **launched** FreshPass, a subscription service that includes a savings and delivery app. Other grocers have followed suit or are testing such options. These offerings are part of a trend in which retailers try to solidify omnichannel shopper loyalty with membership programs similar to Amazon Prime. Prime has changed the game because it has taught consumers to make purchases based on factors that go beyond the product. Supermarkets can stand out by offering subscriptions with features such as free shipping or points toward discounts, and subscription models build members' loyalty by assuring them of something in return for their purchases.

Demand for ready-to-cook and ready-to-eat food subscriptions has **boomed** during the pandemic and remains high despite signs of recovery in the restaurant dine-in sector. The healthy frozen foods market also is doing quite well, suggesting that there is a ripe opportunity to fill a growing demand for D2C food subscriptions. Health-focused frozen food brand Real Good Foods tests new products via its D2C online channel and launches high performers through its brick-and-mortar grocery store partners, but recent PYMNTS research indicates that consumers may be looking to do more than simply test products this way. The demand for D2C food and grocery subscriptions is on the rise, and the share of consumers reporting they would be "very" or "extremely" interested in food and grocery subscriptions

increased from 50 percent in February 2021 to 56 percent in May. Healthy frozen food brands appear to be perfectly poised to take advantage of this opportunity.

For more on these stories and other subscription commerce headlines, read the Tracker's News and Trends section (p. 11).

TACO BELL ON HOW THE SUBSCRIPTION MODEL CAN HELP DELIVER GROWTH AND PROFITS FOR THE QSR SECTOR

Restaurants and QSRs have had to get creative to survive the pandemic, and digital transformations are being augmented by even more innovative concepts, such as restaurant subscriptions. The approach makes sense for the restaurant space, as subscriptions provide eateries with a consistent source of revenue. The subscription model also has a strong record of success across a wide range of industries, with the subscription economy having grown 435 percent since 2012. California-based fast casual chain [Taco Bell](#) is among a slew of QSRs that have recently entered the market, trialing a monthly taco subscription program. In this month's Feature Story (p. 8), Zipporah Allen, the company's chief digital officer, describes how a well-done subscription plan can deliver the value and convenience customers crave while helping to support restaurants through lean times.



DEEP DIVE: HOW CONSUMERS' HUNGER FOR SUBSCRIPTIONS IS HELPING THE FOOD AND RESTAURANT INDUSTRY

Subscription commerce revenue grew 41 percent in 2020 as consumers turned to subscriptions to fulfill daily needs of all types. The model's appeal seems to have no limits, and restaurants are among the latest to embrace the feature. The approach could not be more welcome for eateries: Restaurants that relied

on office workers for their lunch-hour business still are struggling as many employees continue to work remotely. This month's Deep Dive (p. 17) examines how subscriptions leverage the loyalty program concept, offering restaurants and merchants recurring revenue and a high level of brand engagement. It also explores how the model's various forms in the food industry — including meal kit, D2C, restaurant and QSR subscriptions — stand to help sustain the sector in the long run.



FIVE FAST FACTS

34%

Share of subscribers who use more subscriptions now than they did just a few months ago

3.4

Average number of subscriptions used by subscribers at any given time

80%

Share of U.S. consumers who use at least one subscription service

10%

Portion of subscribers who use their subscriptions to save time

19%

Portion of baby boomers and seniors who use subscription services to save money

Feature Story

Taco Bell On How The Right
Subscription Program Can
Deliver Growth



Restaurants have experimented with creative approaches to survive unparalleled adversity during the pandemic. Some quickly went digital with contactless ordering, payments, delivery and takeout to respond to dining room closures and social distancing mandates, while others moved their tables and chairs outdoors. One relatively novel approach now gaining ground is the restaurant subscription, which provides merchants with a consistent source of revenue.

Consumers have demonstrated their comfort with this service model, as illustrated by Amazon Prime, Netflix, Hulu, Dollar Shave Club and Blue Apron. The resulting subscription economy has grown more than 435 percent since 2012, according to recent data. One 2020 [survey](#) found that 55 percent of New York residents would consider subscribing to a favorite restaurant and that 5 percent would do so just to help it stay afloat.

Panera Bread and Olive Garden [have](#) well-established subscription programs, and Pret a Manger, the London-based cafe with locations in the U.S., joined the procession in September. California-based QSR [Taco Bell](#) launched the Taco Lover's Pass last month, a trial subscription plan [available](#) through Nov. 24 at some locations in Tucson, Arizona. The 30-day trial allows customers to redeem one taco per day for a cost of \$5 to \$10 per pass, depending on the user's location.

"The Taco Lover's Pass is the latest addition

to the brand's digital innovation journey," Ziporah Allen, the company's chief digital officer, recently told PYMNTS. "In the subscription economy, we've seen entrants [such as] meal kit companies and fashion brands and thought it would be exciting to merge that subscription-style offering with our iconic tacos."

Allen declined to say how many customers have signed up for the service so far, but she said the response has been more than encouraging.

"[We are] thrilled with the positive reception the Taco Lover's Pass has received," she said.



SUBSCRIPTION MODEL MAKES SENSE FOR QSRs

Allen explained that the subscription offering was designed to boost foot traffic and drive customer engagement as the QSR sector undergoes an accelerated digital transformation. The pass aims to reward Taco Bell's most loyal diners and meet the needs of customers who seek personalized, exclusive digital brand experiences.

The subscription program features easy enrollment and promises a seamless customer experience from start to finish, she added. To purchase the Taco Lover's Pass, users simply add the pass to their carts from the "Online Exclusives" section of the Taco Bell app menu. The daily pass selections from which customers can choose include the Crunchy Taco, Spicy Potato Soft Taco and Doritos Locos Tacos Supreme.

The pilot was the brainchild of a creative collaboration with franchisee partners in the Tucson area focused on driving growth through digital engagement.

"Our fans and team members have been the guiding force behind the decisions we've made, especially in the last year, which has played a significant role in Taco Bell's digital volume growth," Allen said. "We've really focused on how our digital advancements can help better the customer and team member experience. We know our fans are eager for convenience and reliability, two aspects we will continue to deliver on within our digital platforms."

Still, offering subscription services is no guarantee of success for restaurants. Just ask Burger King, which abandoned its \$5 monthly coffee subscription offer, and Cumberland Farms, whose \$25-per-month coffee "Cup-scription" program was dropped after a six-month run.

One possible cause for such failures is an overly cautious approach to offerings. Burger King's program allowed customers to redeem only one small cup of coffee per day, which may not have been enough to convert fans of other brands such as Starbucks or McDonald's. Consumers also might deem some subscription programs as priced too high to yield value.

Industry analysts nevertheless say the subscription model makes perfect sense for QSRs. In addition to incentivizing app and restaurant traffic, these programs can capture specific details about customers' ordering preferences that can be used to build brand loyalty. Recent PYMNTS data showed that 57 percent of loyalty program guests would spend more if restaurants offered the programs, and other research has indicated that increasing customer retention rates by just 5 percent could lift restaurant profits between 25 percent and 95 percent.

Smart application of the subscription model has much to offer QSRs such as Taco Bell. Done correctly, subscriptions can fulfill customers' requirements for value and convenience while providing predictability for restaurants through good times and bad.

NEWS & TRENDS



FOOD SERVICE, RESTAURANT AND GROCERY SUBSCRIPTIONS

SUBSCRIPTIONS ARE HEATING UP IN SUPERMARKET SPACE

Numerous industries are diving into subscriptions, including the grocery space, and many chains are upgrading their services and adding features such as loyalty programs. Idaho-based Albertsons, which operates Safeway, Shaw's and Star Market locations across 34 states, **launched** a new subscription service called FreshPass last summer. The solution also includes a savings and delivery app. Other grocers, such as Giant, Kroger and Publix, are working on similar options as they try to win over omnichannel shoppers with membership programs.

Grocers are competing for consumers who have grown used to the ease and convenience that subscription services offer. Amazon Prime in particular has changed the game by teaching consumers to make purchases based on factors beyond the product. Guy Bloch, CEO at delivery and fulfillment cloud platform Bringg, said providing subscriptions with features such as free shipping or points toward discounts can help supermarkets stand out. He said subscription membership programs let shoppers

know that they receive perks any time they make purchases, which can help supermarkets create long-lasting customer loyalty.

MAJOR RESTAURANT CHAINS ARE PUSHING INTO SUBSCRIPTION SERVICES MARKET

Restaurants also are entering the subscription services market, with even well-known brand names seeing the appeal. Mexican-style QSR Taco Bell, for example, recently **began** a subscription trial at its locations in Tucson, Arizona, costing between \$5 and \$30 monthly for vari-

ous perks. The option, called the Taco Lover's Pass, will extend through Nov. 24.

Taco Bell is not alone in turning to subscriptions to entice customers to frequent its eateries more often. Panera launched a monthly coffee and tea subscription service last year. Evidence suggests such programs are working, with one survey in 2020 finding that members of paid loyalty programs were 60 percent more likely to spend more on a brand after becoming subscribers.



OPPORTUNITY MAY BE RIPE FOR HEALTHY FROZEN FOODS IN D2C SUBSCRIPTION SPACE

Demand for meal kits, heat-and-eat options and subscription meal delivery services has **skyrocketed** since the pandemic began and remains elevated despite signs that the dine-in restaurant sector is recovering. The healthy frozen foods market also has increased by 15 percent over the last two years, suggesting that there may be an opportunity to fill a growing demand for D2C food subscriptions.

Bryan Freeman, CEO of health-focused frozen food brand Real Good Foods, explained to PYMNTS in a recent interview that his company observes product performance firsthand by testing new items in its D2C online shop. If a product performs well, the company will launch it through its brick-and-mortar grocery store partners. D2C remains an uncommon channel for food and beverage shopping, as just 16 percent of consumers report using D2C channels for these purchases, compared to 55 percent across all categories. Recent PYMNTS research, however, found that the demand for D2C food and grocery subscriptions is on the rise. The share of consumers reporting they would be “very” or “extremely” interested in such subscriptions increased from 50 percent in February 2021 to 56 percent in May, indicating that the time may be ripe for companies to launch D2C subscriptions for these in-demand food items.

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICES FLOURISH

eCOMMERCE SUBSCRIPTIONS CONTINUE TO GAIN STEAM

It is not surprising that many consumers preferred to receive products safely at their homes last year, but newly released research illustrates how significantly this trend affected subscription services. A report found that subscription commerce sales **grew** 41 percent last year, and it predicts they will exceed \$27 billion by the end of this year. Household, beauty and pet supply products have experienced the biggest surge in demand for subscriptions. Pet owners in particular are willing to spend more to protect their furry companions’ health, with subscriptions for pet supplies increasing 340 percent year over year as nearly 12 million households welcomed new animals during the pandemic.

Enrollment in subscriptions for household products such as soap or disinfectant wipes and comfort items such as candles has proven exceptionally robust. Subscriptions for these products rose 288 percent year over year in 2020 as stay-at-home orders and social distancing mandates shook up consumers’ rou-



tines. Wellness and beauty products also have been popular, with subscription providers in this space observing a 117 percent increase in subscriptions in 2020 compared to 2019.

CONSUMERS SPEND AN AVERAGE OF \$273 PER MONTH FOR SUBSCRIPTIONS

Additional research is illustrating subscriptions' growing appeal and how it is driving subscribers to spend more. A new poll of 2,500 U.S. consumers found that they now spend an average of \$273 monthly on their subscription services, compared to \$237 each month in 2018. This represents a 15 percent boost and equates to more than \$430 in addition annually. The report also outlined how many consumers underestimate the amount they spend on their subscription services. Eighty-nine percent of respondents' estimates undershot what they actually spent each month on subscriptions, and almost half were off by more than \$100.

Certain services were more ubiquitous than others. Seventy percent of respondents subscribed to cell phone, Wi-Fi, TV or movie services, and half said they were enrolled in Amazon Prime. Other subscriptions included cloud storage, dating apps, fitness, gaming, home security systems, meal services, music streaming and news publications. Respondents also said they used subscription boxes that offered various products, including pet supplies, toys and wellness and beauty products.

SOME UK SUBSCRIPTION BOX CATEGORIES WILL REMAIN HOT POST-PANDEMIC

The world may be reopening, but new research is finding that the subscription box market **continues** to rise in the United Kingdom following the sector's major boost from the pandemic. The market, which has grown a stunning 135 percent since 2017, was worth an estimated £1.4 billion (\$1.9 billion USD) during the height of stay-at-home mandates in 2020. Researchers expect it to grow another 29 percent to £1.8 billion (\$2.4 billion USD) by 2025.

The U.K. subscription boxes that earn the highest average spend are those offering drinks, such as craft beer, wine or specialty coffees, costing an average £30 (\$41 USD) per month. Flower or plant subscription boxes are the next-highest spending category at an average cost of £25 (\$34 USD) per month, and subscription services for gaming and gadgets round out the top three at an average of £20 (\$27 USD) monthly. Other notable categories include book and magazine subscriptions at £15 (\$20 USD) per month and health and fitness subscriptions at £14 (\$19 USD) monthly. U.K. menstrual product subscription provider Yoppie said the subscription lifestyle will continue to resonate with consumers, as it offers more convenient and personalized customer experiences as well as better-quality products than those found in the typical supermarket.

ADDITIONAL SUBSCRIPTION DEVELOPMENTS

SUBSCRIPTION PAYMENT DECLINES ARE RANDOM AND COSTLY BUT AVOIDABLE

Seemingly random false card declines in the subscription sector result in more than \$400 billion in lost sales every year, not to mention immeasurable costs by generating bad will among customers. Darryl Hicks, CEO of FlexPay, told PYMNTS in a recent interview that two out of every three payment **declines** are victim to “the month 15 problem,” which occurs when card-on-file transactions that have been made successfully for months without incident are suddenly and inexplicably declined. Hicks said the problem is too big to ignore, and merchants often calculate a 20 percent card decline rate as the cost of doing business. One solution he advocates is a defensive tool called payment authorization management (PAM). PAM is an application programming interface (API) that promises to alleviate unpredictable fraud triggers by examining the workings of the payment authentication process, he explained.

Hicks said the problem is one of inefficiency, as each card transaction receives a three-digit risk score and financial institutions differ on how to respond. Their time frames for various risk thresholds reset every so often, causing random declines. False declines are responsible for 48 percent of all customer churn with subscription providers, and merchants must do more to fix these problems, he said.

SURVEY: CONSUMERS WILLING TO PAY SUBSCRIPTION FEES FOR AD-FREE SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media platforms typically earn money by obtaining and selling user data to advertisers, but a new survey has found that more than 27 percent of consumers are willing to **pay** a subscription fee for ad-free social media accounts. The remaining 73 percent said they would prefer ad-supported social media if it meant keeping the services free. Seventy-three

percent of would-be social media subscribers said any paid-for platform should be ad-free, 60 percent said it should contain exclusive content, 34 percent want better image quality and 30 percent said such a platform should permit posting whatever they like without censorship. Sixty-three percent reported they prefer a one-time payment over a monthly bill, however.

Twitter **introduced** Twitter Blue in Australia for \$4.49 AUD (\$3.27 USD) per month and in Canada for \$3.49 CAD (\$2.77 USD) per month in June. Twitter's blog stated that this test launch is intended to gain a deeper understanding of how to customize the tweeting experience. Subscribers receive personalized app icons for their devices' home screens, color themes for their Twitter apps and access to dedicated subscription customer support. Critics have said Twitter **failed** to offer the ad-free experience that many expect from such plans.



HOW CONSUMERS' GROWING APPETITE FOR SUBSCRIPTION SERVICES CAN HELP SUSTAIN THE FOOD AND RESTAURANT INDUSTRIES



The explosion of the global subscription eCommerce market has been a major impact of the pandemic. Consumers under stay-at-home mandates turned to subscriptions to fulfill daily needs for everything from entertainment to personal care products to pet supplies. Subscription commerce sales **increased** 41 percent last year and are expected to reach nearly \$28 billion by the end of 2021.

The subscription model's appeal is enduring well past reopening, with PYMNTS **research** from September confirming that consumers' appetites for subscription commerce has grown since March 2020. Today, 205 million Americans have at least one subscription service, up 13 percent from the 182 million counted in the first quarter of 2020. By 2025, the market is **expected** to reach \$478 billion, representing a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 68 percent since 2019.

The food sector in particular is gaining steam. The model is making inroads into every aspect of food service, with even QSRs such as Taco Bell launching subscription packages. The approach could not come at a better time for eateries. Restaurants that relied on office workers for the lunch-hour rush **suffer** as many employees continue to work remotely. Subscriptions **serve** as an extension of the loyalty program concept, offering merchants and restaurants recurring revenue and a high level of brand engagement.

The following Deep Dive examines the most recent developments in food and restaurant subscriptions. It also explores how the model's various forms — including meal kit, D2C and restaurant subscriptions — are poised to help sustain the sector long into the future.

FROM MEAL KITS TO QSR SUBSCRIPTIONS

The pandemic fundamentally changed the food service sector. The combination of restricted options for dining out, little time for food preparation and the culinary limitations of takeout **made** meal kit subscriptions among the breakout stars of 2020. Frankfurt-based meal kit provider HelloFresh, for example, with the largest market share, reported 2020 sales of €970.2 million (\$1.1 billion USD) for Q3 2020, a year-over-year increase of 120 percent. The once-struggling industry found its footing amid last year's tectonic shifts, and analysts have predicted its gains will become permanent. Businesses that deliver ready-to-eat and ready-to-cook subscription meal kits are expected to **grow** at a CAGR of 13 percent and reach \$27 billion in market size by 2028.

Similarly, the pandemic nudged the once-niche D2C food subscription market into the limelight as grocery retailers experienced shortages of food products such as meat and fish. Shoppers previously hesitant to purchase meat products online **pivoted** in response to supply chain challenges, and observers believe those habits will have staying power. A March 2021 **study** of online subscription meat ordering showed

that Net Promoter Scores, a measure of consumer experience in which scores over 50 are considered excellent, have jumped from 26 to 59 since January of this year. Recent PYMNTS research also revealed rapid growth in the share of consumers who would be “very” or “extremely” interested in using D2C food or grocery subscriptions, rising from 50 percent in February 2021 to 56 percent in May.

Perhaps the most innovative subscription concept to hit the food industry has been the restaurant subscription. Eateries in distress during the pandemic **launched** numerous survival strategies, with some reinventing themselves as grocery stores or switching to takeout, and others seizing on the subscription model. Enthusiasm was high, with 55 percent of New Yorkers in one **survey** expressing interest in subscribing to local restaurants, many hoping to help keep them afloat. Restaurant subscriptions still are a relative **rarity**, but industry experts remain optimistic about their potential, especially for QSRs.

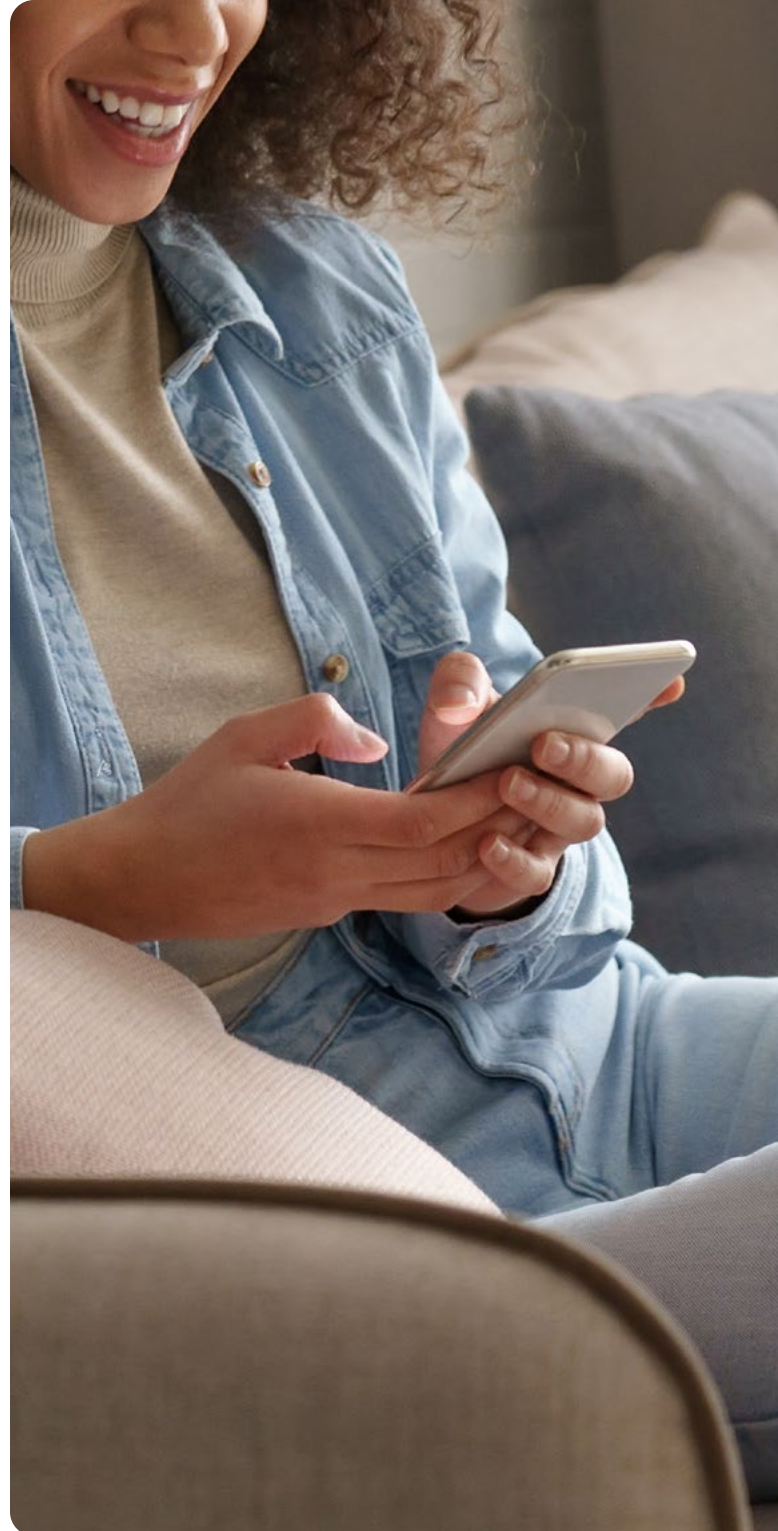
HOW SUBSCRIPTIONS COULD HELP SUSTAIN THE RESTAURANT AND QSR SECTOR

Subscriptions are a logical step for restaurants, given the **increasing** popularity of loyalty programs with consumers. Subscriptions borrow attributes from the loyalty program formula, including recurring revenue and **higher** brand engagement via regular purchases. They also prolong the customer life cycle and incentivize subscribers to make frequent visits.

While some chains experienced growth during the pandemic, the QSR, fast casual and full-service sectors still face a revenue crunch as crowds remain thin during the work-week. Developing and launching subscription programs could **hasten** their recovery and pay dividends going forward. Subscriptions can provide a revenue stream independent of on-premises sales and also entice customers to return to downtown locations.

Taco Bell, encouraged by a 35 percent spending increase per visit after introducing its loyalty rewards program in 2020, **began** testing a subscription taco program in September 2021, offering customers one taco per day for a monthly fee. Panera's monthly coffee and tea subscription service, which launched in February 2020, has acquired more than 500,000 subscribers and helped lift average order sizes, resulting in a 70 percent increase in food additions among subscribers.

Subscription services boost customers' perception of value and provide a digital connection to patrons that can be leveraged for better promotions, fresh marketing and stronger loyalty. The restaurant and food sectors soon could find the subscription model becoming an essential ingredient in their recipes for long-term growth.



ABOUT

PYMNTS.com

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Vindicia offers comprehensive subscription management solutions that help businesses acquire more customers, retain them longer and grow. Providing much more than just a billing and payments system, the company’s SaaS-based subscription management platform combines subscription intelligence, strategic consulting and proprietary retention technology. Vindicia provides its clients with more recurring revenue, more customer data, better insights and greater value throughout the entire subscriber lifecycle. To learn more visit www.vindicia.com.

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