

CASE STUDY : El Pollo Loco

Increased Customer Satisfaction with Versant Tests

Frequent diners at fast food restaurants know that the drive-thru ordering process is almost always challenging. More often than not, the order is lost in translation between the customer and restaurant employee. Receiving incorrect food orders due to language barriers leads to frustrated customers and eventually results in customers taking their business elsewhere. El Pollo Loco, the nation's leading quick-service restaurant chain specializing in flame-grilled chicken, experienced similar frustrations.

Need: Address Customer Satisfaction Issues Due to Language Barriers

At its company-owned restaurants, close to 90% of El Pollo Loco employees are of Hispanic origin; English is a second language for more than half of this workforce.

In July 2004, a major market research study on drive-thru restaurants found that customers perceived a significant language barrier at El Pollo Loco. According to the research, the top 25 quick-service restaurants had an average language barrier score of 1.87 (0 = no language barrier perceived). The top 11 food service chains scored from 0 to 2.34. El Pollo Loco scored 5.38.

“We had clear empirical data telling us that our customers had difficulty understanding our employees,” said El Pollo Loco’s VP of Human Resources and Training, Jeanne Scott. El Pollo Loco realized that employees in customer-facing positions needed better English skills – especially managers and assistant managers.

“We are confident that everyone who is a manager today has acceptable English.”

– Jeanne Scott, VP of Human Resources and Training for El Pollo Loco



Challenge: Identifying Management Talent with the Required Language Skills

Prior to the research study, corporate leaders were unaware that customers were experiencing such dissatisfaction during their visits because of language gaps. To begin to address the language issues, El Pollo Loco decided to first look at the spoken communication skills they needed in their store management teams. El Pollo Loco decided to introduce a new standard for managers, requiring them to have the level of spoken English skills needed to manage customer concerns. To roll out this new spoken English language requirement, the El Pollo Loco team had to find an affordable, easy to administer test that would measure the English speaking skills of managers and management candidates. Moreover, to provide fair assessment in concordance with employment standards, each of the 140 company-owned restaurants would need to use an assessment tool that had proven reliability and validity and could be administered in a consistent fashion.

Solution: Implement a Practical and Valid Screening Test for Spoken English Skills

El Pollo Loco established an employee program which would evaluate the English speaking skills of applicants and aid in training for existing employees. The company selected the Versant English Test, a ten-minute automated English test as their testing tool. During the test a candidate interacts with the testing system over the telephone or on a computer, responding and reacting to voice prompts. The patented Ordinate® testing system analyzes the candidate's responses and, in minutes, returns a personalized score report available online. The Versant English Test also has proven reliability and validity, and was developed in accordance with the legal and professional guidelines embodied in the Uniform Guidelines for Employee Selection and the Principles for the Validation and Use of Personnel Selection Procedures, which govern the use of proper tests for high-stakes employment decisions.

Before employing the Versant English Test, El Pollo Loco conducted a Benchmarking analysis with 25 managers to determine an appropriate cut-off score for test administration. The Versant English Test returns scores ranging from 20-80. Scott and her senior management found that employees scoring 50 or higher had sufficient English proficiency for customer-facing positions.

El Pollo Loco then implemented Versant testing for all managers and prospective managers, including internal promotions and external hires. To ensure fairness, both native and non-native English speaking candidates are tested early in the interview process. While the test is only one of many criteria El Pollo Loco uses in the hiring process, prospective employees scoring less than 50 are immediately rejected. "It is a disservice to a person to let them start the basic restaurant operation training program if they don't have sufficient English skills, since they will fail. If a candidate fails, it is bad for the employee and for the company." Scott said. Candidates take the test over the phone in the restaurant's office and within minutes results

are reported. Scores are then tracked centrally at the corporate office.

Approximately 25% of existing managers scored below a 50 during the first year of testing. As a result, these managers were required to attend a company-sponsored English training program. They were allowed to re-take the test after six months and few managers failed the test a second time.

Results: Managers Have the Language Skills They Need to Take Care of Customers

Since implementing the testing program, El Pollo Loco has seen noticeably positive results. "We are now confident that everyone who is a manager at an El Pollo Loco corporate-run store has acceptable English," Scott said. Managers are now scoring higher in operational training – presumably because they are not hindered by limited language ability.

English training and testing is also viewed as a valuable perk by most El Pollo Loco employees. They appreciate that the company is providing them not only with a job but with language skills that will help them in all aspects of life. Employees realize that language testing has been driven by business needs and appreciate having a clear, objective measurement.

Most importantly, El Pollo Loco managers are now in a much better position to manage store operations and customer interactions with their teams. Managers are cascading this down to their restaurant staff. They are able to hire for and develop better spoken English skills, enable all employees to communicate more clearly in English and deliver a high-quality customer experience. "If you don't care about English," Scott says, "you are consciously making a decision to alienate customers. Versant has transformed our business. Since implementing Versant testing, we have completely changed our relationship with our customers."



Contact Us

To try a sample test or get more information, contact us at:

US: 800.211.8378
Int'l: +1 650.470.3505
sales@pearsonkt.com

Or visit us online at:
www.VersantTest.com