



Fast Food outlets – excuse me, Quick Serve Restaurants, along with Fast Casual Restaurants – are stepping up their loyalty games as they navigate a world still recovering from the COVID hangover. Restaurants face labor shortages, lingering supply chain issues, inflation, and a dining public just returning to pre-pandemic behaviors.

Nation's Restaurant News [reports](#) on the enhancements major brands are adding to their programs. I'm pleased to see that for the most part, they include many of the best practices we've been talking about. Among the chains noted are Chipotle, Starbucks, Jimmy John's, and others.

One trend we see as a must-have for today's programs, is that they are primarily or exclusively driven by and delivered via mobile app. The intersection of ordering ahead, convenient payment and loyalty rewards and benefits is a natural, making app-based programs table stakes. I'd credit Starbucks as one of the first to field a program that combines store-locating, ordering, payment, and loyalty in a single app.

Starbucks is leading again by introducing elements of the Metaverse into their program. You may recall that in many ways I am a Metaverse skeptic; but in this case I am at least Metaverse-curious. Starbucks Odyssey feature allows members to enter a virtual world in which they can earn, buy, and trade exclusive NFTs on their way to earning real-world rewards, including a coffee-themed adventure in Costa Rica.

Jimmy John's is adding gamification to their program, where members can tackle time-limited challenges, which drive deeper brand engagement and reward winners with unique merch and other benefits.

Pop quiz: which major QSR program has the most members?

Perhaps surprisingly, according to the most recent stats I can find, it's Chipotle, which

claims 30M members compared to Mickey D's 25M and Starbucks's 27M.

And Chipotle is another leader in innovation, introducing a new-for-2023 feature called Freepotle, in which members can receive surprise-and-delight "free food drops" several time a year. They're pairing this with a member acquisition promo: a sweeps in which 3,100 people will win free food for a year (to celebrate their 3,100 US locations). Sweeps like this, that are driven by the brand and product experience, are a proven way to attract new members, promote the program, and build brand equity.

American fast food was an innovation that changed how the world eats in the last century. Today they are among the leaders in how the loyalty game is played – and won. *Your thoughts?*

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