

# **ACCESSIBILITY FOR RESTAURANTS AND FAST FOOD OPERATIONS<sup>1</sup>**

**By**

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Location may be paramount, however without adequate accessibility, it simply doesn't exist. In fact, the right location without acceptable access results in a secondary location. Accessibility is many things to many different types of operations. To the fast food operator, accessibility may be the ability of a fairly large number of possible customers to get to the location in a reasonable amount of time (reasonable to the consumer). Also, it involves getting in to and out of a location with ease.

To the restaurant operator who relies upon walk-in trade, accessibility involves the ease of pedestrian ingress and egress to a specific shop or building. Also, the number of pedestrians passing the location is usually extremely important. To the strip shopping center operator, accessibility includes access to the shopping center and access to the individual unit.

The restaurant operator in the neighborhood location must consider access to his or her location for the people who live in the immediate area. Also, for restaurant pick-up, the operator must think of the ease with which his customers can get to and from the location.

I am reminded of the operator, who selected a location in a very busy neighborhood during the day, that unfortunately was dark and dead at night. He could only see the positive opportunities of the daytime activity. Equally unfortunate was the fact that the vast majority of people in the area during the day were women, worried about their figures, who did not eat restaurant at lunch. Color him goodbye!

Still further, I have seen numerous situations where a restaurant operator has decided that because McDonald's was there, he should be there. McDonald's can do many things that other food operators would like to do and cannot. Regardless, access in some form or another is an absolute necessity for short and long range success.

Accessibility usually comes in at least two forms. Access to the area and access to a specific site. Each has its own characteristics; some are duplicative, while others are singular to the location itself. Access to an area can be defined as the ease with which the prospective customers can move throughout an area. The greater the ease, for more potential customers, the greater the opportunity to do more business. Naturally, the characteristics of the people must be in sync with the restaurant customer profile. The access is more specifically defined as the road or street network, public transportation, sidewalks, plazas and others. Impediments to area access includes: physical and psychological barriers, high speed traffic arteries, congestion and traffic back-up, unsynchronized traffic lights, limited turning provisions, high crime areas, secondary traffic arteries, topography, and many, many others. It is important to recognize the need for area accessibility and characteristics of some of the elements. Let's look at some of the more important elements.

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### **Expressways and Freeways**

America has a love affair with the automobile; the sensuous partner being the expressway or freeway. Try as the planner might, they haven't been able to separate the consumer from the auto and the concrete carpet. Expressways have changed our patterns and the way we approach communities. Moreover, they have changed our directional habits, as well as our eating out habits. If we are thinking of a restaurant some distance away, if it isn't near an expressway, we often reject it. Today, without often realizing it, the consumer thinks, not in terms of distance, but rather, time. Thus, if the place isn't near an interchange or fairly easy to get to after exiting an expressway, the consumer is turned off. In the western and southwestern parts of this country, one can have an expressway interchange locational strategy, with is far different from a community locational policy.

### **Major Traffic Arteries**

It is especially important to recognize which streets, avenues or boulevards are the most important. Most often it is obvious. However, other times it is difficult to determine simply by looking. One needs to review the number of moving lanes, the existence of traffic signalization, traffic counts, traffic flow, speed limits, major and minor intersections, turning lanes, traffic patterns, the apparent destination of the traffic and other road or traffic-oriented elements.

### **Secondary Traffic Arteries**

Secondary streets are usually fairly obvious. If not they are the traffic arteries with less traffic and usually with the cheapest real estate prices. Unfortunately, they are often the graveyards of the food industry. When you pick a secondary traffic artery, one usually gets secondary results.

### **Traffic Counts and Traffic Flow**

One of the measures that locational people use in measuring or identifying possible opportunities is the traffic count. What is a traffic count. It is usually, the number of cars passing a specific location over a 24-hour period (in some communities they are done on a 12 hour basis, rather than a 24-hour period). The counts are obtained by city, county or state traffic officials, counting the vehicles through the use of automatic counters. You have seen them. The black wire (actually a narrow hose) across a street, attached to a metal box, usually chained to a pole or tree. These are automatic vehicle counters which count the number of vehicles passing a given location over a period of time often several weeks or months. The figures are averaged to 24-hour periods, thus the 24-hour average traffic count.

Traffic counts are a very important measure of traffic passing a specific location. However, the numbers themselves can be misleading and need to be placed into some context. The counts represent a 24- hour period. Therefore, we must ask, "when is the traffic occurring"? In some cases, we might find that the traffic is occurring during the morning and evening rush hour, with little action at other times. Other times, we find that the traffic is happening on a fairly even pace throughout the day and evening. How do we find out? We try to look at the **HOURLY TRAFFIC COUNTS**. Especially, look at the hourly counts when we expect to be doing business.

### **Traffic flow**

Traffic Flow is essentially a picture of the traffic counts. Namely, it is a map depicting the traffic. Usually, the map shows the arteries carrying the most traffic as the widest, while those carrying the

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least amount of traffic as the narrowest. They are very helpful in **SEEING** traffic. Again, do not be mesmerized by the widest location. One must determine why an area is shown as the area with the most traffic, and also, when and what is the traffic.

### **The Number of Moving Lanes**

Most of us hear that the traffic in the area is going to increase significantly, without considering how will the traffic artery handle it. Streets and lanes can only physically handle so much traffic per hour. I have seen numerous instances where the food operator was told that the traffic counts would rise to 25,000 or 30,000 cars within a 24-hour period on a traffic artery by his friendly real estate agent. Unfortunately, it never happens and the unit does poorly. Why? Often because the traffic artery is incapable of handling the traffic. There are simply not enough lanes to handle the volume. Traffic volume does reach a capacity. Ask the local traffic engineer before you get locked into a possibly bad situation.

### **Speed Limit**

Speed limits do have an effect on the amount of business that some food operators can achieve. Fast tracks are especially susceptible to problems. If there is danger in getting into and out of a location, older people and women over 40 years of age will often avoid the locations. These locations are often easy to get into, difficult to get out of, especially if the traffic flow is heavy when we are doing the most business.

Also, check the actual driving speed against the speed limits. You may find that people are not paying any attention to the speed limits, and thus the actual speeds are much higher. Younger potential customers are often turned off by speeds that are too slow. Extremely congested areas are avoided by the especially auto- oriented youth.