Panera Cooks with Data to Deliver on Service and Satisfied Customers

2,000+
locations across the US and Canada

16,000+
menu items

For many, a warm bakery blanketed by the smell of their favorite loaf of bread right from the oven elicits an irreplaceable feeling of comfort and coziness. Like a fresh sandwich coupled with your favorite hot soup on a cold day, a fresh lemonade paired with a crisp salad on a hot day, or even the right local nostalgic comfort food when the craving calls, good food is a gateway to satisfied souls.

But whether a company is in the business of food and beverage, retail, hospitality, transportation, or nearly any other industry, the ability to adapt and manage constant changes in customer tastes, market demands, world events, or growth is crucial for success. Always delivering the right product at the right time with service beyond expectations has become a universal goal regardless of the industry.

What differentiates the best modern enterprises that excel in agility, adaptability, and innovation, are their approaches to infrastructure and management of core business drivers: data, and the way data assets are created, organized, governed, and delivered at a granular level in and outside the walls of the business.

One company that was able to adapt to evolving customer expectations, as well as sudden urgent changes brought on by the COVID-19 lockdowns, was Panera Bread, a well-known chain of fast-casual restaurants. The bakery-cafe was founded as the St. Louis Bread Company in 1987, eventually expanding its reach and becoming Panera Bread Company a decade later. Still headquartered in Sunset Hills, a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri, it now boasts more than 2,000 locations across the US and Canada.

Modernizing Data Systems to Meet Growing Demand

While its immense growth was clear evidence of Panera's ability to resonate with customers, it presented several data management challenges. To delight and surprise its customers, the chain desired to evolve its menu faster than other fast-casual restaurants, thereby increasing the frequency of customer visits. Pulling this off successfully required a modern system to manage all data across the business.

As it was, the company's many departments, each attempting to manage its own piece of the business, were heavily reliant on time- and resource-devouring manual processes and data wrangling of different data formats in disparate sources across multiple systems. To get the right data from the right stakeholders to open a new store on schedule could take days or even weeks.

Out of modernization, and the ability to integrate technologies to enhance the guest experience, sprouted Panera 2.0, a turning-point program launched in 2014 with the long-term focus on operational excellence. The program brought mobile ordering and fast-lane ordering kiosks, rapid pickup stations, the MyPanera Loyalty program, and nationwide delivery services. As Panera 2.0 was expanded, data dependencies grew: e-commerce menu data, point-of-sale data, pricing, cafe attributes, discounts, taxes, ingredient and vendor data. The new processes required one centralized and unified source of truth.



Eliminating Manual Tasks with the Panera Data Pantry

Panera turned to TIBCO to make it possible. The TIBCO Connected Intelligence platform was used to create the Panera Data Pantry, empowering the business to unify its systems with a master set of data, efficiently update related systems in real time, and enable the automation of many of its processes.

In 2021, Fast Company named Panera Bread one of the World's Top 50 Most Innovative Companies, in part due to expanded delivery services and new offerings like Panera Grocery that were made possible by TIBCO.

For example, if a natural disaster like the COVID pandemic, or even a hurricane, was to affect a large portion of Panera cafes, the required changes to individual store hours of operation and other impacts on available products or services could be executed and pushed online in minutes, compared to multiple days with previous manual methods.

Beyond adaptability to weather sudden market changes, implementing a platform that unified all its data eliminated costly manual processes. In the early days, the IT department was tasked with entering data into the point-of-sale system. As that grew--to mobile, web, kiosk, and beyond--the number of people required for data entry kept growing. The Panera Data Pantry allowed the business to make changes to the data through governed processes that were automatically pushed out to all consuming systems.

With a new foundation for effective master data management, Panera had the leverage to improve customer intimacy, optimize business processes, and even enable skillful reinvention and quickly deploy new services based on real-world challenges or customer demands.

Striking a Balance Between Comfort and Curiosity

Coziness is vital to the Panera experience. As the company continued to expand across North America, it needed to hone in on the balance between familiarity and discovery—so that at any Panera café—customers could easily recognize their favorite menu items and be delighted by regional fare. In addition to region-specific items, each location has rotating menus—what Panera calls the “celebration process”—which many customers look forward to season-by-season. Pulling off this balance of familiarity and discovery, and rotating seasonal items, required an effective data unification platform to manage every menu component. With the Panera Data Pantry, turning over menu items would be made a quick and agile process for every location while maintaining a degree of autonomy.

Managing menu data is an underappreciated, complex process encompassing over 400 products and 16,000 menu items, including zero-cost items and ingredients that can be ordered as “extra,” “light,” or “none.” Across the country, and taking into account all regional variations, there are tens of thousands of possible menu combinations. Each item influences tens of thousands of nutritional values, and for state and local taxes, are assigned one of over 40 million possible tax codes. Item changes and additions are made every single day.

Then there are the supply chain considerations, ensuring all ingredients for menu items are properly accounted for. For many industries, a comprehensive view of the supply chain is critical to squeeze every ounce of available value, especially those providing food, beverages, and other perishable goods—or in other industries, an airline ticket, a hotel room, or a limited-time sales offer. Because Panera understands the full spectrum of data complexity and provides capabilities to manage the intricacies of its supply chain and menu items, it can quickly pivot to remain resilient in the face of any sudden change.



Pivoting to Meet New Customer Needs

One such example was Panera's fast response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As the situation unfolded, relying more on third-party delivery and takeout services, and keeping store information frequently updated, was only a small part of Panera's adapted business model. As the pandemic continued, Panera was able to adapt to accommodate the growing needs of its communities and changing consumer tastes.

A bigger goal during the pandemic was to continue bringing in revenue while at the same time providing essential goods to communities in need. Many grocers were experiencing mass shortages of foods and ingredients, and even if there was stock available, many people were hesitant to visit a large store due to the risk of contracting the illness. Thus, Panera Grocery was born. Going from idea to implementation in less than two weeks, Panera Grocery gave customers a safe and convenient way to buy basic goods and have them delivered—and it ensured its ability to leverage its existing supply chain while withstanding the pandemic and economic pressures.

"Ramping up the curbside offering earlier this year was a huge accomplishment and involved a lot of teams. We used our café domain to enable cafés to have curbside, and then enabled geofencing. We're notifying you when it's going to be ready with an accurate time so that when you arrive, we know you're here, you know your food's ready, and that interchange can happen more quickly."

—Noel Nitecki, Director of Enterprise Services

Although Panera didn't begin its digital transformation with the intent to withstand a global pandemic, it has, thanks to key foundational decisions made prior to its onset. E-commerce options, including updated hours, the grocery line, and home delivery through third-party providers like Uber Eats, GrubHub, and DoorDash are all controlled via the data management platform powered by TIBCO. Despite a lack of a common standard for implementing and maintaining third-party delivery services, the Panera Data Pantry unified interface for menus, prices, taxes, locations, and a wide range of additional data types, made it much easier. Orders can all be processed on the same POS system regardless of source, and Panera can easily embrace change or new outside services that may emerge. Data consistency across the restaurant chain helps Panera stay a good partner to all third parties through confident compliance and reduced complexity.

Additionally, as customer preferences changed during the COVID-19 pandemic — switching from dining room options to delivery methods —- the demand for takeout foods like pizza skyrocketed. To delight customers and satisfy their cravings for food not previously available on its menus, Panera added flatbread pizzas to complement its selection of sandwiches and soups. Now customers can order more dinner-friendly options while still enjoying the clean, healthy eating Panera offers. Because its new flatbreads made use of existing pantry items such as tomatoes, cheese, and chicken, managing data for ingredients, costs, nutritional values, supply chain, and more through the Panera Data Pantry master data foundation was a breeze. Panera is dedicated to supplying the best ingredients for customers, and its flatbreads are no exception with no artificial flavors, preservatives, or coloring.

"Our guests choose Panera because they want to eat delicious food that they can feel great about eating. Flatbread pizzas, done the Panera way, are the perfect offering for this moment and beyond," commented Panera Bread Chief Brand & Concept Officer Eduardo Luz in a recent company press release.

An Agile Foundation Enables Flexibility and Encourages Innovation

Now, Panera has set the innovation standard in its industry. The company has launched Panera Curbside, a geofence-enabled service that allows guests to stay safely in their car while picking up their orders. The restaurant's free Wi-Fi service extends beyond the store to include the parking lot, which allows staff to be alerted when a customer is arriving for pickup.

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Panera has also launched an innovative, first-of-its-kind coffee subscription program offering coffee and tea all day to its loyalty program members, while supporting cross-sell potential for the business. Famously called "the Netflix of Coffee" by Panera's CEO, the MyPanera+ Coffee Subscription gives customers unlimited premium hot drip coffee, iced coffee, and hot tea. Subscriptions can also be gifted to others, providing Panera with an innovative, differentiated product offering that delights customers.

Panera is a prime example of a company that sought digital transformation and is thriving because of its newfound flexibility.

In addition, the company has launched initiatives to ensure that everyone who could use a helping hand during the pandemic gets what they need. As part of its Together Without Hunger campaign, Panera started the #SeeAPlateFillAPlate challenge, encouraging its customers to donate a plate of food to those less fortunate. Effective data management — the ability to know and control every meaningful piece of data comprising its business — is at the heart of it all.

Cooking Up Future Innovations and Excellent Customer Service

Panera is a prime example of a company that sought digital transformation and is thriving because of its newfound flexibility. Processes that used to take weeks can now be done almost instantly. The company is taking customer intimacy to new levels by being able to say yes to new ideas and push the boundaries of innovation because it manages its data so efficiently. Operationally, implementing changes to menus, suppliers, and other third parties is a fast, seamless process, and supporting expansion to new locations is nearly effortless. Data governance is streamlined throughout the company and workflows are no longer bottlenecked with IT. And as proven with COVID-19, the company is able to reinvent its business however it can imagine to swiftly adapt to serious market pressures.

With newfound agility, control, and accelerated ability to execute, Panera weathered the COVID-19 storm that impacted so many other industries and continues to threaten. Providing loyal customers with the quality food they expect while pursuing adventurous new ideas, Panera is sure to see continued growth and success well into the future.

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