

WEEKLY BRIEFING REPORT

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The numbers

There's nothing new in the danger of being knocked down by a bicycle while you're walking on the pavement. Over a hundred and fifty years ago, on 22 March 1869, The Pall Mall Gazette ran this story "A summons was obtained ... against a comic singer for driving a velocipede on the pavement in Sutton-street [in Clerkenwell, London]. It was complained that the man ... was going at the rate of ten or twelve miles an hour, and before he could pull up knocked down three persons and ran over the foot of a fourth. It was ... not the first accident that had occurred in Clerkenwell from the driving of velocipedes".

What has brought this on is my realisation recently that although I have been analysing and commenting on the foodservice sector for many years, until now I have not needed to concern myself with the issue of bicycles. But delivery has changed that.

Bicycles – electric, or pedalled, and not excluding electric and petrol-driven scooters – are a prime mode of restaurant delivery. It's true that this is not always the case. In widespread rural locations and in many large cities, New York is one instance, traffic conditions and greater delivery distances mean cars are more widely used for delivery. And in other circumstances, it is more economical to arrange delivery by walking.

But my recent research into the delivery bicycle business reveals a world where it is possible to use an electric bicycle from the age of fourteen (provided there is suitable insurance in place). It's a world where pedal assisted bicycles exist but where pedalling can be 'faked' – that happens when the electric mode is full on and only the appearance of pedalling is required (even though the pedals give no impetus to the forward motion). It's a world of charging options – you can charge the vehicle much like a car, or you can use a replaceable battery. It's a world of fleet sales and leasing arrangements. It's world of insurance (in case the 'velocipede' knocks down 'persons') and service arrangements. It's a world where government funds are available to reduce the purchase price by up to £500.

In other words, the world of electric bicycles for restaurant delivery (and indeed delivery of many other products from stationery to pharmaceuticals) is very much like the world of motorcars. I only make that as an observation and not because I can share any particular meaning from the observation.

Nowadays not only does the restaurateur have to be concerned about specifications for, say, combi ovens, it's also a requirement to be knowledgeable about velocipedes.

My insight

The news at the moment, is so dire – socially, economically, politically, internationally – that I am in danger of writing something that makes me even more depressed. So, this week, I am taking a more light-hearted look at things, moreover things that have little to do with foodservice. I'll probably be back to normal next week.

When I was young, we played a party game called 'Chinese whispers' (why it was 'Chinese' I have no idea, but it was possibly because anything mysterious was supposed to come from China). Nowadays, no doubt it's played on-line with millions of participants, the best of whom have become teenage multi-millionaires.

But in my far off childhood days we played it at parties by standing in a line. The first person whispered a message into the ear of the next person, who whispered what he or she thought they had heard into the ear of the next person. And so on down the line. At the end, the final person relayed what they had heard. That was compared with the original message. And the reward was general mirth at how much the original message had been mangled.

The often quoted example is a message, supposedly originated in the trenches in World War 1. The message from HQ was 'Send reinforcements we're going to advance'. This reached the front line as 'Send three and fourpence we're going to a dance'.

And for those who are too young to remember those far-off days of pre-decimal money, 'three and fourpence' was three shillings and four pennies / pence, today valued at almost 17p. But before I go any further down that rabbit hole let me return to what passes for the point of this story.

Last week I sent a text message to someone with whom I was arranging a meeting. Apple AI decided I meant "Let's meet Teheran West End".

My contact, having received my message, was starting to think about clearing his diary for three days in order to make the time to get to our meeting in the capital of Iran. He was wondering about how soon he could book his flight and the cost of accommodation and his air fare. Fortunately, before he actually did any of these things, I had realised the mistake and I resent my message in its original "Let's meet somewhere in the West End".

In today's world of multiple ways of communicating instantly, it's more important than ever not to allow Apple (or whatever) to decide what we mean. We should check what we say (and acknowledge and, if possible, remove ambiguities), we should check spellings.

And then, when we receive a message, we should read it carefully and allow for fat fingers on the part of the sender. And we should be especially on the look-out for the impact of child-like AI algorithms that attempt to think better than we do ourselves.

Otherwise we'll end up playing Chinese whispers. "Send three and four pence, we're going to Teheran".

The rest of this Weekly Briefing Report provides a summary of the news:

News in the past week

Financial & Legal

- Chancellor of the Exchequer reduces period of price cap on consumer energy prices to six months from two years
- Begbies Traynor report that 48% of restaurants and bars are exhibiting 'critical financial distress'

QSR

- Caffè Nero "coffee at home" available at Waitrose
- Caffè Nero LfL sales up 7% in the quarter to end September versus 2019

Pubs

- Loungers LfL sales rose 17% in the half year to end September
- Revolution Bars Group turnover up 257% in year to early July versus 2021
- Revolution Bars Group acquires Peach Pub Company

Leisure

- Eurostar cancelled trains on Wednesday between Paris and London because of rail worker strikes in France

Delivery

- Just Eat Takeaway UK orders fell -15% in the three months to end September; group orders fell -11%
- Deliveroo orders in UK & Ireland rose 5% in the quarter ending end September versus 2021; group orders fell -1% and GTV grew 5%

Around the World

- International Hotel Group system sales grew 2.6% in the latest quarter versus 2019

Around the World Delivery

- Just Eat takeaway GTV fell -5% in the quarter to end September

Delivery Offers in the Week

- Deliveroo: Free delivery on selected favourites
- Deliveroo: Today's the day! Get 20% off for Tasty Thursday
- Deliveroo: Did somebody say free delivery?
- Deliveroo: We miss you. Here's £7 off your next order
- Uber Eats: Your discount is still available