



A well crafted menu is much more than a simple list of what you serve. Make the most of this soft sell sales tool by taking advantage of proven marketing and design techniques.

Maximize Menu Merchandising Power

Menu designs vary as much as the restaurants they serve. The chic downtown bistro spotlights its signature espressos and cappuccinos on a large single sheet punctuated by bold graphics and garnished with copper-foil trim. The family-style restaurant showcases its value-priced dinner entrees on a laminated tri-fold menu sprinkled with mouth-watering food photography. The popular theme restaurant highlights its specialty burgers and sandwiches on a die-cut, hand-lettered menu.

Every year, the National Restaurant Association recognizes some of the nation's most effective and creative menus in its Great Menu Contest. The hundreds of entries present a veritable smorgasbord of styles, but—outward appearances aside—all of the menus are designed to accomplish the same objectives. beyond simply listing

the food available: define the concept and operation, align the customer's expectation with the experience, and perform as a powerful marketing tool. How well a restaurant's menu carries out those functions can determine customer satisfaction, a restaurant's profitability and even an operation's ultimate success or failure.

Nonetheless, what many menu-design-and-development specialists most often see when they visit restaurants are menus that don't quite make the grade, which translates into a multitude of missed marketing opportunities. "The average customer spends about three minutes with your menu," says Robert Welcher, president of Restaurant Consultants Inc., a full service consulting company based in Columbus, Ohio. "How much is comprehended during that three-minute contact with your in-house marketing tool depends on how well

by Jenny Hedden

▲ Menu design consultants say customers spend less than an average of three minutes with a menu and operators have to make the most of that time.

organized it is, how readable it is and how well it conveys the tone of the operation."

Mixing it up

Naturally, the most successful restaurants are those that keep up with the current food trends America's eating habits. For Welcher, the complex puzzle of menu development reduces to one uncomplicated principle: keep attuned to what's selling and what's not selling, and then make the necessary adjustments. He advocates running a detailed analysis of all menu items to track or increasing sales. Welcher recommends using focus groups to get a better handle customer response to a restaurant's menu. "Ask people what they want, what they like and what they don't like. Find out how much they're willing to spend, how large a portion size should be and how value is perceived," say Welcher. A good menu mix requires solid research and creativity. You have to have options for your guests— and by talking to them, you can achieve the proper mix." When items clearly appear to be poor sellers, unprofitable or unpopular with consumers, be ready to delete them promptly from your menu. Be equally ready to add new items on that customers crave.

The trend of trying to appeal to all customers taste is one that troubles Welcher. "I'm disappointed and concerned that by the homogenization of the American restaurant menu. Restaurants have the obligatory pasta, steak, pizza, wings and burgers," say Welcher. They want to be something to everybody, which is a hard thing to do. I think it is critically important that restaurants find out what their segment wants. I look at a menu and wonder, 'Did the chef develop this menu? Who did he talk to? And why does he think the guests like this menu?'" Specializing in certain styles and dishes can make your menu—and your restaurant—stand out in a crowded field.

Quick change artist

A quick response to changing seasons, fluctuating food prices and vacillating customer taste buds requires that menus

themselves be flexible as well as the dishes they list. "To keep the attention of a trendy, capricious customer base, you may have to keep the menu fresh and new" say Restaurant Consultant's Welcher. Thanks to the proliferation of personal computers, menu making software and laser printers, flexibility is easier than ever to achieve.

Professional menu designers, however, warn restaurateurs to proceed with caution. Even though do-it-yourself menu software can slash design and printing costs, it does not replace expert design advice. Inexpensive clip art, borders and spot color do not necessarily build a good foundation of an effective or professional menu, according to Welcher. "If you don't have an eye for design, a grasp for proper layout principles or an understanding of the psychology of a menu and menu engineering, software won't help you," he explains.

Use a professional designer to establish a basic design template, even if you want to keep the menu simple." A designer can offer invaluable guidance in paper color, weight, typefaces and graphics—subtle adjustments that give any menu a professional look and boost its effectiveness.

Look at the menu as an extension of who you are and what you are about," says Welcher. If the menu is not properly designed and developed, it can have a detrimental effect on the overall impression guests have of your restaurant.

Jenny Hedden is senior staff writer at the National Restaurant Association.