

## Reading Between the Lines: The Psychology of Menu Design

Restaurants USA magazine's final issue was published in September 2002  
Restaurants USA, August 2000

### **Does your menu attract or repel diners?**

Experts offer suggestions for effective design to help unlock your menu's selling potential.

By Beth Panitz

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The menu handed to customers at Chi-Chi's restaurants these days is a far cry from its predecessor. The old, standard rectangular menu was replaced this spring with one that features a jagged edge, warm earth tones and lively drawings of fresh fruits and vegetables. The bill of fare was designed to better showcase 25 new items.

"The new menu has a fun-looking, new-wave shape," says Robert Carl, a spokesman for the Louisville, Kentucky, company, which has 148 units nationwide and is a subsidiary of Irvine, California-based Prandium. The new menu is part of the repositioning message Chi-Chi's is trying to send consumers. "You can tell this is not the same old food," he says. "It's a hip, awesome-looking menu."

Like Chi-Chi's, many restaurants realize that their menu's appearance sends out subtle signals that can affect how customers perceive their operation. "The menu is part of your brand identity," says Bill Main, founder of Bill Main and Associates, a Chico, California, foodservice management and training company. "It's a reflection of who you are in the marketplace. If you have a dirty menu, it sends out a message that you probably have a dirty kitchen. If it's a bright, clean, sharp menu, it looks like you're a bright, clean operation." A bill of fare can also subtly direct customers to order higher-profit items.

A menu redesign can improve sales an average of 2 to 10 percent, according to restaurant consultants interviewed by Restaurants USA. For an operation that brings in \$1 million a year, that amounts to an additional \$20,000 to \$100,000 annually. "Restaurateurs should view menus as an investment not as a cost," says Main. "The driving force behind profits is the menu."

Is your menu as effective as it could be? Chances are there is room for improvement. "One of the things I've found is that 90 to 95 percent of menus can be improved," says Bill Paul, founder of Cincinnati-based The Menu Advantage, a company that helps restaurants develop their menus.

#### Subliminal messages

If you think customers decide on their own what to order, think again. "A menu should tell a customer what you want them to buy," says Steve Miller, who teaches a menu-design seminar and is president of the Miller Resource Group, in Grafton, Massachusetts.

The placement of menu items, the graphics and the item descriptions all send messages about what you want customers to order. For example, in a four-page menu — including front and back covers — Miller says the "power position" is on the inside right page above the center. Menu designer William Doerfler identified this as an optimum position in the November 1978 issue of *The Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*.

"The placement is very important," agrees restaurant consultant Isidore Kharasch, president of Chicago-based Hospitality Works, citing the example of a microbrewery that came to him for help with its menu. "They were selling mostly hamburgers and sandwiches, and the chef wanted to sell more of the higher-end items," Kharasch recounts. He recommended that the restaurant place the high-end specialties on the inside right page, toward the middle, and move the burgers and sandwiches from that spot to the back page. "We increased the font in that area [with the specialties]. Then on the back, we reduced the font for the burgers and sandwiches. It was a very subtle thing. In the first week [after the change], the average check went from \$16 to \$21. It's not that people were looking to order sandwiches and burgers, but people were being forced to order them."

A menu item's position within a list can also affect sales. People tend to remember the top two items on a list and the bottom item, says Miller. "Nothing goes in those spots by accident," he says.

Because all locations are not equal on a menu, restaurateurs need to prioritize what they want to sell, says Paul. "That's sometimes difficult for restaurateurs to do. You rarely hear them prioritize what they want to sell. Instead, they say everything on the menu is good."

What items should restaurateurs put in the high-profile spots? "Items that have a high margin and appeal are strategically placed to produce the highest margins," says Lowell Petrie, senior director of brand marketing for Denny's, headquartered in Spartanburg, South Carolina.

Of course, logic also plays a role in arranging a bill of fare. For example, appetizers tend to go in the top of the left panel — a high-profile position that also makes sense sequentially. "It's a combination of logic tempered with strategy and doability," says Paul.

"The same item on a menu will sell differently if placed differently," says Andy Lansing, president and chief operating officer of Levy Restaurants, a Chicago-based restaurant group with 17 restaurants, ranging from the casual-dining Mrs. Levy's Delicatessen to Spiaggia, a fine-dining Italian restaurant. He notes that the same basic placement principles apply — no matter the type of restaurant concept — but he adds a couple of caveats. "Nothing is going to sell if it's not good," he stresses. And servers play an important role in determining what customers will order. "The menu helps steer people in the right direction," says Lansing, "but the servers are the ones who close the deal."

Avoid a split-personality design

"The font you use, the size of print, boxes, shading — all those things help [draw attention to an item]," says Lansing. "But you don't want to go overboard with all of that; it still needs to look elegant and concept appropriate. You don't want to have a starburst in the margin that says 'Buy this.' . . . But that's what you want to say subliminally."

Menus should be graphically exciting, but first and foremost they should be functional, says Lansing. "We want our menus to be spectacular, but we also want them to be good business tools," he says. "Some people want to create the coolest menu that ever existed." In their quest to be creative, "they forget that people might not be able to read the menu." In other words, forget about winning design awards; concentrate on winning customers.

"By using things like borders, illustrations, symbols and heavier type, you can bring attention to things," says Miller. But he cautions not to overdo it. "Use an easy-to-read typeface in 12-point size. . . . If I had to trade off between selling power and beauty, I'd pick selling power."

At Denny's, photos liven up the menu and sell items. The latest menu, released this spring, "has bigger pictures and more pictures, because we know that pictures sell," says Petrie. "You've got to show it to them to sell it."

Kharasch says photos seem to be effective for casual restaurants like Denny's as well as for restaurants where customers might not be familiar with the foods — such as sushi operations. But photos aren't for everyone; good alternatives include pencil or color drawings of fresh fruits and vegetables.

#### Word association

Customers won't find any descriptions on the menu at the 15th Street Fisheries in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. In addition to traditional seafood, the restaurant offers more distinctive items, such as "Bugs," an Australian crustacean that's similar to lobster. "We want the customers to be talking about the items, rather than reading flowery descriptions," says owner Michael Hurst, past chairman of the National Restaurant Association and immediate past chairman of its Educational Foundation. He depends on his servers to give customers the details. The strategy works great, says Hurst, but he admits that it might not suit every operation. "It depends on the type of restaurant and the distinctiveness of the food."

As a general rule, Miller says, a menu should not describe common, familiar items. "People know what roast beef is," he says. "You don't need to create an ode to roast beef."

Kharasch agrees. "The customer is very sophisticated today. Some items don't need to be described." But if you're offering something special or unusual, it's worth a mention, he says. For example, if your salad features locally grown arugula, radicchio and endive, you'll want to list that. "That way customers will know you're not asking them to spend \$8.95 for just a bed of lettuce," he says. But don't give the entire recipe. "The customer doesn't need to know every ingredient. The customer just wants to be enticed to order the item."

And certain words have more selling power than others. For example, "marinated," "roasted" or "cooked in our wood-fire oven" have more allure than "fried," says Kharasch. What if the item is fried? "Then you can say that it's hand-battered. That way you've told the customers the item is fried, without telling them the item is fried."

You'll also want to direct customers to high-profit, high-quality items by making the descriptions of those dishes more appealing than others, says Paul. "You should have a continuum of appeal. Not everything should sound equally delicious. . . . Having everything sound equally attractive doesn't help the guest any more than having everything sound equally bland."

That's not to say that anything should sound unappealing. "If you want to sell something, make it sound as delicious as possible," says Lansing. "Even the ones you don't want to sell should sound good and taste great — they just shouldn't sound as good as your signature dishes."

And once you've written your bill of fare, take the time to proofread it. Spelling errors and typos are two items that shouldn't appear on any menu, says Kharasch. "It says a lot about a restaurant. If the restaurant can't spell hamburger or salad, it makes me wonder how good they are at making those items," he says.

#### Number neuroses

The final critical element of a menu is the pricing. All too often restaurants arbitrarily select a price for an item without analyzing whether they'll profit at that price, says Kharasch. He recommends that restaurants cost out each menu item before setting the price. "I've heard people say, 'We just don't have the time to cost out our menu.' What that means to me is that you don't have time to make money. People could be putting in 15 hours day, bringing in \$1 million, but losing money, because they didn't take the time to cost out items."

Of course, knowing the food cost is just a starting point. Restaurateurs often take their cost and multiply it by three or so to set their menu price. In other words, they aim for a food-cost percentage of about 33 percent. Using this philosophy, an operator might be more apt to push an item with a 25 percent food cost than one with a 40 percent food cost. But that's just one ingredient to pricing. Another aspect is the actual profit margin on each item.

"I focus on the profit, not the food-cost percentage for determining what to sell," says Paul. Take the example of a restaurant that sells a \$15 steak with a 40 percent food cost, netting a \$9 profit, and a \$10 chicken with a 25 percent food cost, netting a \$7.50 profit. Even though the steak has a higher food-cost percentage, it still brings in \$1.50 more per order.

Denny's also concentrates more on the profit margin than on the food-cost percentage, says Petrie. "When it's a low-cost item to produce, if you only look at food-cost

percentage, you won't be making much," he says. "You take the margin to Mr. Banker. Mr. Banker isn't interested in food-cost percentages."

Another factor to examine is what your competition charges, says Hurst. "You don't want to be too far off for an item. If others are charging \$12, you don't want to be charging \$20." In setting prices, he also considers the value customers place on an item. The price consumers are willing to pay doesn't always correlate with an item's actual cost, notes Hurst. "Some things cost so much compared to their visual impact, that they're not worth selling," he says. Other times, customers will be willing to pay \$5 for a drink that costs only 50 cents to make. Items on a menu also should have a relative value, says Hurst. "For example, you shouldn't be charging more for chicken than for shrimp," he says.

And at times, it might make sense to forfeit a profit on an item in order to attract customers. For example, Kharasch recounts that one of his clients was known for its steak special. With a 60 percent food cost, steak brought in a minimal profit, but it attracted a lot of customers — many of them who brought companions who purchased high-profit items. "Designing a menu is like playing chess against the customer," he says. "You have to be very strategic about what the customer is going to order."

Not everyone believes that the loss-leader strategy works. "You should make money on every item you sell," says Miller, noting that each customer is only going to purchase one entree.

In most cases, restaurateurs can round up their menu prices. The practice puts some extra change in their pockets while eliminating odd prices. Paul recommends rounding up items to the nearest 25 cents. "Using other numbers looks bogus and doesn't have an impact. If it's \$3.45, that's no different to the guest than \$3.50," he says. As an exception, he recommends using numbers that end in 95 cents, rather than rounding up to the next dollar — a point at which customers tend to perceive an item as more expensive. Of course, none of these rules are set in stone.

There's also an art to presenting menu prices. Among the mistakes Kharasch has seen are menus that align prices in a column on the right, leading customers to use the "shop-by-price method." "No matter how nice the descriptions, it forces customers to look at the prices first. The eye tends to go straight to the prices," he says. "And don't put the prices from most expensive to least expensive. People figure that out quickly."

Paul agrees that the placement of the price is critical. "I like to position the price at the end of the description, in the same type, the same boldness and without a dollar sign. This approach helps the reader focus on the product — not the price. Even the dollar sign makes the guest a little more aware of the price."

### Analyzing your menu's strengths

Customers spend less than two minutes perusing a bill of fare, estimates Main. If a menu is designed correctly, it can have a significant impact during those few critical minutes. "The menu is the purest expression of marketing," he says. "It's your blueprint for profitability."

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