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Dave Pavesic
Georgia State University, dpavesic@gsu.edu

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The Great American Menu

Work Closely With Your Designer and Printer to Create Your Best Seller

By Dave Pavesic, Ph.D., FMP

Once you're ready to open your doors, the final, physical production of your menu might be the least important of your concerns. More than likely, you'll leave the details to one of your managers or assistants. You might say, "Here's the copy. Tell the artist and printer to make it pretty (sexy, interesting, etc.)." And that's that.

Trouble is, almost everything you've worked toward in your restaurant — planning the concept, negotiating leases, meeting with inspectors, planning purchasing equipment and inventory, and marketing to prospective guests — rides on those sheets. Even the most well-planned menu engineering plan can be tarnished if the final product looks hurried and cheap.

If you slaved away for years writing The Great American Novel, you would make sure that the publisher printed the first edition on quality paper with easy-to-read type. The cover would be elegant and sturdy, and the jacket would feature an interesting illustration. You would want the look and feel of your novel to say, "Pick me up and read me. This is a great work of literature."

Well, your menu *is* your Great American Novel. It reflects everything you've invested in the project — financially and personally. It draws each guest into a personal relationship with your restaurant. The following is some advice on how to make your menu look like something your guests will want to pick up and read. Hopefully, this will also help you better communicate with your designer and printer to get the look and feel that's right for your startup.

Paper Terms

The following glossary will help you better communicate with your menu printer.

Absorption: The property that causes paper to take up liquids or vapors that come in contact with it.

Bristol: A heavy, durable stock often used for menu covers. Has good die-cutting, embossing, scoring, and folding qualities.

Caliper: The thickness of paper usually expressed in "points" (thousandths of an inch). For example, 7-point return postcard stock is 007 caliper.

Coated paper: Paper having a surface coating that produces a smoothness and opacity. Surfaces vary from eggshell to glossy.

Finish: The condition of a paper's surface. A high finish is smooth and hard; low or vellum finish is relatively rough and toothy.

Gloss: A measure of light reflectance used to describe coated papers. The higher the gloss, the more light that is reflected from its surface. Consider the lighting in your restaurant when selecting glossy papers. For example, a brightly lit restaurant would not favor a glossy stock.

Matte finish: Dull finish without gloss or luster.

Opacity: The property of paper that minimizes the "show-through" of printing from one size to another or from another sheet.

Vellum finish: A toothy finish that permits the paper to take ink readily for fast penetration.

Material Decisions

A printed menu can be produced on a variety of natural and synthetic papers. The menu cover can use different weights and textures of treated papers, leather and vinyl materials that can withstand the wear and tear inflicted by repeated use and by water, alcohol, grease and food that comes in contact with the menu. The function of the material used on the menu serves two purposes. First, it addresses the functional, practical and serviceable aspects. Second, it conveys the image of the restaurant and incorporates artistic, decorative, and illustrative elements that communicate personality of the restaurant to the guest. Therefore, the texture, color, weight, style of type font, and ink color used on the menu are important menu design psychology components.

The type of paper that is best for your menu will be determined by the following criteria:

- ✓ Overall size and shape of the menu.
- ✓ The number of folds, embossing, or die-cuts used.
- ✓ The use of color photos or illustrations.
- ✓ The intended life of the menu before replacement.

Although paper is made from fabric, wood, rice and even chemical and fiber compounds, the basic menu papers are primarily wood-based with chemical coatings. Frequently, more than one type and weight of paper will be used for a single menu. The cover is usually a heavier stock and has a more durable finish than the inside pages. Minimum weight of cover stock is 80-pound while the paper stock for inside pages will be 20- to 24-pound.

Choice of paper is a much bigger decision than you might consider. Most restaurants require a paper stock that is versatile because of the variety of graphic treatments it must accept, such as gold leaf stamping, die cutting and embossing. It must be durable and able to withstand frequent handling, folding and unfolding and still appeal to both the eye and touch. The paper used will affect the cost of the menu and can run between 30 percent and 50 percent of the printing cost exclusive of custom art charges, copy writing and press charges. Paper is made from a variety of materials and can be produced to resemble leather, wood or plastic.

The strength of paper is more dependent on the nature of its fiber content than its thickness. High-bursting strength is achieved by closely intermingling long pulp fibers during the forming process of the paper. To make papers tear resistant, the fibers are run in crisscrossing directions. If the menu is to be folded, it is important to inquire about the "grain" of the paper. It refers to the position of the fibers. Grain affects paper in the following ways: Paper folds smoothly with the grain direction but will roughen or crack when folded across the grain. Paper is stiffer in the grain direction; and paper expands or contracts more in the cross direction when exposed to moisture. When paper must be folded against the grain, it must be scored to keep cracking and tearing to a minimum. However, in the long run, constant folding and unfolding will wear through the paper more quickly than if it were folded with the grain. If you have a multipage menu, this could influence its longevity.

Menu papers are either "coated" or "uncoated." Coated papers have a smooth finish that ranges from matte to glossy. Coated paper is made by applying a layer of sealant to the paper during production. The "finish" of paper refers to the smoothness of the paper. Most smooth-finished papers are coated papers. Uncoated papers will have a slightly rough surface and are porous. A vellum finish is relatively rough. The usual finishes of uncoated papers in order of increasing smoothness are antique, eggshell, vellum and machine finish. Additional smoothness is created by coating the paper.

Text papers are noted for their interesting textures and attractive colors. They are good for menus because of their appearance and durability. Index, tag, and "Bristol" are other paper grades that are used for menus. Index is stiff and receptive to ink. More often, it is used for guest checks and menu clip-ons. "Tag," a heavy, almost cardboardlike stock, has good folding qualities, strength, tear and water resistance while possessing a surface adaptable to printing, stamping or

writing. Bristol paper is softer than index or tag and is excellent for folding, embossing or stamping.

Coated papers are better for menu covers as it resists soiling and water better than uncoated papers. It is also a good surface for printing illustrations and photos because the ink will not "bleed" into the paper as it does on uncoated stocks. One rule of thumb for selecting the weight of interior pages is that the cover stock should be at least twice the weight of interior pages unless the interior paperweight paper is the same as the cover.

Uncoated papers can be laminated to make them moisture and soil resistant. What about laminate covers? These have some significant advantages in terms of durability; however, they are relatively expensive, which can make seasonal menu changes cost-prohibitive. Large chains and franchisors, which produce menus in large quantities for family concepts are well-served by them, since they wear well and the per-unit cost is driven down by economies of scale. Laminates are clearly not appropriate for high-average-check restaurants as the image it projects is that of family restaurant or casual dining. (For more information, see "Paper or Plastic: What's Right for Your Restaurant?" on Page 42 of this issue.)

Paper texture, weight and finish can be used to give a menu unique character and communicate the personality of the restaurant. The weight of the interior pages is typically lighter weight than the cover stock. Paper texture can be made to resemble wood, leather, velvet and suede. The rough textures are great for effect but soil easily and are not as durable as smooth-textured coated papers. The opacity of the paper is important when you print on both sides. You do not want the ink to bleed through to the other side. Paper can be coated with high or loss gloss finish to prolong its useful life. Porous papers can be laminated with plastic but such treatment does not fit the personality of high-average-check white-tablecloth restaurants. Uncoated papers laminate best. There are many new synthetic mate-

What's Your Type?

Guidelines for Selecting Type Sizes and Styles

- ✓ Use 12 point font or larger.
- ✓ Use lowercase letters for descriptive copy.
- ✓ Use uppercase letters only for heading and subheadings.
- ✓ Do not mix more that three styles of type.
- ✓ Have at least 3 point leading between lines.
- ✓ Script and exotic type styles should be used sparingly.
- ✓ Leave at least 50 percent of the printing surface blank.
- ✓ Check for sharp contrast between ink color and paper color.
- ✓ Select colors and type styles that match the character of the restaurant.

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Paper or Plastic:
What's Right for Your Restaurant?

One of the most popular and common types of menu format is the plastic laminated format. It definitely has some advantages. They are durable, very easy to clean and can enhance the presentation of certain designs, colors and pictures.

Durable, But Expensive

However, plastic laminated menus can be expensive. A high-quality laminated menu can easily cost $5 a piece and more. The fairly significant investment required can cause operators to delay making menu changes even when it's costing you money to maintain the status quo. When operators purchase laminated menus they often buy large quantities to get a better per-menu price. This makes it even harder to justify a menu change when there are still 10 cases of unused menus in the storage room. As a result many operators keep using the same plastic laminated menus long after a new menu was needed.Are there some reasons why you want to have the flexibility of being able to change your menu quickly and inexpensively? Absolutely, and we'll discuss many of those reasons in other menu articles.

A Better Idea

A menu format that has become increasingly popular is the use of plastic covers with paper inserts. The initial investment in a high-quality plastic cover can be just as much and maybe more than the cost of the plastic laminated formats, but a good plastic cover has a fairly long life expectancy. Menus with a plastic covers and paper inserts can make it easy and inexpensive to make changes.

I'm familiar with several, what I would call casual, fine dining restaurants that use a fairly consistent plastic laminated format. Even though these restaurant have a fairly high check averages, they all use inserts that are black lettering on legal-sized white or off-white paper. Little or no color and their menus still look good and, appear anyway, to work well for them. I suspect that using this type of menu format allows these restaurants to change their menu in 24 hours or less for not much more than around $50. Now that's flexibility.

rials that are being used in place of laminated papers that are waterproof and tear-resistant and come in a wide range of colors. Also, remember that larger menus will require sturdier stock to prevent the pages from twisting and bending while the guest is perusing the offerings. Consider all these aspects in your menu design and work with your printer to determine the best stock for your menu.

Choose Your Colors

The color used in the paper and ink can add much to the design of the menu. More than any other aspect of the menu, color has a definite psychological purpose. Colors are used to create a mood, establish a restaurant's personality, stimulate the appetite, and call attention to particular items. Color of the walls, carpeting, tablecloths and napkins are selected by designers to illicit emotions and physical feelings. Colors are used to make people feel cold, hot, depressed, and romantic.

For example, deep red and purple conveys richness and opulence and are often used in high-average-check restaurants and hotel dining rooms. Beige, pink, light green and lavender imply a warm, soothing atmosphere. Consider how certain colors are associated with certain types of restaurants. For example, Italian restaurants may use red-and-white-checkered tablecloths or napkins. Steakhouses typically use black and red in their décor, upholstery, employee uniforms, and menu. Mexican restaurants use orange and yellow to a great extent. The menu cover, paper, ink and even the style of the font should be selected to communicate the restaurant's personality.

Full-color menus are called "four-color separations" and this process is rather expensive because each of the four primary colors, red, yellow, blue and black must be applied in separate press runs. This requires the press to be cleaned and re-inked after each run. However, multiple colors can be inexpensively incorporated through the combination of colored paper stock, colored ink and dot matrix screens.

Ink and paper color need to be selected for readability and design consideration. A multiple-color menu can be produced inexpensively (compared with full-color printing) by selecting different ink and paper colors. Colors used need to contrast well yet compliment the color scheme of the restaurant interior, tabletop and employee uniforms. Two or three colors can be as effective as "four-color" processing; however, printing costs increase significantly with four or "full" color. Although black ink on white paper provides the best contrast, tinted paper and tinted inks can sometimes be very effective and inexpensive to use. The use of "screens" can take an ink color, red for example, and provide a range of colors from a very pale red blush or pink to a deep red used in a boarder. The closer together the dots and the greater number of dots (or pixels) the deeper and more pronounced the color. The fewer the dots per square inch, the lighter the color. A screen of 10 percent to 20 percent concentration of dots per square inch produces a very light color that can be overprinted in black. It also creates a nice contrast and makes that section stand out.

What's Your Type?

Consider the styles used in the following type fonts and their appropriateness for the personality of the concept. There are basically two styles of type: serif and sans serif. A serif type font has tiny lines at the ends of the letters. The type on this page is an example of a serif font. **A san serif font looks like this.** It does not have the tiny lines. Your word processing program on your computer has many different type fonts. Like color, type fonts are used to highlight individual menu items or menu categories. The font should be compatible and consistent with the character and personality of the restaurant. Once chosen, the font and other graphic elements used on the menu should be used on other printed materials from matchbooks, cocktail napkins, place mats, and table tents.

Do you prefer Italian Restaurant or **Italian Restaurant**; Silver Bullet Diner or *Silver Bullet Diner*; English Pub or English Pub; or Mexican Restaurant or MEXICAN RESTAURANT? Most would agree that the second font style does a better job expressing the personality of the restaurant concept. However, don't get too carried away, particularly regarding exotic type-

faces, script and italic fonts, which I do not recommend. If used, they should be used sparingly and for effect purposes. Examples of exotic type fonts that should not be used on a menu are like these: *Shelly*, **Brush Script**, and *Caflisch Script*. As a rule, do not use more than three *different* styles of type, as it will result in a cluttered appearance that can detract from the emphasis one seeks in using type fonts for emphasis. Exotic fonts can detract from graphics and illustrations used to draw the eye. A good designer will help you select the best typeface for your concept, while keeping an eye on readability.

The menu should be set with mostly "lowercase" letters ("NOT UPPERCASE"). Two thirds of the type should be set in lowercase because it is more readable in print than uppercase. Larger sizes of type are called "display" type. UPPERCASE or CAPITAL LETTERS are reserved for section titles, menu categories, and/or the name of the menu item. Since readability is the ultimate goal of the menu production process, you need to select font sizes that fit the space you have available without being too small or too crowded. If the menu is too small for the number of items, a common fault in the design is to reduce the type font and crowd the menu. This reduces the effectiveness of the menu design and makes it difficult to read under low-light conditions.

Type sizes are measured in "points." The smallest type font used on a menu should be 12 point. (For example, the type on this page is 11 point.) The space between printed lines should be spaced adequately for readability. In printer's jargon this space between lines is called *leading*. It is measured in points and a minimum of three-point leading is preferred for ease of reading. The space between letters can be spaced to accommodate space needs as well. Space can be created with a process called *kerning*, which places the letters closer together. When space between letters is increased, the process is called letter spacing. If parts of the menu are duplicated, typed or otherwise produced in-house, be sure to use a quality printer like an ink jet or laser printer.

Frank's Bistro

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FRANK'S BISTRO

Frank's Bistro

Desktop Design Tools: Liberators or Traps?

Modern desktop publishing and word processing software has given average computer users some very powerful design tools, with templates, downloadable clip art, and a typeface for every mood. This can give you a sense of empowerment to create your own menus (advertisements, brochures, etc.); however, it will not make you a graphic designer. It is well worth the investment to hire skilled designers to develop your menu and other marketing materials. They have the training and expertise to translate your concept onto paper. Moreover, they can work directly with printers to handle the final production of the project, freeing your hands for other tasks. Just make sure that you have an opportunity to review and approve the final product.

While this is useful information when communicating with your graphic artist, use your judgment and experience regarding the best type style and size. For example, if you cater to older patrons, delight them by using larger type to assist in reading the menu. If you have a kids' menu, make it playful and with large, plain type they can read and understand.

Cover Story

If your menu has a separate and detachable cover, use the front and back of your menu cover to incorporate menu psychology elements. Traditionally, the menu cover contained the name of the restaurant and a logo. The logo and color scheme is carried over into signage, matchbooks, cocktail napkins, guest checks, printed advertising, and letterhead. The continued use of the common logo and color on the menu and other printed matter related to the business is called *thematic continuity*. Thus, when seen by the public, the identity of the business is reinforced. Today, some menus do not have a recognizable cover, as they are used to list appetizers and cocktails.

The back cover can be used to provide information on other locations if a multiple-unit operation; other services offered, e.g., catering, banquets, rehearsal dinners, and wedding receptions. I am amazed at the number of restaurants that do not include their address, telephone number and hours of operation on the menu. I guess they feel that you know where you are located and that you are open. Remember, every guest in your restaurant will look at your menu. Consider it valuable internal marketing "billboard" space. Don't get carried away, but don't overlook its ability to promote your business.

Final Touches

Finally, after the typeface, paper, ink and colors have been determined, decorative accents can be added to spark customer interest, highlight menu copy and reflect an extra element of design to your menu. A menu with only printed words is dull and uninteresting. An added touch is accomplished through incorporating illustrations, full-color photographs or graphic designs on the menu. Illustrations are drawings of recognizable subjects such as wine bottles or glasses, candles, loaves of bread, and other foods whereas graphic designs refer to decorative patterns, boarders, or abstract designs used to separate or encircle sections of the menu.

The menu printing process will primarily be done with lithography, where a metal sheet is etched with the printed matter and placed on a revolving cylinder or drum. This method is cost-effective for small runs. The other method is called letterpress, where the type is set on a flat plate. This is more expensive and requires high runs to be able to justify the setup costs. This process is used when high-quality full-color photographs or illustrations are reproduced. Magazines like *Food Arts* and *National Geographic* are printed on letterpress.

Desktop publishing systems with laser color printers can also produce very attractive full-color menu pages where menus can be printed in-house. The benefits of such a system are streamlining menu production, reducing production costs, simplifying and speeding up menu revisions to address cost increases, addition of new menu items and deletion of slow-selling items. There are also many companies that specialize in printing menus and can answer all your questions concerning paper, ink and printing. Many employ graphic artists who can design your menu to be an effective cost control and marketing tool. Since the menu is so important to the financial success of your restaurant, you should consider getting their advice. (For more information, see "Desktop Design Tools: Liberators or Traps?" on this page.)

And if You're Not a Poet, and You Know It

The value of well-written descriptive copy is often lost on many menus. While long and flowery wording is sometimes criticized, not using any descriptive copy is equally a flaw in the overall menu design. The standard menu items like steaks, chicken and salads, often are "underdescribed" on menus. Consider a menu offering *Sirloin Steak, $9.95.* Is the customer to assume that it is broiled as opposed to grilled? What grade of meat is used? What is included with the steak? If the restaurant purchases only corn-fed Iowa beef should this not be stated on the menu? If they use a special wood-burning charbroiler, should this not be mentioned? If they depend on verbal descriptions to come from the servers, an inconsistent and incomplete description can result.

If you don't fancy yourself another Shakespeare, consider hiring a professional copywriter to execute the project. You might not be able to craft the right language yourself, but you will recognize winning prose when you see it. Don't be afraid to edit and re-edit.

Common Menu Mistakes to Avoid

These are the most common pitfalls encountered by restaurants. Try to avoid them when producing your first (or next) menu.

- ✓ Leaving the menu layout and design up to your printer and not working with a graphic designer to accentuate the menu items you want to feature.
- ✓ Crowded menu pages with too much and too small type font.
- ✓ Poor readability because of font size, paper color and font style.
- ✓ Printing on dark paper with dark ink, making readability difficult under low-light conditions.

- ✓ Aligning prices in a column down the page.
- ✓ Using the same graphic design on all menu items so nothing stands out.
- ✓ Not emphasizing the items the restaurant wants to sell through graphics, fonts, color, or illustrations.
- ✓ Not treating the menu design decision with the same due diligence as any major capital investment decision.
- ✓ Not using the front and back cover for information about the restaurant, e.g., hours, services, history, and address.
- ✓ Failing to design the menu to fit the décor and personality of the restaurant.

A restaurant's financial success gives credibility to the decisions and methods employed by the owner-operator. No matter what format or style their menu uses, it will likely be heralded as a great menu. Almost all menus can be improved upon relative to any one of the elements previously described. After reading these two articles, you are able to see the strengths and weaknesses in menu design and will avoid the common mistakes. **RS&G**

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