The Psychology of Menu Design: Reinvent Your 'Silent Salesperson' to Increase Check Averages and Guest Loyalty

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The menu is the most important internal marketing and sales tool a restaurant has to market its food and beverage to customers. It is the only piece of printed advertising that you are virtually 100 percent sure will be read by the guest. Once placed in the guest’s hand, it can directly influence not only what they will order, but ultimately how much they will spend. Menu design directly influences sales revenue. Management is constantly forecasting business volume to estimate how much to buy, keep in inventory, and prepare. A properly designed menu makes these kinds of decisions easier and more accurate.

A well-designed menu can educate and entertain the customer as well as be a communication, cost control, and marketing tool for your restaurant. The menu is designed to help the guest decide what to order. When you strategically place menu items on the menu, you will sell more of them than if you placed them randomly.

Well-designed menus market the food the restaurant prepares best and wants to sell by making those items stand out from the others. This article will discuss menu design techniques to help you increase the effectiveness of your “silent salesperson” to boost check averages and guest loyalty.

Your Restaurant's Business Card

The menu design must be congruent with the concept and image of the restaurant and effectively communicate the overall dining experience to the guest. Think of your menu as your restaurant business card. It introduces the customer to your restaurant, and its design should complement the décor, service, food quality, and price range of the restaurant. The menu design should incorporate the colors and graphics that the customer sees from the table. A properly designed menu can help any restaurant — whether it be a fine-dining, casual-theme, fast-casual concept, or fast-food —
Examples include poor readability because of font size, paper color and font style; crowded menu pages with elements too numerous and font type too small; and printing on dark paper with dark ink making readability difficult under low-light conditions.

Incongruent. This includes failing to design the menu to fit the décor and personality of the restaurant. Your menu is your primary communication tool so nothing stands out and about one-fourth of them do not have any identifying information. Over the years I have forgotten where some of them came from and the menu does not contain any information. Since people take menus from restaurants as souvenirs, it should contain what is referred to as “institutional information.” To not include it would be like having custom matches without your restaurant’s name on them.

Inadequate management commitment. Not treating the menu design decision with the same due diligence as any major capital investment decision is setting yourself up for failure. So is 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.

Hard to read. Examples include poor readability because of font size, paper color and font style; crowded menu pages with elements too numerous and font type too small; and printing on dark paper with dark ink making readability difficult under low-light conditions.

Overemphasizing prices. When you align prices in a column down the page, guests can summarize discount items based on price alone.

Monotonous design. Using the same graphic design on all menu items so nothing stands out says, “blah.”

Poor salesmanship. Not emphasizing the items the restaurant wants to sell through graphics, fonts, color, or illustrations reduces your influence on what items will move.

Poor use of space. This includes not using the front and back cover for information about the restaurant, e.g., hours, services, history, address, etc. I have more than 1,000 menus in my library and about one-fourth of them do not have any identifying information. Over the years I have forgotten where some of them came from and the menu does not contain any information. Since people take menus from restaurants as souvenirs, it should contain what is referred to as “institutional information.” To not include it would be like having custom matches without your restaurant’s name on them.

Too big. The size of the menu needs to take into account the size of the table, the place setting and the table appointments. Oversized menus can be awkward to hold and handle while sipping a martini and trying to have a conversation with your dinner companions.
109 Seconds and Counting

Several years ago, Gallup reported that most customers will spend an average of 109 seconds reading a menu. This is the time limit you have to get your message to them. The time it takes to read a menu and make a decision needs to be addressed in your menu design and presentation. Over the years, restaurants like Bennigan’s, TGI Friday’s, and The Cheesecake Factory have been known for their multipaged menus and extensive listings of menu items. If it takes longer to make a purchase decision, it will lengthen your table turnover times, especially with first-time guests. With the information on menu item sales being quickly and easily assembled through point-of-sale computers, the number of selections and pages have been greatly reduced because they found that 60 percent to 70 percent of their sales came from fewer than 18-24 menu items. It did not make sense to have 50-100 different choices. Not only did they shorten the order-taking time, they reduced inventory and purchases.

Considering the importance of the menu sales mix in the smooth and efficient operation of the restaurant, it behooves all restaurant operators to learn the various techniques of menu design so they can be incorporated into their next menu design. A properly designed menu can direct the attention of the diner to specific items and increase the likelihood that those items will be ordered. These items should be the ones with the highest gross profit, lowest food costs and help achieve the average check needed to return the desired sales. In addition, degree of preparation difficulty should be factored into your menu evaluation. If an item cannot be prepared in 10-12 minutes or it requires multiple steps and needs to be moved between more than two stations or employees before it gets to the pickup window, it may not be one of the items you want to prominently display on your menu. This being said, while menu design and placement of items on the menu can influence the customers’ decision, it will not influence customers to purchase items that they do not want. Menu design can help increase the odds of an item’s selection.
Think how much easier it would be to forecast use levels of perishable ingredients, production quantities, and scheduling help when you can forecast to within 1 percent to 3 percent of what you will be selling during any given meal period. If you can predict the number of customers that will enter your restaurant, you can quantify your needs for inventory, production and staffing.

Don't Leave Guest Preference to Chance

The following statement may at first sound contradictory to what has been stated, but here goes: Any menu, any design, and any format will produce a predictable sales mix if put in service every day for a prolonged period. In other words, regardless of the menu design, the popularity of particular menu items will evolve so management will be able to forecast customer preferences and thereby be able to plan purchases and preparation quantities according to the existing sales pattern. Here is the key point we want to make: If such a sales pattern will occur without any rhyme or reason to the design of the menu, think of the possibilities if the menu were designed to promote the items the restaurant wanted to sell more than any other. Instead of leaving it entirely to a random selection, you can actually “direct” the customers’ attention to those items you want to sell and are geared up to sell.

How do you turn your menu into a cost control, marketing and communication tool? There are certain “practices” that when incorporated into the graphic design and layout of a menu can actually “influence” the menu selections of the guests. These practices and techniques are not subliminal and do not in any way force or trick the customer into ordering something they do not want more than looking at a television commercial or newspaper advertisement influences the purchase decision. However, like a television commercial or newspaper advertisement, menu design can put an idea into the head of the consumer, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will at least consider the choice when a purchase is made. If they never saw the ad it would never have occurred to them to even consider its purchase.

The Power of Print

The techniques of menu psychology are most applicable to the printed menu. (However, there are others that can be employed with verbal menus, i.e., menus delivered orally by the server. In some restaurants, this might just include specials. In very upscale establishments, this might include the entire menu. But this article is devoted to only the printed menu.) What are the techniques employed in the design and production of a menu? Some of the techniques involve such elements as the print style and size, the paper and ink color, the texture and finish of the paper, graphic design, art work and illustrations. Even the placement of items on a page or with a list is done for specific reasons. Actually, menu psychology techniques can be anything that is used to direct the reader’s attention to certain parts of the menu to increase the likelihood that those items will be remembered. If they are noticed and remembered, they are more likely to be ordered than an unnoticed or forgotten item.

In a study by a hospitality management student at Florida State University of a Bennigan’s menu from the early ’80s, more than three-fourths of all menu items sold were either snacks or appetizers. The menu at the time contained 14 pages and the dinner entrees were listed on the last two pages. The customers didn’t bother to read past the first four or five pages and the menu length and design was significantly contributing to the poor sales of dinner entrees in the overall menu sales mix.
You can improve your sales without changing any menu item or price. All you have to do is reposition the items and employ menu psychology techniques on your menu. There are several different menu formats and each has a different area of sales concentration. The items you put in the area of sales concentration should be selected with care and purpose. They should be items that you want to feature and do better than the competition. This is where you want to list your house specialties and signature items.

In addition to the format, the menu items are typically grouped into menu categories. The number of and names used for the various menu categories will be greatly influenced by the type of restaurant, the price range, and number of menu offerings. For example, the typical categories for a restaurant featuring steak will be different from that featuring seafood or ethnic cuisine, such as Italian or Mexican. The industry standard is to put menu items into categories and in the order in which the items are typically eaten. Restaurants with higher check averages typically have more menu categories than those with lower check averages.

**Formats**

There are three basic types of menu page and fold formats you can use on a menu. First is the single-page format in which the entire menu is contained on a single page or card. The area of sales concentration is in the top half of the page. Then there is the most common format of the two-page/single-fold menus. Menu size and shape will vary considerably. The National Restaurant Association conducts a menu contest every year during its annual convention in Chicago and has found that the most common sized menu was 9 inches by 12 inches. This is the result of no other reason than to accommodate the standard paper size of 8.5 inches by 11 inches.

The graphic “Eye Movement Pattern” on Page 40 shows the typical eye movement over a three-panel, two-fold menu. The pattern of eye movement is not fixed and can be altered and directed by “eye magnets.” Eye magnets are little graphic techniques that will attract the eye and guest’s attention. Some of the best examples are graphic boxes around menu items, the use of a dot matrix screen of color as a background, using a larger or bolder type font, incorporating an illustration or even a photograph to “draw” the eye. The areas of emphasis are used to list the items you want to promote the most.

**Sometimes Bigger Isn’t Better**

In addition, oversized menus are difficult to maneuver in tight quarters. Guests have knocked over wine glasses with the menu and menus have been scorched by candles. Customers have commented that the menus were obstructing their view of their dining partner and were even too large to be placed on the table. The more extensive the listings of menu items, the larger the menu dimensions and the more space that is needed to contain the listings and descriptive copy.

If you have a three-panel menu with interchangeable pages, try swapping them at lunch and dinner for a month and check your sales mix for any changes. Odds are that whatever is in the center panel will sell more than if it were on the back cover. This is also a way to increase your check average at night by moving the lower-priced sandwiches and salads to the back cover where they are less likely to be noticed and therefore ordered.

Menu design psychology also uses several visual element techniques to increase the effectiveness of the menu as a marketing, communication and cost control tool. The first visual element is the font size and style. Words, numbers, or graphic symbols can be increased in size to attract the reader’s eye or decreased in size to de-emphasize attention to a particular item. It follows that selectively increasing the type size and style of some menu items is a technique that will draw the customer’s eye and therefore their attention. It is this attention that increases the odds that the customer will consider ordering that item more than if they had never noticed it at all.

Different styles of type fonts can be used as “eye magnets.” This technique is most effective when the entire menu is limited to three different font styles. When four or more different font styles are used, the drawing power of the font becomes diluted and the eye never rests in any one area. Again, the intent is to bring attention to some menu items or areas of the menu. Improper placement or use of these techniques can be counterproductive and take attention away from the menu sections or items the operator wishes to emphasize.

The second technique is accomplished by increasing the brightness or color (shading) of visual elements to attract attention and establish a menu grouping. In printing jargon, this is referred to as dot-matrix screening. The brightness of a color can be increased, such as changing from gray to black or from a light pink to a dark red through a screen of tiny dots placed in various densities that produces a specified percentage of color.
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The use of color in the font, graphics, and borders can also be used to attract attention. The change from a light type to a bold type can also increase awareness and can actually direct the eye along a prescribed path. Thus, color and brightness can be used along with font size and style to direct the reader to certain parts or sections of the menu.

Another way to direct a guest’s attention to a certain part or section of the printed menu can be accomplished by placing the elements in a confined area or space on the menu. The use of borders to “frame” a menu item or group of menu items is an example of this menu psychology technique. An example would be the appetizer section of a menu that is set off by a box border or graphic design. The grouping of all the appetizers within a designated area encourages reading them as a unit. Adding an extra line space (leading) between menu items and putting less space between the title or name of the menu item and its descriptive copy clearly conveys that the description is for the preceding item.

In much the same way that spacing tends to group visual information, the use of similar elements such as brightness, color, size, or shape encourages elements to be seen together. Thus, switching from regular to bold type, changing fonts, or introducing a different color of type signals to the reader that they are moving from one section to another, e.g., appetizers to salads.

While all these elements can be used to guide the customer’s eye around the menu to the items that provide the best overall return, the entire menu must remain uncluttered and easy to read. If for example, appetizers are contained within a rectangular border, do not use a circle or square around another appetizer and place it adjacent to the others. A different shape suggests a different menu category, e.g., side dishes or salads.

The menu design psychology techniques described in this article are useful tools to the graphic designer in preparing a menu. In the March 2005 issue, we will discuss how the menu paper, its weight, texture, finish and color contribute to the menu design, the average check and gross profit return.

For now, the key point is to put a great deal of energy and thought into the design and psychology of your menu. Your efforts and planning will be returned many times over.