

Menu Engineering for Maximum Marketing

You work hard to give your customers the very best meals and service. You may have the best-tasting menu offerings, but if they're presented in an outdated or unattractive format, you could be losing valuable revenue. Research suggests that a re-designed menu can increase sales by at least 10 percent. Take an honest look at your menu; is there room for improvement? The single most important marketing collateral a restaurant possesses is its menu. The menu should function as a tour guide and could prove to be the best salesperson in your company. A well-designed menu is an important step in conveying to your customers that you are committed to serving the very best.

Menu engineering and design is the perfect marriage of both the science and art of a successful restaurant. One of the surest ways to effectively and measurably increase sales, profits, and guest satisfaction scores in a manner that is both quick and sustainable is to correctly engineer your menu.

Over the next few issues of MaineSense, we will have a on-going series of articles on the importance of Menu Engineering. Each topic will focus on approaches and important considerations specific to menu design and engineering. If you are about to endeavor on launching a new menu strategy, you will find lots of tips that can have a meaningful impact on your efforts.

Top 10 Menu Marketing Tips

1. Drop dollar signs. A recent study by the Culinary Institute of America showed that menus without the symbol "\$" or the word "dollars" saw an increase in sales of over 8% per person. Another tip is to place prices right next to the end of descriptions so that they blend in as opposed to setting them out all by themselves to the far right margin.
2. Encourage customers to eat more by separating courses into different sections. For instance, instead of just listing "First Courses", separate offerings into appetizers, soups and salads. And never put desserts on the main menu – it may keep people from ordering appetizers, salads and first courses.

3. Studies have shown that people order the first and last items in a category most often – our eyes naturally look at the top item in a list and the bottom item, often glancing over the middle items in a list. Be sure to put your most profitable items that you want to sell at the top and the bottom of your lists, and break up long lists into smaller ones so you don't have so many unseen items.
4. An easy way to create attention to an item in the middle of a list is by drawing a box around it to feature that item. This has the added advantage of breaking up a long list and creating shorter lists with more “top and bottom items.”
5. Add some pizzazz to your menu items by naming menu items with descriptive and tantalizing names. Would you rather order “Crab Cakes” or “Chesapeake Bay Jumbo Lump Crab Cakes?” By getting descriptive and creative with your names, it will enhance the sales of those items.
6. Customers love to order items that they believe are unique to your restaurant, especially if they can't experience the same thing at other restaurants. If you don't have something unique, try creating something new that you can claim as your own signature dish. Unique creations can command a higher price point, because customers can't do a price comparison, so don't be shy when it comes to pricing.
7. Utilize add-ons (with additional costs) to enhance your normal plates, such as “add chicken or shrimp to your salad”, or “add shrimp to your steak”, or “add Blue Cheese crumbles,” or “add a second vegetable.” These add-ons are incremental sales that do wonders to your check average!
8. No matter what kind of restaurant you run, from fast casual to fine dining, combo meals can help your customer make a choice that makes them feel like they're getting a deal, even if the combo costs exactly the same as the a la carte menu. Have you ever done the math on a combo meal? They usually include little if any discount to the price, yet they make it much easier for the customers to say “yes” to add a drink or dessert to their meal. Look for ways you can create a combo to increase your sales.
9. Designate your most profitable and popular dishes with a symbol that means “Signature Dish Recommended by the Chef.” These will become some of the most popular items on your menu.
10. If you are going to show pictures of your food, make sure you have quality photographs. In your food photography, the food should look appetizing, but do not try to deceive the customer. If the real food arrives and the quality or quantity does not resemble the picture, the customer might be upset. To be safe, you may want to keep your menu clear of food photography, but if you do, make sure the descriptions of your menu items are detailed enough to be enticing on their own.

11. Be careful not to clutter your menu with words and pictures. About half of the menu should be empty space. That way, the menu will look nicer, and customers will be able to clearly see all of the items offered. Balancing the “stuff” on your menu with space will help you sell more.
12. Instead of constantly updating your menu to include specials and promotions, consider including inserts. It does not have to be fancy, and can simply be a white sheet of printed paper listing the seasonal, weekly or daily specials, or it can be a small advertisement for an upcoming event or promotion.
13. Any time your menu offerings or prices change, you need to reprint your menu. Never use a pen or marker to update menu pricing or to add or remove menu items, because it looks unprofessional. If your menu changes a lot, then you should use menu holders so that you can easily reprint and switch out each page.
14. Offering a separate menu for children is a great way for kids to feel special. Kids today are very likely to influence their parent’s decision-making on restaurant choice. While a paper placemat menu and crayons are great tools for distracting toddlers, older kids want “real” folding menus. And do not label menu items with diminutive names like “kiddy” or “pee wee.” Kids don’t want to be treated like “babies.”
15. Understand Page Positioning. On a three-panel menu, people most often look at the center panel first, and then move counter clockwise. On two-panel menu, people look at the top right-hand side first. Consider putting your high profit items such as specials or specialty drinks in these spots.