The Ultimate Guide *to* Menu Design

TouchBistro

You’ve spent months mastering a new dish that will make your restaurant stand out. The flavor, the colors, the price. It’s all perfect. Chef’s kiss. But if your menu isn’t designed properly, the dish still might not sell.

Why?

A successful menu is a mix of art and science. This means it needs to include both artfully designed dishes and strategic menu engineering. If your new dish or most profitable items aren't located in just the right spot, they're likely to get overlooked by customers who decide to order something else.

You see, your menu is more than just a list of what dishes you have on offer. A well-designed menu can improve a customer's entire dining experience, boost the perceived value of your brand, strategically drive buying decisions, and increase your profits. In fact, menu engineering is proven to increase profits by up to 15%. If you don't want to leave those profits on the table, you'll need to create an effective menu design.

In this guide, we'll take you through all the fundamentals and best practices of menu design, including:

- The ideal number of menu items
- How to categorize your menu items by profit and popularity
- How to place those items strategically on your menu
- How to name menu items and write descriptions
- The best way to indicate pricing
- The top 9 menu design tips to boost profits

Let's get started!

Table of Contents

6 Number of Menu Items
8 Menu Categories
10 Placement and Design
16 Names and Descriptions
18 Pricing
20 9 Design Tips to Boost Profits

Number of Menu Items

Let's start at the beginning, with the size of your menu. Your instinct may be to provide customers with as many dishes as possible.

The problem? More choice isn't always better. Research shows that too much choice can actually hinder the decision-making process altogether. People take longer to decide and usually go for something tried and true – chances are that's not your newest or most profitable dish.

So how many menu items is too many?
The magic number is 7.
Seven appetizers, seven entrees, seven types of pizza.

According to menu engineer Greg Rapp, "When we include over seven items, a guest will be overwhelmed and confused, and when they get confused, they'll typically default to an item they've had before." This isn't always a bad thing, but a well-designed menu will entice guests to choose items higher on the profitability scale.

For many years, restaurants had long, extensive offerings that aimed to have "something for everyone." Now the layout design trend has changed, following a "less is more" philosophy. Having fewer items not only makes it easier for guests to answer the classic question, "what are you getting?", but it also means less food waste, reduced labor costs, simplified training, and faster service. Fewer choices also helps define your restaurant concept and makes it easier to market your offerings.

"Too many choices make it hard for consumers to make a choice. [It also can make it difficult for consumers] to remember why they go to a particular restaurant," says Darren Tristano, President of foodservice research firm, Technomic. In short, less choice equates to a better experience for guests and more profits for restaurants.

MENU
COFFEE bar
Toast BAR
ESPRESSO bar
SANDWI BAR
TEA bar
Salad B
HOT CHOCOLATE bar
KIDS' B

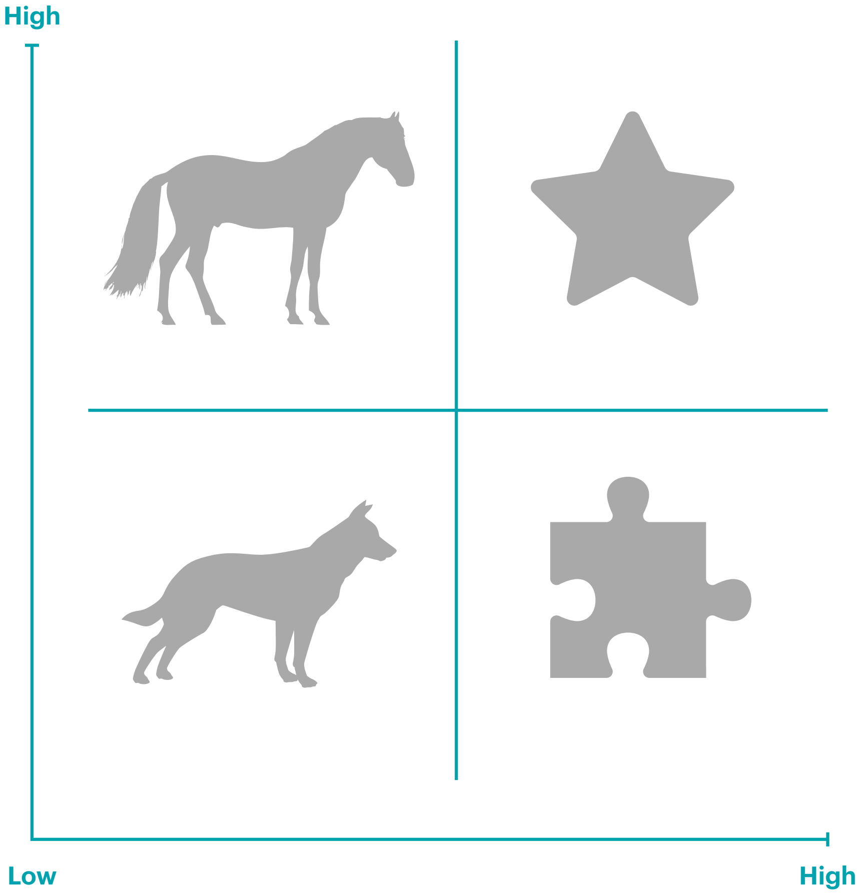
Menu Categories

Four distinct categories should drive your menu design. And no, we're not talking about typical categories such as appetizers, entrées, desserts, and beverages.

Menu engineering is guided by four categories, which include stars, plough-horses, puzzles, and dogs.

Each of the categories above represent different levels of popularity and profitability of your dishes. The quadrant shown here depicts this:

Menu Classification Chart



To determine which menu item falls into which category, you must first do a cost and profitability analysis on each item, taking into consideration everything from the cost of individual ingredients to the item's forecasted sales. Modern POS systems make this practice easier by giving you the ability to draw sales analytics from past and current performance.

Once you've determined your true costs, you'll find that each menu item falls into one of the following categories:

- **Stars:** Very popular and highly profitable dishes. These are the items you'll want to highlight on your menu.

- **Plow-horses:** Also popular but have low profitability. Because they're popular, consider them keepers. You can experiment with these items to improve their profitability by using add-ons to increase your profits.

- **Puzzles:** Highly profitable but not very popular. Increasing the sales of these items might be a dual effort of menu design and server sales. They're profitable so you won't want to lose them, but you need to think of creative ways to separate these from the pack and turn them into stars.

- **Dogs:** Not very popular or profitable. Every menu has its share of dogs and it's up to you to determine when to '86 an item. Avoid any special emphasis on the menu.

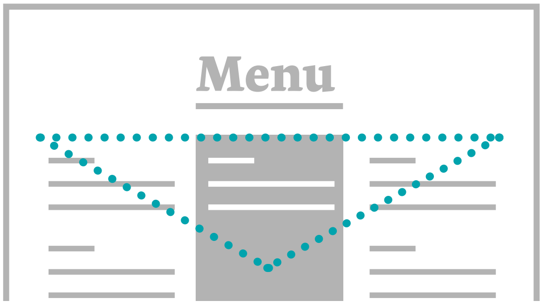
Categorizing all your menu items can help you see which items you should keep, which ones you should adjust (price etc.), and which you should drop. Plus, as we'll go through in the next section, categorized menu items will also help you know where to place them within the menu design.

Placement and Design

Now that you have a better idea of the number and category of your items, it's time to figure out where to place them on the menu and how to pull together the rest of the design. Here are a few key terms that will help you make these decisions.

The Golden Triangle

Think of your menu as a map. And within that map there is a Bermuda Triangle of sorts, where diners are immediately drawn, like some sort of magnet.



This area of your menu that customers read first is actually called the Golden Triangle. Aaron Allen – restaurant consultant and expert on the psychology of menu design – says that, "When we look at a menu, our eyes typically move to the middle first, before traveling to the top right corner, and then, finally, to the top left."

Because the eyes gravitate here first, you'll want to display high-margin items (such as your stars and puzzles) in your Golden Triangle.

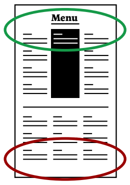
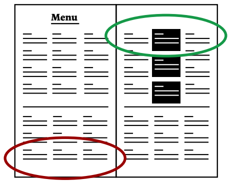
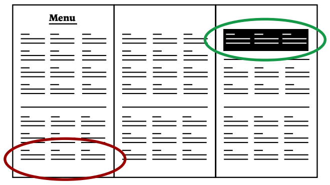
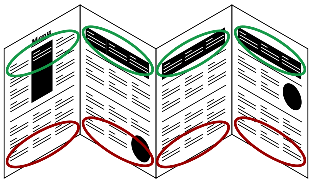
Negative Space

Think of negative space as a rest-stop for your eyes. White space allows the eye to take a break and the brain to process information, allowing guests to make a more thoughtful decision without getting overwhelmed by the choices in front of them. Items that are called out in an area with a lot of whitespace will get more visual attention.

FRUIT JUICES
HAPPY DAYS
BIMBO
SKIN GLOW
EASY PEASY
THREE IS A CROWD
BABY FACE
GOLDEN GLOW
FRESH START
COFFEE
LATTE -80
CAPPUCCINO -80
FLAT WHITE -100
MOCHA
AMERICANO -70
BULLETPROOF -120
DAILY SPECIALS

The Sweet Spot

When looking at a menu, the eye moves easily to the top right (again, the Golden Triangle). This is a hotspot for profit-generating dishes. Guests have been conditioned to know this is where the main plates will be located. Remember that the sweet spot does change based on the layout of the menu, so the Menu Cover Depot has laid out various sweet spots here:

Menu Configuration	Area of Most Attention	Area of Least Attention
One-Panel 	Top of the page	Just below the bottom of the page (If your one-panel menu cover displays items on both sides of the cover, all entrees should appear on the front side, as those on the back will not receive as much attention.)
Two-Panel 	Top of the right-side panel	Just above the bottom of the left-side panel
Three-Panel Book-Style 	Top of the third panel (Old textbooks say that the inside of the middle panel constitutes the best location, but I have found that the top of the third panel gets more respect in that it's seen as having the best menu items.)	Just above the bottom of the first panel
Many-Panel 	Top of each page	Just above the bottom of each page

Images

Images should be used sparingly. Too many images could create a less than desirable impression, but when paired strategically, images actually do have the power to increase sales by up to 30%. But, that success does depend on the type of restaurant. Photos on menus are generally associated with less expensive or value-driven venues, so if your restaurant concept is aiming to be on the higher-end, it's best not to include them at all.

But there is something to be said about the power of images. Essentially when humans see something delicious, we get hungry. This is why you should never grocery shop while hungry. We're essentially Pavlov's dog.

Brian Mennecke, an associate professor of information systems, says, "The more vivid the image, in terms of movement, color, and accuracy of representation, the more realistic, the more it's going to stimulate your response to it." Another study found that when testing a digital display of salad at camp, campers who saw the salad were 70% more likely to order it for lunch. Long story short: pictures sell.

An effective way to use images is to embed images of your star and puzzle items into your mobile POS menu so that servers can show the diners a visual right at the table if they're contemplating an item. Not only do you get the benefits of the visual, but it's another way to reinforce that guest-server connection.

Call Outs

Calling out specific profit-generating menu items with boxes, ribbons, and other eye-catching graphics is a great way to bring extra attention to that item. But of course, similarly to images, you'll want to do this sparingly. Ideally, this means only one high-margin item per section (i.e. one appetizer, one entree, one dessert). But keep it to just one. The more boxes that litter a page, the less effective they will be.

Color Theory

A pop of color never hurts, especially to emphasize a certain section or series of dishes. But there's more to color theory than just attracting the eye. It goes all the way back to our evolution, where our caveman ancestors deemed certain food colors safe for consumption, and others not. Red and yellow are found to increase and stimulate appetite as they appealed to the former, whereas grey, brown, black and blue are thought to decrease appetite because they were associated with poisons.

As Melissa Breyer reported, "According to the Rohm and Haas Paint Quality Institute, red is a powerful color that increases blood pressure and heart rate. It often produces feelings of intimacy, energy, passion and sexuality. It also stimulates the appetite – it is often used in restaurants and is an excellent choice for dining rooms in the home. Yellow is also an appetite-stimulating color as it is associated with energy and happiness. (Hmmm. Red and yellow. Maybe that explains 38,000 McDonald's locations worldwide?) This is why many designers recommend warm colors for home kitchens and restaurants – not only does it increase the appetite, but it has been shown to increase the speed at which people eat. Blue is rarely recommended: it slows us down and makes us want to go to sleep."

Technology

Menus change, sometimes as often as the seasons. While it might be ideal to hire a graphic designer who specializes in menu design and engineering, it's not always an option for a restaurant with an ever-evolving menu. Luckily there are new software solutions making graphic design easy for the otherwise graphic design impaired. Here are a few options to get you started:

- **MustHaveMenus**
- **iMenu Pro**
- **Canva**

Menu Item Names and Descriptions

Words likely unheard by restaurant guests: "I'll have one order of the Dead Baby Cow Cutlet with Vinegary Red Cabbage on the side." "Grandma's Schnitzel with German-style Red Cabbage" sounds much more appealing.

As experimental psychologist Charles Spence says,

> **"A label directs a person's attention towards a feature in a dish, and hence, helps bring out certain flavors and textures."**

While there is no one size-fits-all approach for naming dishes, there are three creative menu naming strategies you should keep in mind:

1. Stay in line with your brand: If your brand is sassy, be sassy. If your brand is conservative, be conservative.

2. Express your differentiators: Locally sourced from the farm down the road? Picked from your own garden? Without killing your menu with buzzwords like "fresh" or "organic," if there's a particular selling point, express it in a direct way.

3. Be clear… or don't be: No one ordering a burger wants to end up with a salad and vice versa. Name your items accordingly. That said, a touch of ambiguity, like using a foreign name, might prompt a conversation between the guest and server, offering a unique chance for servers to strengthen their relationship with the guest. Restaurateur Russell Norman says, "I don't use a huge amount of Italian, but I occasionally use it so that customers say 'what is that?'"

As for adjectives, the jury is still out. Some restaurateurs are choosing to axe traditional descriptors like drizzled or homemade from their menus, while others continue to see the value: “Adjectives like ‘line-caught,’ ‘farm-raised,’ or ‘locally-sourced’ are big turn-ons for customers. These things all help increase perception of quality of the item,” says restaurant consultant, Aaron Allen.

Some studies have also found that longer more detailed descriptions can result in 30% more food sales. Either way, in the same article, menu engineer Greg Rapp reminds us that, “People taste what you tell them they’re tasting.

Hot Tip

Some menu engineers will even create less appetizing descriptions for items considered dogs, and more appetizing descriptions for the profit-generating stars and puzzles.

Pricing

While service with a smile has some returns when it comes to influencing what guests order, your menu might actually have more sway. Here are three strategies that menu engineers consider when creating profit-generating menus.

Strategic placement: By placing more expensive items first, perhaps in the Golden Triangle or a call out box, everything preceding that item seems much more reasonable. This is also a common cognitive bias known as “anchoring,” whereby the human tendency is to “heavily rely on the first piece of information offered when making decisions.” Another strategy is to bookend a “high profitability, high popularity” star within the brackets of a “low profitability, low popularity” dog and a “high profitability, low popularity” puzzle. This makes that star item even more appealing.

Removing the $: Many modern menus have axed the dollar sign and it’s not just because they’re being trendy. One study found that people eating lunch with a dollar-sign-free menu spent more money than those with dollar signs. Debunking other theories that writing out the price or removing decimals will increase spend, the same research found those practices had a lesser effect.

Nested pricing: Rather than a dotted line from your menu item to the price, list the price discretely after the name or description. It will draw less attention and encourage people to spend more.

Train Station
Special Offer
meal of the day
veggie soup
&
mushrooms
DRINK MENU
ICED DRINKS
FRESH
ROASTED BEANS
SIGNATURE BLENDS
SINGLE ORIGIN BEANS
Train Station
tools
hardware
repairs
KITCHEN GARDEN
peppers
ciboulette

9 Menu Design Tips That Will Help You Boost Profits

Beyond all the theory and science of menu engineering 101, here are nine top takeaways to help you design the most effective menu possible.

1 Categorize menu items based on popularity and profit – Run a cost analysis using your POS and place menu items in the appropriate category: star, horse, puzzle, and dog.

2 Limit choice to guide buying decisions – Each menu section (appetizer, entree, etc.) should have only seven or fewer items.

3 Place high-margin items in the Golden Triangle – Stars and puzzles should go in the middle, top right, and top left of your menu.

4 Highlight one high-margin item per section – Call out one star or puzzle menu item in each of these areas with bold text, italics, ribbons, or boxes so people notice them.

5 Use photos sparingly – Consider using only one high-quality image on your menu to make customers drool a bit.

6 Include menu modifiers to upsell – Classic modifiers include extra sides or toppings, but also think about the unconventional opportunities: burgers by the ounce, liqueur with dessert, etc.

7 Update your menu for cross-selling – Use your POS to analyze items that are frequently bought together to create pairings you can highlight on your menu.

8 Use color to get people to buy – Green is freshness, orange stimulates appetite, yellow brings happiness, and red encourages action.

9 Use decoy dishes – Place expensive dishes at the top of the menu to create the perception that the other items are better value.

TouchBistro is an iPad and integrated payments solution built for restaurant people, by restaurant people. Our system helps thousands of restaurateurs around the world increase sales, delight guests, and save both time and money. Find out how our solutions can help make it easier to run your restaurant. Book a demo today!

www.touchbistro.com
1-855-363-5252

TouchBistro®