



EXTREME MENU MAKEOVER

TRANSFORMING YOUR MENU FROM PRICE LIST TO POWER TOOL

by Verla Wallace

Last spring when Hans Lenzlinger revamped the menu for his Swiss-themed New Glarus Hotel restaurant, he tried something new. He moved a popular Sauerbraten entrée from its location on a menu insert to the upper right-hand corner of the right-hand page of his menu. Sales of the signature dish jumped 25%—even though Lenzlinger had also raised its price.

“I had been negligent in updating our menu,” Lenzlinger admits. “It’s a big job if you do it right, but it’s an area that independents like me can use to our advantage. We’re able to change our menu more easily than the chains. We shouldn’t waste the opportunity.”

Lenzlinger learned about the power of menu engineering from Gregg Rapp, the man described by TIME Magazine as “the menu magician.” The Wisconsin Restaurant Association Education Foundation featured Rapp at a seminar entitled “Menus: a Profit Approach” at the 2008 Wisconsin Restaurant Expo.

Rapp tells restaurateurs the first step to a finely tuned menu is to create a detailed profile for every item on the menu. Use index cards and create a separate card for each food item—its cost to make, its profitability and its popularity compared to other items on the menu.

“You have to do the homework—especially the costing,” Rapp says. “It’s absolutely essential, whether you run a hot dog stand at Loew’s Hardware or an upscale supper club in the North Woods.”

Rapp then suggests placing each food item in one of four categories, which he has dubbed:

- **Stars** – the high profit/high sales items (These items are usually not price sensitive.)
- **Puzzles** – high profit/low sales (This would be an item like the steak and lobster dinner you would like to sell in higher volume.)
- **Plowhorses** – high sales/low profit (These are the items favored by price-sensitive diners. Leave them alone.)

- **Dogs** – low profit/low sales items (These need to go.)

Kevin Quinn, who, along with his dad Pat, co-owns Mackinaw’s Grill and Spirits in Green Bay, used one of their suppliers, SYSCO, to help them cost out entrees. When he matched those costs against an item’s popularity, it made it easier to decide what stayed and what needed to go.

“We’re constantly refining our menu and we’re not afraid to take things off the menu and put new things on. Items identified as Super Stars—like our Raspberry Chicken Salad or our signature Elk Stroganoff—not only stay, they now get premium location on the menu.”

Location, Location, Location

What exactly is the best spot on any menu? As Hans Lenzlinger learned with his Sauerbraten entrée, it’s the upper right-hand corner.

“Whether you’re talking about the wallboard menu at a quick-serve restaurant or a supper club in the North Woods,” Rapp says, “the prime real estate on a menu is the upper right-hand corner. That’s where you place the item you most want to sell. To make it even more prominent, put it in a box.”

Beyond that, Rapp recommends placing items into categories, so diners who came looking for seafood or a burger can find it easily. Then, within each category, list your most important food items at the top of that category.

“The eye is lazy,” he says. “It goes to the easiest thing to find on a page. The



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easier you make it for the customer, the more time they have their eye on things that will increase sales.”

Alaa Musa, owner of Casablanca Restaurant in Milwaukee, took Rapp’s advice. “The importance of where an item was located on the menu was a new concept to us. Typically, our menu was top to bottom, left to right. Now dishes like our signature Casablanca Combination—a customer favorite that carries a good profit margin—get the prime real estate.

“Most of us in the industry got into this business because we love food and love what we do,” continues Musa. “But we still have to make a living at it. Learning about the psychology of menus helps more than I realized.”

Rearranging menu items and removing the “dogs” from the menu makes room for new additions. Newly added items, in turn, foster more return visits.

“You want to keep your regular customers interested in coming back,” Musa adds. “When we started planning our new menu, I spoke to our regulars and asked what they’d like to see on our menu that wasn’t there now. They consistently mentioned seafood.

“We’ve been around for 20 years,” he continued, “but we never offered seafood. We began to offer several seafood entrees as specials to further test interest. They were a huge hit. People would ask, ‘When is that item going on the menu permanently?’ We got the message. On the new menu we’re about to bring out, we’ve added a full seafood

Before



After

section, prepared with our unique Middle Eastern flair.”

What’s in a Name

How food is described on a menu is another under-utilized way to grow sales and build repeat business, according to food researcher Brian Wansink. In his book *Mindless Eating; Why We Eat More Than We Think*, Wansink claims better descriptions—such as saying “succulent Italian

Seafood fillet”—can increase sales by 27%.

“If labels accurately describe the taste, smell and mouth feel of a menu item,” he says, “customers will be more able to picture themselves buying and enjoying it. It enhances a customer’s perception of quality and value, too.”

When a person can’t decide between three items because of the tantalizing descriptions, it also increases the likelihood of a return visit. The restaurateur of course, is responsible for delivering on the customer’s higher expectations.

When it comes to crafting the actual descriptions, menu engineer Rapp believes restaurateurs are their own best copywriters.

“Restaurateurs write about food from the heart; copywriters don’t have that same love affair with food. Even if you’re not a writer, talk about each menu item into a tape recorder. Talk about it from your heart. What do you love about that item? You can always get help later refining the copy.”

Bill Brakken, owner of The Rookery Pub at his Cable Nature Lodge in Cable, takes the principle one step further. “We highlight on the menu 12 local producers from whom we buy—places like Bullfrog Fish Farm or North Star Bison or Six Rivers Co-op for produce. We say things like, ‘Fettuccine noodles with DragSmith Farm vegetables.’ or ‘Green Tea cured Iowa pork loin with haricot vert, spaetzle, and Door County cherry gastrique.”

“When customers see top-drawer names and descriptors sprinkled throughout the menu,” Rapp adds, “they’re more likely to believe that all the items on your menu are of higher quality.”

The Playbook for Pricing

One of the most common mistakes restaurateurs make on their menus, according to Rapp, is where and how they show prices.

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Menu

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- Gregg Rapp

two spaces and the one or two digit price of the food item. Remove the dollar signs. It softens the price. Think about it. Dozens of dollars signs all over the menu? It’s a negative. Dollar signs

draw attention to money rather than food.”

Kevin Quinn not only follows Rapp’s advice in his Green Bay restaurant, he has also changed all their prices from ending in .95 to .99.

“A \$6.95 item is now \$6.99,” Quinn says. “We think it’s a less noticeable way to raise prices. You wouldn’t think it would make that much difference. However, we figured it out and realized it really added up over the year.”

Rapp also recommends using actual prices—even if they fluctuate—rather than saying “market price” or some comparable wording on higher-ticket items. It may help build the average check because “Guests may not order the most expensive menu item, but frequently they will order the second-most-expensive option.”

Don’t be afraid to have a little fun on the menu, too. Bill Brakken remembers how Gregg Rapp described a playful menu item called the Super Duper Steak. It carried a \$50,000 price tag because it came with a yacht.

“We were all over that idea,” Brakken said, “and decided to try something

similar with one of our signature items, the Rookery Salad. In addition to the regular version, we offered a Rookery Salad Supreme Edition for \$230.00. It includes the salad plus nine weekly farm share baskets for 2-3 people from DragSmith Farms.

“People who bought the Supreme Edition come in every week to pick up their basket of produce and stay to have an additional meal with us. We don’t really make any more money on it off the baskets, but customers love the idea. It’s created a lot of good buzz and repeat business.”

“All your problems go away with high volume,” Rapp concludes, “so the more people we can get into the restaurant the better. People sit at home watching the Food Network and then come into your restaurant expecting great things. The right menu helps convince them they’ve made the right decision.” **WR**

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