

How to Optimize Your Restaurant Menu



**Top 10 Menu Engineering
Tips**

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Introduction

As a restaurant owner, you probably think a lot about your food, your team, and keeping customers happy. But one thing that often gets overlooked is the menu itself. It might seem like just a list of what you serve - but it's actually one of the most powerful tools you have.

Studies show that smart **menu design can boost restaurant profits by up to 15%**. That's a big deal, especially in a business where every dollar counts. If some of your dishes aren't selling, cost too much to make, or aren't priced right, your menu could be quietly eating into your profits.

In this guide, you'll learn 10 practical tips to help you improve your menu - based on real restaurant results. These ideas can help you **sell more, waste less, and make your guests even happier**.

Let's get into it.



Tip 1: Understand Menu Engineering Fundamentals

Before you can improve your menu, you need to understand how it's really performing. That's where menu engineering comes in. It's a simple way to look at how each menu item is doing based on two things: **how popular it is** and **how profitable it is**.

Think of it like this:

- **Stars** are your best items. They sell well and have a high profit margin. Keep them on the menu and make sure they're easy to find.
- **Plowhorses** are popular but don't make you much money. They might need a price adjustment or a cheaper ingredient swap.
- **Puzzles** have high profit but don't sell much. These might just need better placement or a more appealing name or description.
- **Dogs** are low in both sales and profit. It's usually best to remove or replace them.

To figure this out, you'll need to gather some basic data: how much each dish costs to make and how often it sells. You can use a simple spreadsheet, or your POS system.

Once you sort your menu items into these four categories, it's much easier to know what changes will actually help your restaurant grow.



Tip 2: Analyze Your Menu Data Like a Pro

Making smart changes to your menu means looking closely at the numbers behind each dish. Instead of guessing what sells or makes money, you want to base your decisions on real facts.

Start by checking your sales records or receipts to see which menu items are ordered the most. This tells you which dishes are popular. Then, figure out how much it costs to make each item by adding up the prices of all the ingredients. Subtract the cost from the menu price to find out how much profit each dish brings.

For example, if a pasta dish sells for \$16 but costs \$6 to prepare, **you're making \$10 on each order.** If it's also a top seller, that's a strong dish to promote. But if you have a dish that's expensive to make and doesn't sell often, it may be dragging down your profits.

This table helps track and compare profitability using basic sales and cost data.

Menu Item	Sales Volume	Food Cost	Menu Price	Profit Margin
Cheeseburger	150	\$3.50	\$12.00	\$8.50
Caesar Salad	60	\$4.00	\$11.00	\$7.00

It might take some time to gather all this information, but even a simple spreadsheet or notebook can help you keep track. Once you have these numbers, you can sort your menu items into groups based on popularity and profitability. This helps you know which dishes to keep, adjust, or remove.

Tip 3: Identify Your Most and Least Profitable Items

Once you've gathered data on how often each dish sells and how much profit it makes, the next step is to categorize your menu items. This helps you see which ones are helping your business and which might be holding you back.

Start by sorting your dishes into four groups



Stars

01

These are your winners. They sell a lot and bring in high profits. Make sure these dishes are easy to find on your menu, and consider highlighting them to encourage more orders.



Plowhorses

02

These sell well but don't make much profit. They might have high ingredient costs or low prices. Look for ways to reduce costs or adjust prices without upsetting your customers.



Puzzles

03

These have high profit but don't sell often. It could be because guests don't notice them or the description doesn't appeal. Try moving these items to a better spot on your menu or rewriting their descriptions to make them more tempting.



Dogs

04

These items don't sell much and don't make money. Usually, it's best to remove them to save kitchen time and reduce waste.

Tip 4: Use Strategic Pricing to Boost Margins



Pricing your menu items isn't just about covering costs and adding a simple markup. How you price can affect how customers see your food and what they decide to order. Smart pricing helps increase your profits without scaring away guests.

One effective approach is to look at pricing psychology. For example, **prices ending in .99 or .95 often feel more appealing than round numbers**, even if the difference is just a few cents. Another trick is to include a few **higher-priced "decoy" items**. These make other dishes seem more reasonable, encouraging guests to spend a bit more.

Avoid listing prices in a column because it makes customers focus only on cost. Instead, placing prices **next to each item or at the end of a description** can encourage them to consider the whole dish instead of just the price.

You can also consider price anchoring by **grouping items at different price points**. For example, offering a premium steak next to a mid-range one makes the middle option feel like a good deal.

Finally, don't be afraid to raise prices carefully. Even a small increase **on popular items** can add up to significant extra revenue. Just be sure your quality and portions match the price so customers feel they're getting value.

Tip 5: Optimize Menu Layout and Design

How your menu looks can greatly influence what your customers order. People usually scan menus quickly rather than reading every word. Knowing where their eyes naturally go helps you place your best dishes where they'll be seen first. Here are the main points to focus on:



01 Place Key Items in Prime Spots

Studies show diners' eyes often go first to the **top right corner** of the menu. This is a great place to feature your most profitable or popular dishes. The **top left** and **center areas** also get a lot of attention, so use these spots wisely.



02 Use Highlights to Draw Attention

Use boxes, borders, or shading to make specials or top sellers stand out. But keep it clean—don't overcrowd the menu. A neat layout helps customers decide faster and feel less overwhelmed.



03 Choose Readable Fonts and Clear Pricing

Select simple, easy-to-read fonts. Prices should be visible but not distracting. Avoid fancy or all-caps fonts that can slow down reading or confuse guests.



04 Use Color Wisely

Warm colors like red and orange can increase appetite, but don't overuse them. Make sure colors match your restaurant's style and create a pleasant look.

By focusing on these four areas, your menu will guide guests toward your best items and improve their overall experience.

Tip 6: Write Menu Descriptions That Sell

The words you use to describe your dishes can make a big difference in what customers choose. Good descriptions help guests imagine the flavors and feel more excited about ordering. They can also make dishes seem more valuable, which helps justify your prices.

Here are some simple ways to write descriptions that sell

01

Be Specific

Avoid vague words like “delicious” or “tasty.” Instead, describe the main ingredients, cooking method, and flavors. For example, “Grilled chicken with garlic herb butter and roasted vegetables” is clearer and more tempting than just “grilled chicken.”

02

Keep It Short and Clear

Long descriptions can be overwhelming. Aim for one or two sentences that give enough detail without confusing or boring the reader.

03

Highlight Unique or Local Ingredients

Mentioning fresh, local, or special ingredients adds value and can make a dish stand out.

04

Use Sensory Language

Appeal to the senses by describing taste, texture, and aroma. Words like “crispy,” “juicy,” “spicy,” or “creamy” help customers imagine the dish.

05

Align With Your Brand

If your restaurant is casual, keep descriptions friendly and simple. For a fine dining spot, use more elegant language. Make sure the tone matches your style.

Tip 7: Reduce Menu Complexity Without Losing Appeal



It's tempting to offer lots of choices on your menu, thinking more options mean more customers. But having too many dishes can actually hurt your restaurant in several ways. It can slow down your kitchen, increase food waste, and confuse customers, making it harder for them to decide.

One common rule to follow is the **80/20 rule**: usually, about **20% of your menu items bring in 80% of your sales**. That means many dishes might not be worth the effort and cost to keep. Reducing your menu size can simplify kitchen prep, speed up service, and improve food quality because staff focus on fewer dishes.

When trimming your menu, look at your sales and profit data to spot the least popular or least profitable items. Also consider which dishes take too long to prepare or require special ingredients that aren't used often.

You don't have to remove all less popular items at once. Try testing by **removing one or two dishes and see how customers respond**. Sometimes, simplifying the menu can make it feel fresher and more focused, attracting guests who appreciate a clear, well-curated selection.

Remember, a smaller menu can actually boost guest satisfaction by **making choices easier and improving consistency**.



Tip 8: Leverage Seasonal and Limited-Time Offers (LTOs)

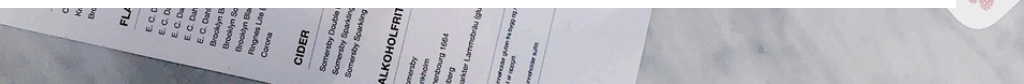
Adding seasonal or limited-time offers (LTOs) to your menu is a great way to keep things fresh and exciting for your customers. These special dishes can create a sense of **urgency, encouraging guests to visit sooner rather than later to try something new.** It also gives you a chance to test new recipes without committing to them long-term.

Seasonal items allow you to use **fresh, local ingredients that may be more affordable and of higher quality at certain times of the year.** This can help reduce costs and improve flavor, while also supporting local producers. Plus, customers often appreciate the feeling that your menu changes with the seasons, showing you care about freshness and variety.

When planning LTOs, choose items that are easy to **prepare and fit your kitchen's capacity.** Make sure the price reflects the value and exclusivity of the offer. Promote these specials clearly on your **menu and through your staff to build excitement.**

After the LTO period ends, review **how well the item sold and whether it made a good profit.** If it performed well, you might consider adding it permanently or bringing it back during the next season.

Using seasonal and limited-time offers thoughtfully can **boost sales, attract repeat customers, and keep your menu lively** without overwhelming your kitchen.



Tip 9: Train Your Staff to Support Menu Goals

Your staff can make a big difference in how well your menu performs. When servers know which dishes to promote and why, they can help guide customers to choices that boost your profits.

Here are four key steps to train your team effectively:



Educate on Menu Highlights

Teach your team about your most profitable and popular dishes—the “Stars” and “Puzzles.” Explain why these items matter so they can recommend them naturally.



Provide Regular Training

Hold regular sessions to update your staff on menu changes, new specials, and limited-time offers. Practice how to describe dishes and answer common questions confidently.



Encourage Feedback Sharing

Ask your staff to share what guests say about the menu. This feedback helps you understand what works and what might need tweaking.



Use Incentives and Recognition

Motivate your team by recognizing and rewarding those who do well at upselling or promoting key menu items. Positive reinforcement keeps everyone engaged.

By following these steps, your staff will feel more confident and motivated. That means better guest experiences and more sales for your restaurant.

Tip 10: Use QR Menus to Stay Flexible and Informed

QR menus have become common in restaurants, especially since the pandemic, but they're more than just a contactless way to share your menu—they can actually help you optimize your menu more easily and efficiently.

Here's how:



✓ Update Your Menu Instantly

With QR menus, you can make changes in real-time. Want to remove a low-selling item? Adjust a price? Add a limited-time offer? It can all be done in minutes without the cost or delay of printing new menus.

✓ Test and Learn Quickly

QR menus allow you to test different versions of a dish name, description, or placement to see what works best. You can switch layouts, highlight specials, or experiment with pricing and track customer response.



✓ Reduce Waste and Save Time

By making your menu flexible, you can adjust based on ingredient availability. This is especially useful for managing food costs, avoiding 86'd items, and keeping your kitchen running smoothly.



✓ Track Customer Behavior

Some digital menu systems can show you what customers click on the most, helping you understand what catches their attention—even if they don't order it.



Conclusion



Optimizing your restaurant menu is one of the smartest moves you can make to improve your business. It doesn't require a big budget or fancy tools—just a willingness to look closely at your menu, understand what's working, and make thoughtful changes. Here are the key takeaways to remember:

1. **Understand Menu Engineering Fundamentals** – Learn how to evaluate dishes based on popularity and profitability.
2. **Analyze Your Menu Data Like a Pro** – Use basic sales and cost info to understand what's really working.
3. **Identify Your Most and Least Profitable Items** – Sort items into categories to decide which to promote, adjust, or remove.
4. **Use Strategic Pricing to Boost Margins** – Apply smart pricing techniques to increase profits without scaring off customers.
5. **Optimize Menu Layout and Design** – Position high-margin items where they get the most attention.
6. **Write Menu Descriptions That Sell** – Use clear, sensory language that helps guests imagine the dish.
7. **Reduce Menu Complexity Without Losing Appeal** – Simplify your menu to cut costs, reduce waste, and improve quality.
8. **Leverage Seasonal and Limited-Time Offers (LTOs)** – Keep the menu exciting and flexible with short-term items.
9. **Train Your Staff to Support Menu Goals** – Make sure your team knows how to recommend the right items.
10. **Use QR Menus to Stay Flexible and Informed** – Make quick updates, test ideas, and track what catches attention.

Optimizing your menu is one of the easiest and most cost-effective ways to improve your restaurant's performance. Take it one step at a time, review your progress regularly, and keep learning what works best for your guests and your business.