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# THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO RESTAURANT MENU DESIGN — AND — CREATION

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## *Menu design is an art and a science.*

You've spent months mastering the perfect mix of spices, searching for a wine that brings out the flavors on the palate, teaching your staff how to replicate each new dish down to the finishing pinch of salt. In your mind, they are a work of art. The flavors sing. The sauces dance. Perfection. The night your new menu goes live, your heart is beating out of your chest. You can't wait for the first chit to come through. One does, and then another... then the rush hits and nothing. Not one order of any of your new creations. Not a single one.

The good news is, we're sure everyone would love the artfully, intentionally designed dishes... if only they'd been marketed properly. Welcome to the fickle world of menu engineering. It's at once an art, a science – and a headache if you don't know the basics. And yet, with a few simple restaurant menu design tips, you can ensure the dishes you want to be devoured actually get ordered, and you can also increase your profits. In fact, menu engineering is proven to increase profits by up to 15%.

In this Ultimate Guide, we'll take you through the fundamentals and best practices of menu design. With these restaurant menu design ideas, you'll be well on your way to benefitting from the strategic placement of your best sellers - with no dish left behind!



# Layout Design

## SQUARE PEG, ROUND HOLE

### Placement and categories

The stars are connected to the plow horses. The plow horses are connected to the puzzles. The puzzles are connected to the dogs. The dogs are connected to the... No idea what we're talking about? We digress.

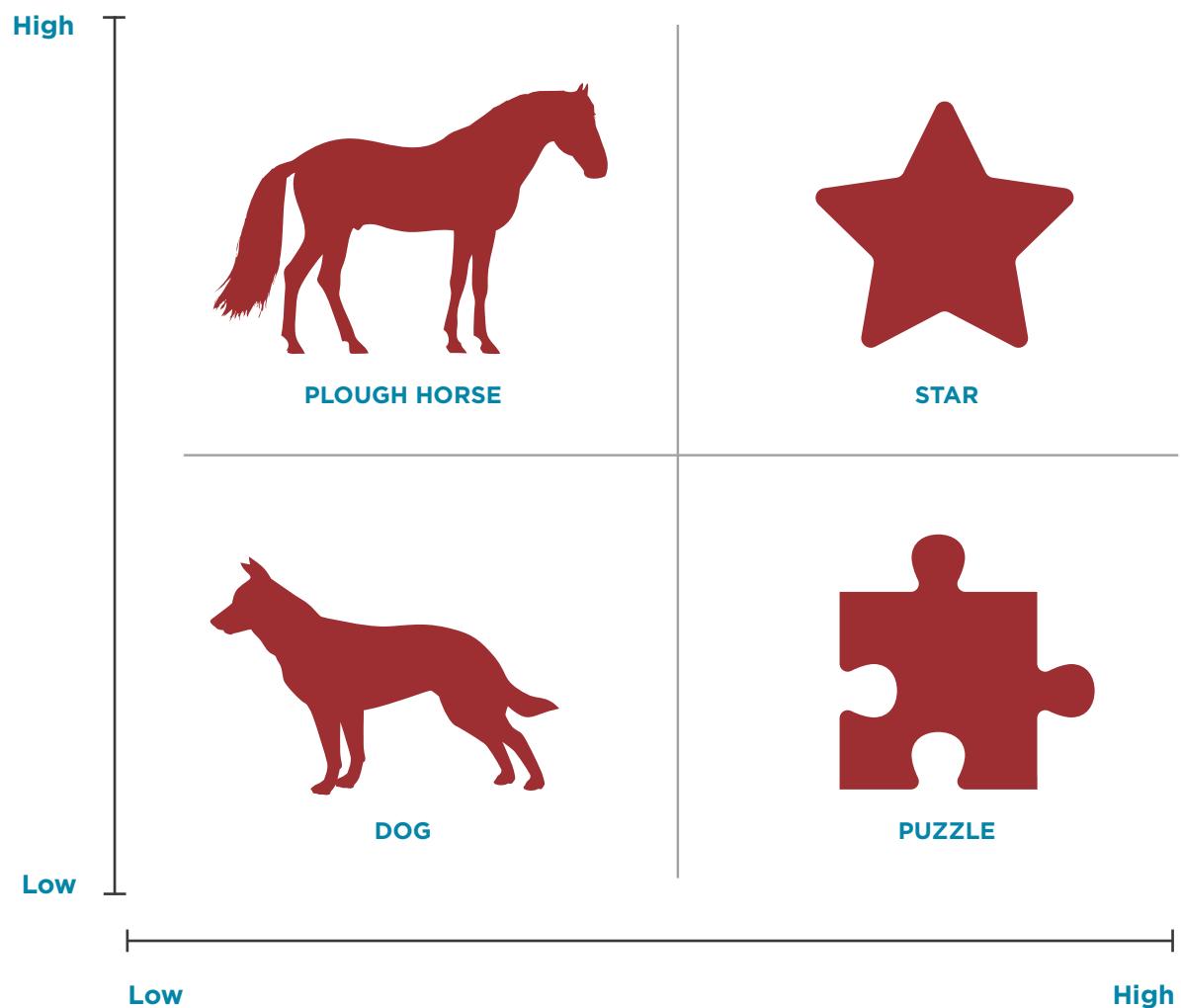
Menu engineering 101 is guided by four categories. To determine which menu item falls into which category, you must first do a cost and profitability analysis on each item, taking into consideration everything from the cost of individual ingredients to the item's forecasted sales. Modern POSs make this 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:** items that rank both high on the profitability scale and are also highly popular. These are the items you'll want to highlight on your menu.
- **Plow-horses:** dishes that might have low profitability but they rank high in popularity. They're popular so consider them keepers. You can experiment with these items to improve their profitability by using add-ons to increase your profits.
- **Puzzles:** the plates that appeal to only a certain few, but are highly profitable. To market these on your menus might be a dual effort of design and server sales. They're profitable so you won't want to lose them, but creative ways are needed to separate these from the pack and turn them into stars.
- **Dogs:** dishes that have both low profitability and low popularity. Every menu has its share of dogs and it's up to you to determine when to '86 an item. Any special emphasis should be avoided.



## MENU CLASSIFICATION CHART





## How much is too much?

So many dishes, such little space. If only there were a magic number of items to include in a category... Wait... there is!

It's 7. Seven appetizers, 7 entrees, 7 pizzas. Lucky number 7!

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." While, of course, sticking to what you know isn't always a bad thing – especially if the choice is a Star – but a well designed menu will entice guests to choose items higher on the profitability scale.

For many years, restaurants had long, extensive offerings under the ethos of "something for everyone" where more choices were theorized to appeal to more guests. But now, the layout design trend has changed, following a "less is more" philosophy. Having less not only makes it easier for guests to answer the classic question, "what are you getting?", but it also means less food waste and faster service. What's more, is that few choices also aid in marketing.

"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 more profits all around.



# Menu Titles

## WHAT'S IN A NAME? EVERYTHING!

### Placement and categories

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 menu titles, there are three creative menu naming strategies you should keep in mind when it comes to naming dishes:

- 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.

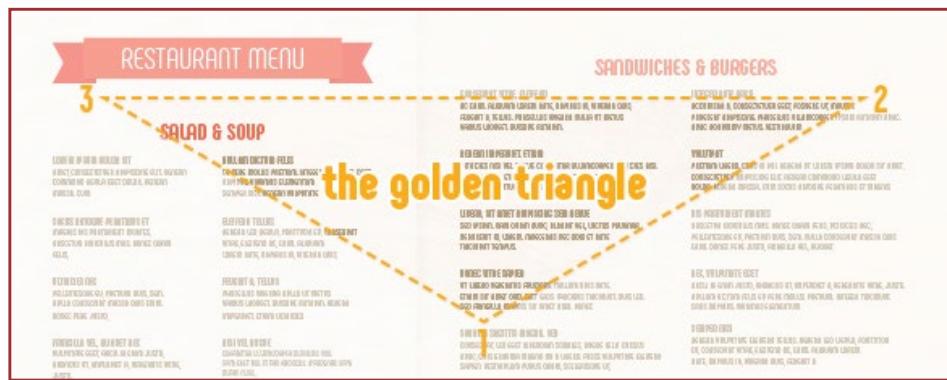


# Design

## JUDGING A RESTAURANT BY IT'S COVER

The menu is a map within itself. It has Bermuda triangles where dishes disappear and Alice in Wonderland signs that scream, “eat me”. When you’re designing your menu or noodling layout ideas, you’ll want to consider how the eye moves across the page.

**The golden triangle:** Also known as the “high rent” area of your menu, this is the centre block of a three column menu. The eye naturally gravitates here first. This is where you’ll want to place those revenue generating Stars and it’s a good place for Puzzles that you want to highlight.



**Negative Space:** Think of it 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.



**The Sweet Spot:** When looking at a menu, the eye moves easily to the top right, which is another hotspot for profit-generating dishes. Guests have been conditioned to know that this is where the main plates will be located. The sweet spot does change based on the layout of the menu. [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 menu 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



**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. The more boxes that litter a page, the less effective they will be.

**Images:** To 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%](#). As this [Design School article](#) asserts, “Whether or not photographs of dishes will be an effective addition to a menu depends largely on the type of restaurant. Pairing a photograph with every dish tends to be a technique associated with low-end or cheap venues, so high-end restaurants generally avoid the practice.”

But there is something to be said about the power of images. Essentially when we 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 that, “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 digital [iPad POS](#) menu so that servers can show the diners a visual 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.



**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 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 31,000 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 with the seasons. While a graphic designer who specializes in menu design and engineering is ideal, it's not always an option for a restaurant with an 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:





# Display Pricing

## TO \$ OR NOT TO \$

While service with a smile has some returns when it comes to influencing the dishes a guest chooses, your menu might actually have more sway. Here are a couple of strategies 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.



# Conclusion

When it comes to menu design, design practices evolve as trends do. There's no single recipe or magic concoction of words or a single practice that will ensure your profit generating items get ordered. However, by keeping tabs on your costs, items that are selling and not selling, and viewing your menu as a living, breathing, constantly changing thing, you can become more agile and better able to adapt to customers' changing tastes.

Now that we've told you what to do, one last piece of sage advice: always, ALWAYS proofread. Or you risk ending up with one of these restaurant translation fails: [stir-fried wikipedia](#) with pimentos, anyone?



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