

Joel Feigenheimer Interview – Menu Planning

What are necessary concepts to consider before planning a menu?

Answer: I don't know if the word is concepts, but there are several issues to decide prior to planning a menu. For example, you need to consider the basic constraints of the physical plant of the operations.

Is it large enough to handle the menu you desire?

Are there special equipment needs that must be addressed prior to menu implementation?

Is the restaurant too large to build an intricate menu?

Is it too small to drive volume for a less expensive menu?

What about the expertise of the ownership or management?

Do they know about the food they want to market on the menu?

Is the menu too specialized to be commercially successful?

Is the menu priced correctly to make a profit?

Can the items be easily changed in case of drastic product price swings?

Do the menu choices reflect the concept? Are they the right price? The right quality?

Are the menu choices operationally valid? Can they be completed timely and w/ consistent quality?

How/why do menu and cover size matter? (Physically speaking)

Answer: Menu and cover size only matter as it relates to whether they fit w/ the concept. Does the size of the cover work for the guests?

If you have an elderly clientele can they handle a bulky menu?

If it's a kids place do they need a huge menu?

Is it part of the décor to have a physically large menu?

Are you using that menu size to promote your business properly or it is a billboard for Coke, Pepsi or other vendors who have paid for placement?

What are the benefits to your operation by using an oversized menu?

Does it increase perceived value or benefit to the guest in some way?

Why is it important to limit the menu size? (Does it have negative outcomes?)

Answer: The offerings on a menu only need to be limited by the operational expertise. If the concept calls for a huge menu, then it works if the operation can produce a large menu w/ consistent quality. If the concept calls for a small, intricate menu then again, that should meld together with what the guest is expecting when they walk in the door. A successful example of a large menu might be Cheesecake Factory/ Grand Lux Café or even T.G.I.Fridays to an extent. These operations have large menus. Cheesecake does an amazing job at delivering a consistent product to their guests. The operational logistics to push out quality fresh food is daunting. Many operations w/ large menus use frozen or pre-made products so that they can have inventory of everything on their menu. Very few companies have been able to copy Cheesecake's ability to deliver fresh food with so many items.

Larger menu offerings often mean more inventory, higher carrying and production costs and higher food costs. More spoilage, more chances for errors as staff may not be familiar with all the items because they aren't produced on a regular basis. If a guest orders a low usage item on a large menu, the consistency between cooks made not be where it is expected.

If you limit the menu, which all operations must do to some extent, you do limit your guest choices. However one only needs to look at Houston's to see a company that offers a relatively small menu, but where each item is of above average quality on a consistent basis.

What is the most difficult part of menu planning?

Answer: Menu planning is somewhat like building a jigsaw puzzle. It's not difficult, but it can be intricate.

Do your menu items match the concept?

Do they align with the service and physical plant?

Can your team produce the menu as you designed it and consistently deliver quality product?

Some might consider the "difficult" part of menu planning being the item costing. It is not hard, but it is extraordinarily critical to know your costs on EVERY menu item.

I think the most difficult part is when you work hard on product and recipes and then people come to taste and review. Then they tear apart all your work. This doesn't taste right...this doesn't look right...etc. You and your team have put work into making a quality menu presentation and then everyone gets to take shots at it. It is a necessary part of honing your menu, but it is hard to take that type of criticism of "your baby".

Have you experienced cases in the industry of menu planning that harmed/helped a business?

Answer: Menu planning can only help an operation. You must know prior to start up your hypothetical costs and to develop a base to compare against your actual operational performance. I believe any planning is better than none. However, one can certainly plan a menu poorly or without thought to new technologies such as preferential placements, guest manipulation and placement of profit driven

products. If the numbers don't work out, you have a blueprint via the menu to change costs and profit margins at your fingertips.

Pertaining to price changes, I have seen operators hike their pricing to adjust to "inflationary concerns" and their guests accept the change and I have seen other operator's tank within a matter of months after the change. Clearly the guests know when overall food inflation is moving upward or downward. So the question is not, can you raise prices, but how can you raise them and to what degree without affecting your client base?

I think all of us are living through a financial era where we see menu planning decisions affecting operations today. Those operations which had an expensive, image based menu are being pounded by decreased guest counts and lower sales. Other operators who were more "value" based in their offerings or in some cases, just the perception of value, are enjoying better financial performance as the public defines a new direction for what they expect in the food and beverage experience.

The guest will define the types of menus as they always have in the past. It is up to the savvy operator to perceive those changing desires and be able to bring a quality product to the market place in a marketable and profitable manner.

How has menu writing and planning changed in the time period in which you have been working in the industry?

Answer: Menu planning is much more about merchandising and guest manipulation. In the past, owner/operators put items on their menus which they thought would sell and which the restaurant could produce on a quality basis.

Now menus are reviewed by focus groups, they are tweaked and re-tweaked. Menus have been deconstructed to see where a guest's eyes go first, second and third. Studies have been completed on font size for best presentation. There are opinions on how to present pricing (for example, is the price in numbers or spelled out) Are there dots from the menu item to the price or is the price adjacent to the item? Are the price points in dollars or do they include cents?

In most corporate type operations there is an emphasis on menu training for sales staff. After all, the menu is your sales tool for the restaurant. An operator must be confident that his sales staff can promote and highlight those items that properly represent their menu and operation as a whole.

Items are costed out and reviewed for pricing stability. Continuous feedback from the guest and POS reporting systems allow the operator to change the menu daily if needed, but certainly on a faster pace than in the past.

Printing systems are such that operators can often change their menu in house. No longer does the operator need to go to the printer, get bids, set type, review the proof and send it back. Printing was expensive and menus were often updated yearly instead of seasonally or shorter.

Now it's about staying ahead of trends. Buying what's fresh and reasonable. Take advantage of spot pricing while still delivering on quality product. With prices skyrocketing, menu planning, costing and merchandising are now required actions if an operator wishes to be truly successful.