

What Makes a Menu Design Truly Great?

A Consultant's Guide to High-Performance Menus

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A restaurant's menu is more than a list of dishes—it's the single most influential sales, branding, and operational tool in the business. A great menu drives revenue, shapes guest perception, streamlines service, and reinforces the restaurant's identity. After decades of consulting across restaurants, food trucks, hotels, and convenience-store foodservice, there is one truth I return to again and again: **a well-designed menu is one of the highest-ROI investments an operator can make.**

Here's what elevates a menu from "good enough" to strategically great.

1. Clarity and Readability Always Come First

A beautifully designed menu is useless if guests struggle to read or navigate it.

Great menus prioritize:

- Clean typography with strong contrast
- Logical section breaks (starters, salads, mains, signature items, beverages, etc.)
- Limited use of ALL CAPS (which slows reading)
- Bullet points or short descriptions rather than paragraphs
- A balance of white space to avoid crowding

Readability speeds decision-making, prevents order anxiety, and leads to higher average checks because guests actually see what you want them to buy.

2. Strategic Item Placement That Maximizes Profit

Menu design is psychology. Guests' eyes follow predictable patterns, and the best menus take advantage of this.

Key tactics include:

The Golden Triangle

Most readers' eyes go to:

1. **Top right** – highest-value real estate
2. **Top left**
3. **Center**

Prime these areas with your most profitable items—signature entrées, chef specialties, high-margin cocktails, desserts, or bundles.

Highlighting Winners

Use:

- Boxes
- Shaded backgrounds
- Icons/markers
- Photos (selectively, never too many)

These draw the eye and act as silent suggestive selling.

Decoy Pricing

Positioning one high-priced item near mid-priced items makes the latter feel more reasonable and increases sales.

3. Smart Category Engineering

Great menus are engineered—not just designed.

Operators should categorize every item by:

- **Profitability**
- **Popularity**
- **Operational difficulty**

This is the basis of *menu engineering*. Proper design ensures:

- Stars (high profit, high popularity) are showcased
- Plowhorses (high popularity, low profit) are portion- or price-adjusted
- Puzzles (high profit, low popularity) get better placement or storytelling
- Dogs (low profit, low popularity) are replaced, reformulated, or repositioned

This is one of the most valuable steps a consultant can provide.

4. Descriptions That Sell Without Overselling

The best menu writing is short, sensory, and honest.

Strong descriptions include:

- Flavor cues (“smoky,” “roasted,” “buttery,” “bright,” “crisp”)
- Key ingredients or techniques
- What makes the dish special

Avoid:

- Long paragraphs
- “Menu-speak” clichés
- Overpromising

Descriptions should make guests hungry—not confused.

5. Visual Hierarchy That Guides the Guest

Visual hierarchy is how you tell diners what matters most.

Great menus use:

- Larger headings for categories
- Slightly larger fonts for signature dishes
- Subtle bold text for high-value items
- Consistent spacing so the eye doesn’t jump
- Limited color palettes

The goal is intentional simplicity—not chaos.

6. Pricing That Makes Sense (and Makes Money)

Your menu design should remove price resistance and simplify choices.

Key principles:

- Avoid “price ladders” (items ordered by price instead of logic)
- Place prices after descriptions, not aligned in a column
- Consider “just-below pricing” (\$14.95 instead of \$15) only if aligned with your brand
- Bundle items where it genuinely adds value
- Engineer margins around operational realities (food cost, labor intensity, speed, space)

And above all: **never compete on price when you can compete on perceived value.**

7. Photography and Illustrations—Used Sparingly and Strategically

High-quality photography is powerful but risky.

Use photos when:

- You run a fast-casual or family concept
- You have signature items that sell extremely well visually
- Guests expect images (e.g., diners, pizzerias, QSR, food trucks)

Avoid them in upscale or chef-driven concepts unless they are exceptionally well done.

Illustrations, icons, and hand-drawn accents can add warmth without cheapening the brand.

8. Branding Consistency Across All Touchpoints

A great menu reinforces your brand identity.

Menus should match:

- The restaurant's logo
- Its interior design
- Uniform colors
- Tone of voice
- Menu boards, digital displays, and takeout menus
- Online ordering platforms

When a guest feels a consistent brand experience, they trust the pricing and the food more.

9. Operational Realism: The Secret Ingredient

The best menu design is useless if the kitchen can't execute it.

As consultants, we always consider:

- Ticket times
- Station capacity
- Prep labor
- Cross-utilization of ingredients
- Storage limitations
- Staff skill level

Operationally smart menus reduce labor strain, food waste, and errors—especially during peak hours.

10. Continuous Testing and Performance Monitoring

Great menus evolve.

Top operators test:

- Layouts
- Price changes
- Highlight boxes
- Removing or renaming items
- A/B testing online vs. in-house versions
- Usage heatmaps on digital menus

Small menu changes can produce **double-digit revenue improvements** without raising prices.

Final Thoughts

A great menu is a blend of psychology, design, and operational science. It should:

- Tell your brand story
- Guide guests effortlessly
- Maximize profit
- Reduce stress on your staff
- Deliver a cohesive, confident experience

When done right, it becomes your most powerful silent salesperson.