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Tweak the menu to maximize profits

Consultants advise operators to push drinks, drop dollar signs
BY MARK BRANDAU

Glowing reviews and good marketing are integral to a restaurant's success, but the menu may be the most important way a chef or owner impacts the customers. Consultants and academics agree that a little careful menu engineering, both in the mix of items offered and the way they're presented, goes a long way toward achieving success. Following are some tips to consider:

- **Balance your menu.** Offset the increased costs of premium menu items, which tend to be the least profitable, by using lower-priced ingredients such as chicken, fish, pasta, organ meats and more obscure cuts of beef, restaurant consultant Erik Blauberg says.

- **Add vegetarian or vegan dishes** to the mix. Vegetarian dishes, aside from being less expensive from a procurement and production basis, also mitigate the veto vote.

"Usually, if you have a vegan in your party, that will dictate where the party eats," Blauberg says. "They want to make sure everybody's going to be satisfied, so diversity is going to be very important on the menu."

- **Target menu price increases.** Restaurant coach David Scott Peters of Smile Button Enterprises

says raising menu prices across the board is a "Band-Aid approach." Instead, he suggests, consider hiking the price of your restaurant's signature bestseller slightly and getting rid of the dogs on your menu. If the signature item is as irresistible as it needs to be, Peters says, a small price increase with that dish could let restaurateurs hold the line on the rest of the menu.

- **Train, train, train.** Blauberg and Peters both stress that training servers to know everything about a restaurant's dishes is a crucial part of menu engineering. A knowledgeable, confident server not only can supplement menu descriptions with an effective explanation, but also knows how to upsell items.

- **Try a few subtle tricks.** Anecdotal evidence and empirical research show that how a menu is presented affects how guests perceive price and value. If a great picture accompanies a menu item, Peters says, that dish tends to sell more. He also suggests printing



Creative fixes to your menu can result in solid sales and happier guests.

the price of the item in a smaller font. A study conducted last year by The Culinary Institute of America and Cornell University showed that customers spent an average of 8 percent more when menus were printed without dollar signs or the word "dollars" in the list of prices. References to dollars, the schools found, "activated concepts of cost or price, initiated a pain of paying, and consequently caused guests to spend less."

- **Don't forget about beverages.** These typically are the highest-margin items on any menu and usually aren't included in prix-fixe meal deals. ■

10 | Feel your customers' pain

Service guru Brown says hire and train with empathy in mind
BY DINA BERTA

Operators who provide exceptional service have a better chance at surviving an economic downturn, even if they're experiencing lower customer traffic and spending, says "service guru" Bob Brown, owner of Bob Brown Service Solutions in Ashburn, Va. The author of the *Little Brown Book of Restaurant Success* and the *Big Brown Book of Managers' Success*, Brown has been consulting with restaurant and hotel operators for the past seven years. He pioneered Marriott's Service Excellence program and today works with such clients as Disney, Nordstrom, Hilton, Morton's of Chicago and Olive Garden, among others. When consulting on service issues, Brown often draws on his highly successful experience as a waiter. He earned \$60,000 a year in tips working at Washington, D.C.'s famed Paolo's in Georgetown during the late 1980s. Brown recently released a training program on DVD, "The Seven Keys of Beverage Sales Success."



What do operators need to do to improve service, particularly during a recession?

Diners are looking for a break from the bad news — for a cocoon of warmth and kindness. Providing a safe haven through artful and empathetic service is the key to gaining their gratitude and loyalty.

Can a manager teach empathy?

It's a talent, not something you can train, so hiring is critical. Owners and managers can get the pick of the litter now. Applicants are showing up for host positions in suits and with resumes in hand.

How does empathy make a difference?

We're hearing stories about people not tipping as much.

However, I have a friend who works at a Morton's in Georgetown. Because he is so caring and kind and thoughtful to customers who used to buy a lot of stuff, but now are not, they leave him a bigger tip.

OK, say I've got a staff of very empathetic servers, what else can I do as a manager or owner to help them improve their skills?

Build their knowledge of the food and how it is prepared. Encourage them to offer concierge level service — to know the neighborhood, the city, to be able to recommend fun things to do. Know current events; know what is happening in the world. It gives people an opportunity to have a conversation.

People are not getting the emotional break they need. They come in, eat, and they go. When two people empathize — whether it's the server with a guest or a manager with a server — something magical happens. Even healing happens. That lifts us and keeps us going, and lets us know that we're all in this together. ■