



Give Your Menu a Performance Review

Hard-working employees are worth their weight in gold to any business and often pull more than their share of the load on the service floor, in the dish room, bar or kitchen. Unproductive workers, on the other hand—those who show up but don't contribute anything positive—can drag everyone else down, hurt morale and ultimately need to be let go.

Managers are used to evaluating their employees in terms of productivity and return on investment in training and development. They can and should also periodically apply similar evaluation criteria to their menus. Thinking of individual items as “employees” and judging their contributions can offer great insight as to how hard your menu is working for you. Specifically, evaluate which “employees” are the stars deserving of more recognition and promotion and which are the slackers that should be let go.

There are many methods commonly used to analyze menus. One that foodservice distribution leader Sysco Corp., Houston, uses with its operator customers during business reviews relies on a matrix system that gives immediate visual cues as to how hard individual menu items are working. The process involves evaluating menu items on criteria including number sold, popularity percentage, food cost, sell price, food cost percent, and total cost, revenue and profit. Items are placed in the matrix, which has four quadrants labeled Stars, Puzzles, Plow Horses and Dogs, based on how they score on these factors.

Stars, those items contributing both high gross profit and high sales contribution, can be better emphasized and promoted by the staff and through highlighting on the menu. Puzzles, those items that contribute good gross profit but lower sales, and Plow Horses, those with strong sales but low gross profit, can be tweaked accordingly. Dogs, items with weak sales and weak gross profit, should be shown the door.

Ari Weinzweig, founder partner in the Zingerman's businesses based in Ann Arbor, MI., including Zingerman's Deli, Zingerman's Roadhouse restaurant and ZingTrain consulting, says the ability to look at product offerings objectively can directly impact profitability. When chefs or managers really like a particular item and want it on the menu because it fits an emotion-based ideal of what they want to serve, they can wind up pouring resources into items that customers just aren't buying. You have to

periodically look at the numbers supporting individual items and engineer the menu accordingly, he says.

Such a process can be enlightening, agrees Tim Erickson, owner of Jolly Bob's, a popular Caribbean-theme restaurant in Madison, WI. "Our Jerk Chicken, for instance, has always been a no-brainer for us," he says. "It's our biggest seller and among our most profitable entrees. We've always downplayed it in part because it sold itself. Instead we worked hard promoting other items that we felt should be as popular but didn't sell as well. Looking at it through the lense of menu analysis, we realized that we should be putting the Jerk Chicken on a pedestal and letting it work even harder for us."

Just as you would do with employees, conducting detailed performance reviews of your menu is simply good management. But, of course, it's just the first step. Acting on the information and insights gathered is the next important step. Do you promote the Stars, tweak the Puzzles and Plow Horses, and fire the Dogs, or continue doing business as usual?