



# Engineer Your Menu

**Sell your most profitable items with a strategic menu design.** By Matt Alderton

MENUS ARE LIKE REAL ESTATE. THE BEST PIECES OF land should go to a restaurant's most profitable items, according to restaurant consultant Gregg Rapp.

Rapp is a menu engineer based in Palm Springs, Calif., and the author of *How to Turn Your Menu into a Bestseller*. He has been engineering menus for profitability, upselling their most profitable items and down-selling their least profitable for 25 years. *SAM'S CLUB® Source™* spoke with Rapp to find out what makes menu magic for your bottom line.

**SAM'S CLUB Source:** What is menu engineering?

**Rapp:** Engineering is the layout. It encompasses how a person looks at the menu, how they hold the menu and, of course, what they order. A key ingredient is, once you find a winner on your menu, extending it into other items to make it a super signature item. It's similar to the way a grocery store shelf is engineered: Grocers place products they want to move at eye-level. Grocery store shelves are about 50 years ahead of restaurants in understanding how a person buys.

**SAM'S CLUB Source:** What is the most important part of a menu?

**Rapp:** The descriptions; its flavors and tastes. The more items that entice a person, the better the restaurant and the more the customer will return.

You should describe your items with descriptions that will excite and entice your customers. The better an item sounds, the more value you're adding to it. The more you talk about it, the less it costs. If you just say, "Hamburger, \$15.95," it sounds expensive. But if you say, "Hamburger: Made from premium Kobe beef, hand-massaged in the mountains of Japan," all of a sudden that \$15.95 hamburger sounds like a bargain. A better description will pull the perceived cost down and add value.

**SAM'S CLUB Source:** How does the feel of a menu make a difference to the diner?

**Rapp:** If I hand you a big padded book, and you open it up and it's an italic type and you can hardly read it, you don't have to look at the price. You know that's expensive. So a menu helps drive home and support your concept. Your concept is developed by your advertising, your interior, your logo, your building, your food and your chef. Everything adds up. The more you develop your concept, the better your brand will be.

**SAM'S CLUB Source:** What are restaurateurs' most common menu mistakes?

**Rapp:** They'll put leader dots out there, and then they'll list the prices. So the person then shops the prices. They'll shop the price list, then look over at the items. If you list it with leader dots, it forces you to look at that side, because the right-hand side is more powerful than the left-hand side.

Another mistake is focusing on food cost rather than profit. I don't care about food cost percentage; I look at dollars and cents instead of percentages. A steak may run 40 percent or 50 percent food cost, but if it's bringing in more money than a pasta dish, that's what I want to sell. It's called food cost myopia; they can't look past that cost percentage.

**SAM'S CLUB Source:** How can restaurateurs use their menus to increase the bottom line?

**Rapp:** Categorize it. Use categories like "Steaks," "Seafood" and "Chicken," because then a person doesn't have to read the whole menu to get what he wants.

**SAM'S CLUB Source:** How often does a restaurant need to revisit its menu?

**Rapp:** I recommend every six months for prices and items. Some do it daily. For a new menu concept, I recommend at least

**"Strategically lay out your menu, just as a grocery store strategically lays out its shelves."**

**SAM'S CLUB Source:** What is the most overlooked element of menu design?

**Rapp:** Layout. You want to lay your menu out according to what you want to sell. I can tell you, for instance, that you put your most profitable category in the upper right-hand corner. I can tell you, too, that you put your most profitable items in the first, second and third spots on your menu.


Let's say we have a soup-and-salad special at \$4.95. That pulls people into the restaurant. If you put it in a prominent spot, they'll order it right after they sit down. Instead, you want them to read your menu. Put your most profitable items in the most prominent spots; if they have to search a little bit harder for the soup-and-salad special, they may find something else they want to order while they're looking.

Every restaurant is different with its costs and its sales mix; otherwise it would be simple. But it's not. You should lay your menu out according to what your costs are, what your pricing is, the neighborhood that you're in and how much you can charge.

every three years. And that's the look of the menu, the design of the menu. Some of the chains do this every six months.

It's important to remember that a menu can be verbal, a menu can be a chalkboard, a menu can be a special sheet, it can be a menu board on a wall. All of these can be engineered for profitability.

**SAM'S CLUB Source:** Should independent restaurateurs hire a menu engineer?

**Rapp:** Yes, it does make sense to hire a menu engineer. Or to at least strategically lay out your menu, floor plan and how it sells to each and every customer that walks in the door. In my business, I guarantee the restaurant will be up \$1,000 in profit in the first month, or I refund the fees. And in 15 years, no one's ever asked for their fees to be returned. 

For more information on menu engineering, visit Rapp online at [www.menutechnologies.net](http://www.menutechnologies.net).

Matt Alderton is a Chicago-based writer and editor.