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The Psychology of Menu Design: Reinvent Your 'Silent Salesperson' to Increase Check Averages and Guest Loyalty

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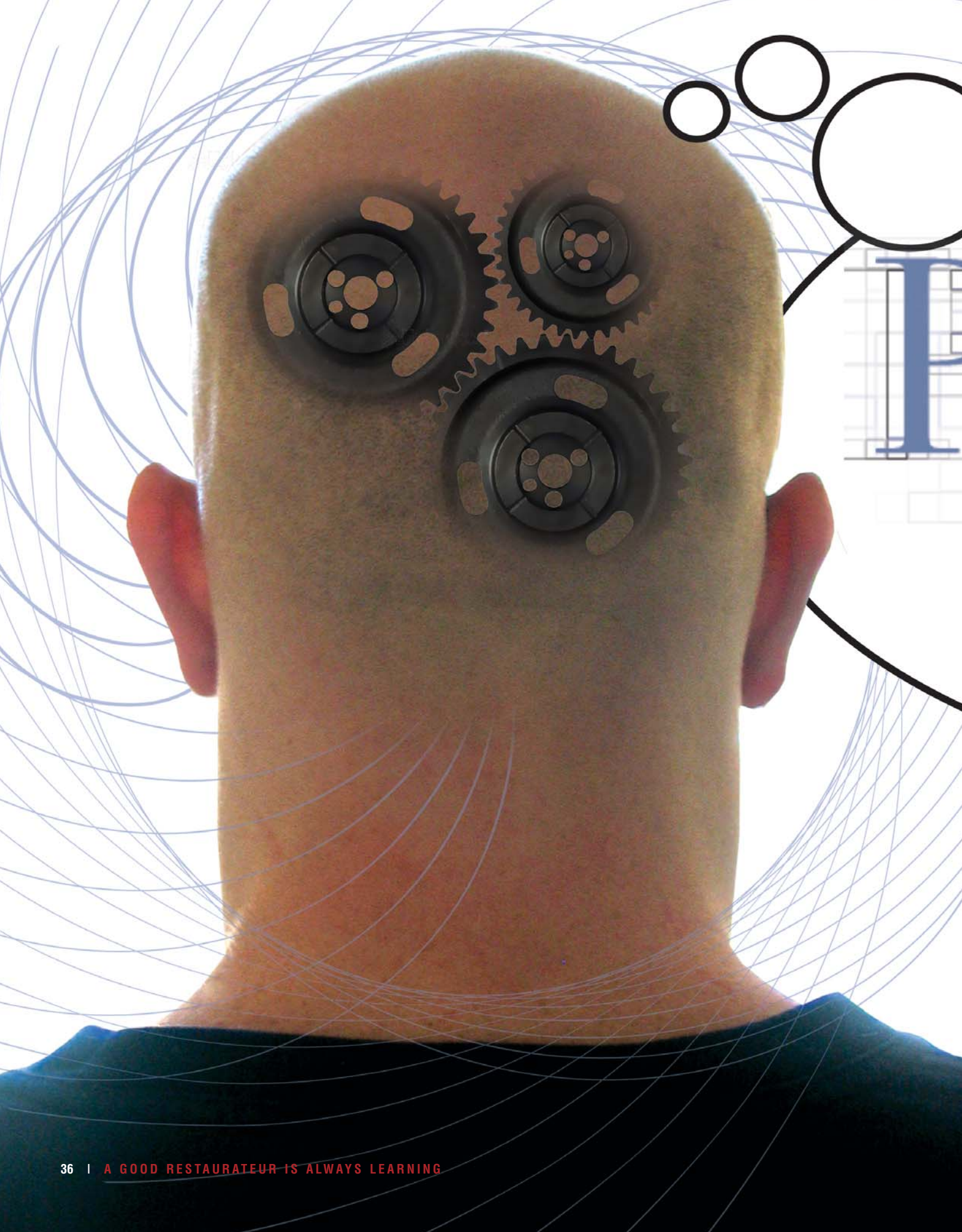
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The Psychology of Menu Design

Reinvent Your 'Silent Salesperson' to Increase Check Averages and Guest Loyalty

The menu is the most important internal marketing and sales tool a restaurant has to market its food and beverage to customers. It is the only piece of printed advertising that you are virtually 100 percent sure will be read by the guest. Once placed in the guest's hand, it can directly influence not only what they will order, but ultimately how much they will spend. Menu design directly influences sales revenue. Management is constantly forecasting business volume to estimate how much to buy, keep in inventory, and prepare. A properly designed menu makes these kinds of decisions easier and more accurate.

A well-designed menu can educate and entertain the customer as well as be a communication, cost control, and marketing tool for your restaurant. The menu is designed to help the guest decide what to order. When you strategically place menu items on the menu, you will sell more of them than if you placed them randomly.

Well-designed menus market the food the restaurant prepares best and wants to sell by making those items stand out from the others. This article will discuss menu design techniques to help you increase the effectiveness of your "silent salesperson" to boost check averages and guest loyalty.

Your Restaurant's Business Card

The menu design must be congruent with the concept and image of the restaurant and effectively communicate the overall dining experience to the guest. Think of your menu as your restaurant business card. It introduces the customer to your restaurant, and its design should complement the décor, service, food quality, and price range of the restaurant. The menu design should incorporate the colors and graphics that the customer sees from the table. A properly designed menu can help any restaurant — whether it be a fine-dining, casual-theme, fast-casual concept, or fast-food —

achieve its sales goals, keep its costs in line, increase its speed of preparation and service, and return a desired average check. This does not happen by accident; it must be planned during the design of the menu or menu boards.

Too often menus are not given the time and budget that such an important marketing tool deserves. Many of the popular and high-volume dinner houses have menus that if their logo and name were removed, the image created in your mind from the menu would be severely understated to the extent that you might not even consider going there to eat. One of the services provided to out-of-town visitors by hotel concierges is making recommendations and reservations at local restaurants. They often display menus for the benefit of visitors, who make dining decisions solely on the basis of the menu.

The same care, time and effort should be given to the task of menu design and production as is given to the design and décor of the dining room and kitchen. The menu content is the product of the chef and owner who have in many instances spared no expense in the dining room décor and the kitchen equipment. They are highly respected professionals in the restaurant community and yet their menu design gives the impression that they ran out of money or that the menu design was just an afterthought. Considering how much the restaurant depends on the menu, it is astonishing that many menus do not reflect the level of professionalism and knowledge of the owners, chefs and managers.

More and more restaurant companies have come to realize and understand the importance of proper menu design on check averages. Several years ago, Houlihan's revamped its menu with the goal of increasing check averages. The menu was designed to lead the customer from the specialty drinks on the cover to appetizers on the first page to the complete dinners inside. Its old menu, by contrast, lumped all types of items next to one another on the same large fold-out page. This, it was felt, might have somewhat deflected dinner sales by making it easy for the customer to select only an appetizer.

Menu Psychology

An article in *The Wall Street Journal* told of restaurants that designed their menus to highlight the most profitable offerings. These menu items were also hyped by servers when asked to recommend a dish by a guest. Techniques such as highlighting items have been used for years in the retail sector. Their store window, counter, and mannequin displays have been used to promote clothing and merchandise. They found that if a customer notices the merchandise it greatly increases the likelihood that they will make a purchase. If they never noticed the merchandise, there is zero possibility of purchase. Adapting this merchandizing theory to menu design, restaurant operators can boost sales of high-profit/low-cost items by highlighting them on their menus. This is called "menu design psychology" or "menu psychology." What we are essentially saying is that the design of the menu can have a subtle effect on what customers will eventually order. The menu is to a restaurant what the merchandise display is to a major department store. You want the customer to see all the things you have for sale in the hope that they see something they like and ultimately make a purchase.

The concept of menu psychology was introduced to the industry in the writings of the late Albin Seaberg, in his book, "Menu Design," published in 1971. He pointed out the importance of designing a menu in such a way that you get the customer's attention and raise the odds that they will select certain items more than others. Too often the menu design was left to the printer or graphics specialist without any input from the restaurant manager. Knowledge of these "menu psychology" techniques will greatly improve the design of any menu.

109 Seconds and Counting

Several years ago, Gallup reported that most customers will spend an average of 109 seconds reading a menu. This is the time limit you have to get your message to them. The time it takes to read a menu and make a decision needs to be addressed in your menu design and presentation. Over the years, restaurants like Bennigan's, TGI Friday's, and The Cheesecake Factory have been known for their multipaged menus and extensive listings of menu items. If it takes longer to make a purchase decision, it will lengthen your table turnover times, especially with first-time guests. With the information on menu item sales being quickly and easily assembled through point-of-sale computers, the number of selections and pages have been greatly reduced because they found that 60 percent to 70 percent of their sales came from fewer than 18-24 menu items. It did not make sense to have 50-100 different choices. Not only did they shorten the order-taking time, they reduced inventory and purchases.

Considering the importance of the menu sales mix in the smooth and efficient operation of the restaurant, it behooves all restaurant operators to learn the various techniques of menu design so they can be incorporated into their next menu design. A properly designed menu can direct the attention of the diner to specific items and increase the likelihood that those items will be ordered. These items should be the ones with the highest gross profit, lowest food costs and help achieve the average check needed to return the desired sales. In addition, degree of preparation difficulty should be factored into your menu evaluation. If an item cannot be prepared in 10-12 minutes or it requires multiple steps and needs to be moved between more than two stations or employees before it gets to the pickup window, it may not be one of the items you want to prominently display on your menu. This being said, while menu design and placement of items on the menu can influence the customers' decision, it will not influence customers to purchase items that they do not want. Menu design can help increase the odds of an item's selection.

Highlighting and arrows have long been used by retailers to bring attention to specials. Why not do the same in your menu?

About the Primacy and Recency Theory

Most people do not "read" a menu from page to page. Instead, they "scan" the menu with their eyes. Therefore, if you want to feature specific menu items, they need to be placed where the eye goes first. Do not leave this to chance. The use of "eye magnets" helps direct the gaze of the reader to that particular section. The eye can be drawn by treating a particular section of the menu differently from the rest. Perhaps you put a box around your appetizers or use a larger or different color type font to make a menu description stand out from the rest. Dot-matrix background screens can also be effective as well as using icons or symbols to the left of the menu description. They have been used to designate "Heart healthy," "low carbohydrate," or "Spicy Hot" items. However, use these techniques sparingly because it you overuse them, you diminish the ability to direct attention to specific items.
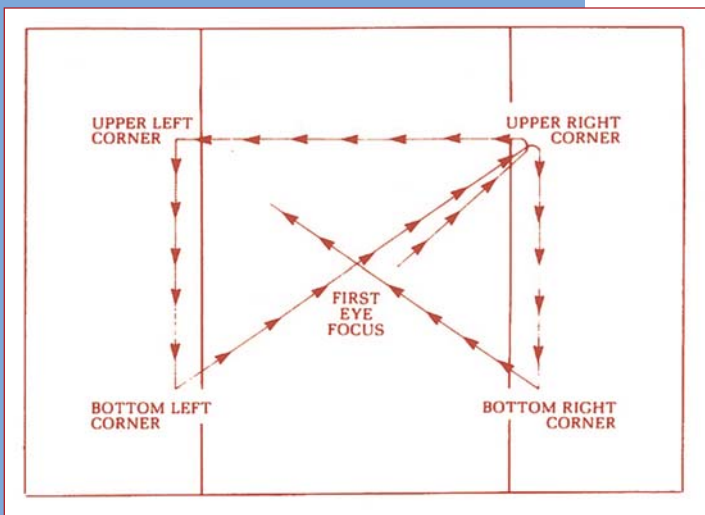
This is the typical eye movement over a three-panel, two-fold menu; however, the pattern of eye movement is not fixed and can be altered and directed by "eye magnets."

Think how much easier it would be to forecast use levels of perishable ingredients, production quantities, and scheduling help when you can forecast to within 1 percent to 3 percent of what you will be selling during any given meal period. If you can predict the number of customers that will enter your restaurant, you can quantify your needs for inventory, production and staffing.

Don't Leave Guest Preference to Chance

The following statement may at first sound contradictory to what has been stated, but here goes: Any menu, any design, and any format will produce a predictable sales mix if put in service every day for a prolonged period. In other words, regardless of the menu design, the popularity of particular menu items will evolve so management will be able to forecast customer preferences and thereby be able to plan purchases and preparation quantities according to the existing sales pattern. Here is the key point we want to make: If such a sales pattern will occur without any rhyme or reason to the design of the menu, think of the possibilities if the menu were designed to promote the items the restaurant wanted to sell more than any other. Instead of leaving it entirely to a random selection, you can actually "direct" the customers' attention to those items you want to sell and are geared up to sell.

How do you turn your menu into a cost control, marketing and communication tool? There are certain "practices" that when incorporated into the graphic design and layout of a menu can actually "influence" the menu selections of the guests. These practices and techniques are not subliminal and do not in any way force or trick the customer into ordering something they do not want any more than looking at a television commercial or newspaper advertisement influences the purchase decision. However, like a television commercial or newspaper advertisement, menu design can put an idea into the head of the consumer, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will at least consider the choice when a purchase is made. If they never saw the ad it would never had occurred to them to even consider its purchase.

The Power of Print

The techniques of menu psychology are most applicable to the printed menu. (However, there are others that can be employed with verbal menus, i.e., menus delivered orally by the server. In some restaurants, this might just include specials. In very upscale establishments, this might include the entire menu. But this article is devoted to only the printed menu.) What are the techniques employed in the design and production of a menu? Some of the techniques involve such elements as the print style and size, the paper and ink color, the texture and finish of the paper, graphic design, art work and illustrations. Even the placement of items on a page or with a list is done for specific reasons. Actually, menu psychology techniques can be anything that is used to direct the reader's attention to certain parts of the menu to increase the likelihood that those items will be remembered. If they are noticed and remembered, they are more likely to be ordered than an unnoticed or forgotten item.

In a study by a hospitality management student at Florida State University of a Bennigan's menu from the early '80s, more than three-fourths of all menu items sold were either snacks or appetizers. The menu at the time contained 14 pages and the dinner entrees were listed on the last two pages. The customers didn't bother to read past the first four or five pages and the menu length and design was significantly contributing to the poor sales of dinner entrees in the overall menu sales mix.

You can improve your sales without changing any menu item or price. All you have to do is reposition the items and employ menu psychology techniques on your menu. There are several different menu formats and each has a different area of sales concentration. The items you put in the area of sales concentration should be selected with care and purpose. They should be items that you want to feature and do better than the competition. This is where you want to list your house specialties and signature items.

In addition to the format, the menu items are typically grouped into menu categories. The number of and names used for the various menu categories will be greatly influenced by the type of restaurant, the price range, and number of menu offerings. For example, the typical categories for a restaurant featuring steak will be different from that featuring seafood or ethnic cuisine, such as Italian or Mexican. The industry standard is to put menu items into categories and in the order in which the items are typically eaten. Restaurants with higher check averages typically have more menu categories than those with lower check averages.

Formats

There are three basic types of menu page and fold formats you can use on a menu. First is the single-page format in which the entire menu is contained on a single page or card. The area of sales concentration is in the top half of the page. Then there is the most common format of the two-page/single-fold menus. Menu size and shape will vary considerably. The National Restaurant Association conducts a menu contest every year during its annual convention in Chicago and has found that the most common sized menu was 9 inches by 12 inches. This is the result of no other reason than to accommodate the standard paper size of 8.5 inches by 11 inches.

The graphic "Eye Movement Pattern" on Page 40 shows the typical eye movement over a three-panel, two-fold menu. The pattern of eye movement is not fixed and can be altered and directed by "eye magnets." Eye magnets are little graphic techniques that will attract the eye and guest's attention. Some of the best examples are graphic boxes around menu items, the use of a dot matrix screen of color as a background, using a larger or bolder type font, incorporating an illustration or even a photograph to "draw" the eye. The areas of emphasis are used to list the items you want to promote the most.

Gaze motion patterns will vary according to the page format, graphics, layout and number of folds in the menu. There is a tendency to list items in the order in which they are consumed. This puts cocktails and appetizers first and desserts and dessert beverages last. The greatest amount of space on the menu is given to entrees, which are the highest-priced items on the menu. In most restaurants, close to 100 percent of the customers will order an entrée but only a small percentage will order appetizers and desserts. This begs the question that perhaps we should relinquish some of that prime menu space that up to now has been reserved for entrées, and in their place put a la carte appetizers, side orders and desserts. This emphasis can only increase the likelihood of those items being selected in addition to an entrée.

Restaurants with static menus that combine both lunch and dinner items can be quite extensive. Their menus tend to be fairly large and become crowded and use a type font that's too small. A crowded menu that is difficult to read is not an effective merchandising tool. It is recommended that if the menu approaches 12 inches by 18 inches in size that multiple menus be employed to keep the size manageable. Separate drink, wine, dessert and children's menus may be more practical and do a better merchandising job than an oversized and crowded menu. Especially with desserts, a separate menu that is handed to the guest is a more effective sales piece than having them recall what was on the original menu or having the server describe the choices verbally. Table tents and menu boards can be used to merchandise daily specials when menu clip-ons add to the clutter and compete with the regular menu items.

Sometimes Bigger Isn't Better

In addition, oversized menus are difficult to maneuver in tight quarters. Guests have knocked over wine glasses with the menu and menus have been scorched by candles. Customers have commented that the menus were obstructing their view of their dining partner and were even too large to be placed on the table. The more extensive the listings of menu items, the larger the menu dimensions and the more space that is needed to contain the listings and descriptive copy.

If you have a three-panel menu with interchangeable pages, try swapping them at lunch and dinner for a month and check your menu sales mix for any changes. Odds are that whatever is in the center panel will sell more than if it were on the back cover. This is also a way to increase your check average at night by moving the lower-priced sandwiches and salads to the back cover where they are less likely to be noticed and therefore ordered.

Menu design psychology also uses several visual element techniques to increase the effectiveness of the menu as a marketing, communication and cost control tool. The first visual element is the font size and style. Words, numbers, or graphic symbols can be increased in size to attract the reader's eye or decreased in size to de-emphasize attention to a particular item. It follows that selectively increasing the type size and style of some menu items is a technique that will draw the customer's eye and therefore their attention. It is this attention that increases the odds that the customer will consider ordering that item more than if they had never noticed it at all.

Different styles of type fonts can be used as "eye magnets." This technique is most effective when the entire menu is limited to three different font styles. When four or more different font styles are used, the drawing power of the font becomes diluted and the eye never rests in any one area. Again, the intent is to bring attention to some menu items or areas of the menu. Improper placement or use of these techniques can be counterproductive and take attention away from the menu sections or items the operator wishes to emphasize.

The second technique is accomplished by increasing the brightness or color (shading) of visual elements to attract attention and establish a menu grouping. In printing jargon, this is referred to as dot-matrix screening. The brightness of a color can be increased, such as changing from gray to black or from a light pink to a dark red through a screen of tiny dots placed in various densities that produces a specified percentage of color.

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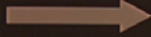
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The use of color in the font, graphics, and borders can also be used to attract attention. The change from a light type to a bold type can also increase awareness and can actually direct the eye along a prescribed path. Thus, color and brightness can be used along with font size and style to direct the reader to certain parts or sections of the menu.

Another way to direct a guest's attention to a certain part or section of the printed menu can be accomplished by placing the elements in a confined area or space on the menu. The use of borders to "frame" a menu item or group of menu items is an example of this menu psychology technique. An example would be the appetizer section of a menu that is set off by a box border or graphic design. The grouping of all the appetizers within a designated area encourages reading them as a unit. Adding an extra line space (leading) between menu items and putting less space between the title or name of the menu item and its descriptive copy clearly conveys that the description is for the preceding item.

In much the same way that spacing tends to group visual information, the use of similar elements such as brightness, color, size, or shape encourages elements to be seen together. Thus, switching from regular to bold type, changing fonts, or introducing a different color of type signals to the reader that they are moving from one section to another, e.g., appetizers to salads.

While all these elements can be used to guide the customer's eye around the menu to the items that provide the best overall return, the entire menu must remain uncluttered and easy to read. If for example, appetizers are contained within a rectangular border, do not use a circle or square around another appetizer and place it adjacent to the others. A different shape suggests a different menu category, e.g., side dishes or salads.

The menu design psychology techniques described in this article are useful tools to the graphic designer in preparing a menu. In the March 2005 issue, we will discuss how the menu paper, its weight, texture, finish and color contribute to the menu design, the average check and gross profit return.

For now, the key point is to put a great deal of energy and thought into the design and psychology of your menu. Your efforts and planning will be returned many times over. **RS&G**

A way to direct a guest's attention to a certain part of the menu is to confine the elements with a border or graphic.