

Bar Menus Keep Guests In Chairs and Cash In Your Till



There is an industry adage that suggests the most expensive seat in your restaurant is the empty one. Keeping warm bodies in seats is best accomplished by exceeding guest expectations, which is exactly the intended function of a well designed bar menu

“Maintaining a balanced focus between food and beverage is fundamentally important to attaining success in the restaurant business,” contends Bill Main, chairman and CEO of *Bill Main and Associates*, a leading restaurant consultancy. “No restaurateur would force guests to guess what specials are being offered out of the kitchen, yet many do just that when it comes to the bar. The rationale for marketing a drink menu is the same as that behind featuring a food menu.”

While overlooked by some, bar menus are marketing devices capable of driving sales,

improving profitability, creating an identity for the bar and even some things that you can't do for yourself.

“The unfortunate part of our business is that no matter how well you hire, the fact is there will never be enough face time with all of your guests to sell them on each and every facet of the bar and its offerings. Even if it were possible, it would likely be an undesirable situation,” says Will Jacobus, director of beverage operations for *Dave & Busters*. “On the other hand, your bar menu speaks volumes about who you are, what you do best and provides guests with qualified advice on what to order.”

The beverage experts interviewed agree that bar menus are invaluable creative tools. “Bar menus allow you to market your best cocktails, those that are genuinely special and differentiate your bar from the field,” states Tony

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Abou-Ganim, beverage guru and founder of the *Modern Mixologist consultancy*. Furthermore, the drinks on your menu should be specialties that you yourself would recommend to your closest friends. Ultimately they will help create a memorable experience.

Bill Main concurs. "Menus enhance the guests' experience by inducing them to try something new and adventurous. Perhaps the drinks rekindle old memories and stir up positive reminiscences, or perhaps they are innovative and quickly become the guests' new favorites. Either way the guests are prodded into expanding their horizons."

In addition to enhancing the overall dining experience, bar menus are loaded with other operational benefits, none more compelling than driving sales and increasing the bar's profitability.

"The bar's menu should merchandise engaging specialties that command high profit margins," says Jim Laube, author, restaurant consultant and founder of *RestaurantOwner.com*. He suggests that a bar menu presents a unique opportunity to create win-win situation. Guests get a chance to consider singularly delicious signature drinks and the management gets to market profit-laded drinks.

"When a guest picks up a bar menu there is a potential sale that may have never existed before," states Dave & Buster's Will Jacobus. "A well conceived bar menu is a necessity for maximizing sales opportunities and building a highly profitable beverage operation."

Operational Considerations

One of the missions of an effective bar menu is to further define the identity of the establishment. The drinks that you promote as specialties of the house create an image in peoples' minds and go a long way to defining who and what you are.

"While every segment of your bar business should be represented, take care not to overwhelm guests with selections," advises Jacobus. "Know what your clientele will gravitate to and focus the majority of your marketing efforts there, rather than trying to be everything to everyone."

Another principal objective is to create a

menu that piques the guests' interests in what you have to offer and do it in such a manner that it is both enticing and visually appealing.

Few people have a better understanding of how to create winning bar menus than Tim Johnson, director of purchasing and beverage for Champps and man who is known affectionately in the industry as "Dr. Drink."

"We're visual creatures, so load the menu with visually enticing photos of the drinks. Represent your specialties with a sense of pride and use descriptive language that accentuates their most positive qualities. The goal is to make the guest want what you're offering."

Jacobus advises making your bar menu as visually appealing as possible. The investment you make in enhancing its production value will pay off handsomely. In addition, he suggests keeping a constant theme running through your specialties. For example, if yours is a tropical concept, promote drinks consistent with that theme, rather than offering a haphazard assortment.

Make sure that your menu is conveniently small, compact and easy to read. Lighting conditions should also be taken into consideration. Light backgrounds and dark print are considered optimal. Although bar menus are typically sized in the 6" x 9" range, there is room for creative latitude when it comes to being innovative in design, shape and texture.

"Design is critically important," says Bill Main. "On average, bar menus are studied for less 30 seconds, whereas guests peruse a conventional food menu for two minutes or more. The upstart is that your menu needs to grab people's attention and deliver your marketing messages quickly and effectively."

Once the bar menu is produced, there are training issues to consider. Abou-Ganim stresses the importance of getting the bartending fully on-board with the program. Getting the staff to use to menu is crucial and yet many in management do little to explain why or how the menus are to be used. As a result, within a few weeks the program is deemed a failure and they are taken off the bar and cocktail tables.

One of the principal messages to the staff needs to be that the bar menu is a creative tool, but like all tools it must be used correctly.

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Servers must working knowledge of the drinks being promoted, believe that they are genuinely special and familiar with the descriptive

“A menu sitting unopened on a bar top or cocktail table is simply a waste of valuable real estate,” says Johnson. “Instead it needs to be integrated program. For instance, the host/hostess should deliver the menu to the guest, open it up and make a recommendation. The server or bartender should point to a specific drink and verbally describe it in terms similar to what is written, but with conviction and panache.”

One viable strategy is to create several different bar menus, each formatted similarly but promoting different specialty drinks. Introduce one and use it for several months, accurately tracking each drink’s sales. Then rollout the second menu and carefully monitor its success. Afterwards, analyze the results and create a bar menu that features only the bestsellers. That is how drink specials eventually become signatures of the house.

Cross-promoting food specials on the bar menu is growing increasingly popular with restaurateurs. Bill Main contends that if the on-premise set-up permits marketing appropriate food items on the bar menus is an excellent way to drive sales. More and more people are choosing to eat at the bar, further adding impetus to merchandising appetizers and light fare in the lounge. Another legitimate consideration is the positive mitigating affect that food has on the consumption of alcohol, all of which suggests that merchandising “cocktail cuisine” on the bar menu is highly advantageous.

Tips From The Pros

“Most of us in the business have spent many a semester at the school of hard-knocks,” contends industry notable Laube. “We work hard and continue to learn from our mistakes. Keeping those mistakes to a minimum and the learning curve as shallow as possible is the key to success.”

To that point, we asked our panel of experts what they thought some of the biggest mistakes restaurateurs and manager make when devising a bar menu. Their feedback was profuse and highly enlightening.

Industry icon Tony Abou-Ganim laughed and readily acknowledged having launched more than one idea that never reached cruising altitude. He thinks that more often than not operators over-reach their capabilities by trying to do too much with their menus. Promote about six to eight specialty drinks that are genuinely worthy of promotion. Abou-Ganim advises offering a balanced line-up divided evenly between house-specific signature drinks and “lost and forgotten classics.”

Abou-Ganim also believes that many menus fail to deliver on their promise. The drinks that are served fall short of their descriptions or how they are graphically depicted. The unavoidable consequence is the guest to be immediately being underwhelmed and disappointed. Ensuring that the bartenders consistently deliver the goods is a training issue.

Tim Johnson has a Hall of Fame resumé and the scars to prove it. He contends many operators believe that implementing a bar menu is the end all, the ultimate in point of purchase marketing. His point is that menus don’t sell drinks, servers and bartenders do. Bar menus have the potential to be highly effective tools, but only if management sets in motion the necessary steps to ensure that they are used as designed.

Johnson also thinks that all too often a bar manager or operator is swayed by a to put an item on a menu in exchange for printing or marketing funds. He advises asking yourself if they weren’t paying for it would you still add it to the menu, make it look this way, or even bother with it. If the answer to any part of the question is no, then don’t do it.

Considering Abou-Ganim’s status as a master mixologist, it is not surprising that the most common mistake he sees on bar menus is featuring tired old Cosmopolitans and Apple Martinis. He asserts that marketing signature drinks that genuinely creative is fundamentally important to becoming a destination venue.

Another misguided practice is making specialty drinks so complicated that bartenders have no interest in making them. When its crazy busy, a drink that takes two-minutes to prepare can rattle the nerves and cause bartender hesitate to recommend it.

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The adage about the most expensive seat in the house being the empty one is particularly apropos to the discussion of bar menus. The formula for success in this bar business is far from tricky—keep the clientele happy and they'll return with their discretionary income. Dissatisfied guests will leave, tear out your name from the

yellow pages and advise everyone they come in contact with to do the same.

Keeping warm bodies in seats is best accomplished by exceeding guest expectations and a skillfully designed bar menu goes a long way to accomplishing just that.

Robert Plotkin is a judge at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition and the author of numerous books including *Secrets Revealed of America's Greatest Cocktails*. To read more from Robert visit his blog, BarMedia.com/blog. You can reach him at BarMedia— robert@barmedia.com.

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