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The Effects of Restaurant Menu Item Descriptions on Perceptions of Quality, Price, and Purchase Intention

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ABSTRACT. The restaurant menu sits at the core of a restaurant's strategy. A variety of suggestions have been made as to how restaurants should "manage" their menus: Some are derived empirically; others are driven intuitively without supporting evidence. This research note examines how menu description complexity can increase perceptions of item quality, expected price, and selection likelihood. It is recommended that restaurateurs would benefit significantly by carefully crafting menu descriptions that emphasize food preparation.

KEYWORDS. Menu item, perceptions, quality, price, purchase intention

The menu is the No. 1 tool. . . . Menus are the purest form of your restaurant's strategic marketing plan.

—Tom Feltenstein, CEO of Feltenstein Partners

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Among the multitude of factors that might entice a diner to enter a restaurant, it is the menu that drives the process. Indeed, the menu outlines your strategic marketing plan and serves as the first impression for a consumer. Hotels will often carry a collection of local menus so that guests might identify appropriate dining venues. Restaurants post menus outside so that passersby might be persuaded to dine within.

The menu serves several functions for both the restaurateur and the consumer. Carefully designed menus direct customers' attention to particular items and facilitate item selection. Menus can represent a type of selling situation and are similar in character to giving a professional speech (Bowen & Morris, 1995). Although menus are intended to promote a perception of value among customers, the exact mechanism that creates that perception has not been scientifically studied. What is known is that the design of a menu directly influences how customers perceive the operation (cf. Stoner, 1986). Subtle changes in menu design can increase sales up to 10% (Restaurants, USA, 2000). For a business that does 2 million in sales, that could mean as much as $200,000 in additional revenue.

Prior research has emphasized issues of product placement on a menu page with the underlying logic that the primary purpose of menu design is to sell goods that the restaurateur wants to move. This article examines how features of a menu create perceptions of quality, value, and ultimately, appropriate pricing. A number of restaurant consultants have advised their clients to construct menus using simple wording over more complex descriptions, whereas others have suggested that more complex wording communicates an items' distinctiveness or "unique" character. Therefore, it is important to understand how item wording affects customer responses.

PSYCHOLOGICAL INFLUENCES

In a highly influential stream of research, Tversky and Kahneman (1974) proposed that individuals use heuristics to simplify complex decisions. Heuristics are simple rules that allow people to make efficient decisions under complex and uncertain situations. For instance, the representativeness heuristic involves a "goodness of fit" analysis where product attributes are examined to determine if an item fits within a particular category. Thus, it might be concluded that expensive corked wine produced in France is of higher quality than wines produced in New Zealand using screw-type caps. In reality, either wine could be of superior quality, but the customer has

applied simple rules to reach a conclusion. These same strategies are likely to be used when assessing menu choices. Selections that are described in more complex terms might be seen as being higher in quality and more desirable than those items described in more basic terms. Perceptions of higher quality allow restaurants to implement pricing strategies that are consistent with customer reactions to price-quality beliefs (cf. Nagle & Holden, 2002; Pavesic, 1985, 1989).

Taken together, there has been some debate regarding how menu items should be described to consumers. Both practitioners and academic researchers agree that the menu is an important communicative tool. Some evidence suggests that items might best be described in simple terms, whereas other research suggests that more complex and elaborate descriptions might lead to higher quality assessments. In this brief research report we attempt to understand better how descriptive complexity of menu items influences how these items are evaluated by potential customers.

METHOD

Subjects and Design

The data were collected from 160 college students (112 females, 48 males) who were recruited over a 3-week period to participate in a survey of food preferences and restaurant behavior. The research design consisted of a 2 complexity (high, low) by 2 price (present or absent) factorial. Complexity was determined through pretesting. Menus from a variety of restaurants were collected and examined for comparability. This sample yielded three dishes (beef, chicken, and pasta) that were determined to have the highest and lowest levels of descriptive complexity and they are presented in Figure 1. As an additional manipulation check for complexity, a sample of 25 college students were asked to rate the complexity of the description for each item on a scale of 1 (simple, not at all complex) to 9 (very complex). Results reflecting the comparison between the high and low complexity descriptions revealed that each of the three menu items presented in Table 1 differed significantly (all t's > 3.5, p's < 0.01). In addition to complexity it is also possible that customers might rely on price to assist in making judgments regarding quality. To help determine if a price-quality strategy is being used, half of the respondents were provided with pricing information for each menu item and half

FIGURE 1. Menu item descriptions.

Filet Mignon

Low Complexity

10 oz. grilled, mushroom sauce, and served with a choice of potato or vegetable.

High Complexity

10 oz. grilled tenderloin served with a sweet garlic and thyme crust, sliced vine ripe marinated tomato, and smoked mozzarella cheese with a sherry vinegar demi glace.

Stuffed Breast of Chicken

Low Complexity

An oven-roasted, stuffed, boneless, skinless chicken breast. Served with wild rice and vegetables.

High Complexity

Citrus marinated chicken breast stuffed under the skin with shrimp and crabmeat, grilled over a hickory fire, then served with a sweet and spicy Georgia peach sauce, saffron wild rice, and fresh vegetables.

Pasta

Low Complexity

Flat egg pasta with smoked chicken, mushrooms, a cream sauce, and parmigiano.

High Complexity

Wide flat egg pasta, sautéed with garlic, olive oil, grilled chicken breast, mixed wild mushrooms, pancetta (Milan cured bacon), and artichoke hearts in a Pinot Grigio cream sauce, finished with white truffle oil.

TABLE 1. Effects of decisional complexity

	High	Low	DF	F	Sig
Filet price	17.23	14.83	1,159	23.19	0.001
Filet quality	7.63	5.81	1,159	67.20	0.001
Filet purchase	5.03	4.04	1,159	6.68	0.011
Chicken price	16.53	13.63	1,159	34.06	0.001
Chicken quality	7.43	6.53	1,159	16.43	0.001
Chicken purchase	5.94	6.48	1,159	1.87	0.173
Pasta price	14.91	13.80	1,159	.898	0.345
Pasta quality	7.55	7.10	1,159	7.48	0.007
Pasta purchase	6.11	6.45	1,159	5.42	0.021

were not provided this information. Participants rated descriptions of menu items from each of three food items (filet, chicken, pasta) on three evaluative criteria that served as the dependent measures. 1. How likely is it that you would purchase this item (1 = not at all likely; 9 = extremely likely)? 2. How would you rate the quality of this particular item (1 = low

quality; 9 = high quality)? 3. Using the scale below (10$-----24$), what would you expect to pay for this particular item?

RESULTS

Menu Analyses

Initial probing of the data collected from this sample of 160 respondents revealed a number of expected correlational relationships between perceptions of quality, price, and likelihood of purchasing the dish. When asked to consider the filet there were strong relationships between the price and perceived quality of the dish ($r = 0.40$, $p < 0.01$); as well as the quality and likelihood of purchasing the item ($r = 0.40$, $p < 0.01$). When asked about the chicken dish, similar patterns were observed (i.e., price-quality, $r = 0.47$, $p < 0.01$; quality -purchase intention, $r = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$). Finally, a price-quality relationship was also observed in the pasta dish ($r = 0.49$, $p < 0.01$).

A multivariate analysis of variance was performed that simultaneously examined the complexity of the item description (high-low), and the presence or absence of pricing information across all nine menu item questions. This analysis revealed an overall effect of descriptive complexity, wilks' lamda F (9, 148) = 14.10, $p < 0.0001$), as well as an effect for pricing information, wilks' lamda F (9, 148) = 2.12, $p = 0.03$). The complexity by pricing interaction was not significant, wilks' lamda F (9, 136 = 1.02, $p = 0.430$). The univariate results for complexity and price are presented in Tables 1 and 2, and as can be seen in Table 1, seven of the nine menu

TABLE 2. Effects of price information

	Present	Absent	DF	F	Sig
Filet price	16.59	15.46	1,159	4.57	0.034
Filet quality	6.75	6.69	1,159	0.056	0.813
Filet purchase	4.50	4.56	1,159	0.026	0.873
Chicken price	15.16	14.99	1,159	0.102	0.750
Chicken quality	7.06	6.89	1,159	0.565	0.453
Chicken purchase	6.24	6.18	1,159	0.025	0.875
Pasta price	14.90	13.81	1,159	5.71	0.024
Pasta quality	7.35	7.30	1,159	0.088	0.767
Pasta purchase	6.50	6.06	1,159	1.52	0.220

questions were influenced by descriptive complexity. Items described in more complex terms increased perceptions of quality, likelihood of purchase, and expected price. Interestingly, there was a general trend for pricing information to enhance perceptions of quality, likelihood of purchasing, and price expectations. Only two menu items (i.e., price expectations for the filet and pasta dishes) reached conventional levels of statistical significance, yet most of the remaining items were rated more favorably when price was included in the description.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

These data indicate that descriptive complexity and to a much lesser extent, pricing information influence perceptions of quality, price expectations, and purchase intentions. More complex terminology increased perceptions of quality, likely choice, and pricing expectations. The presence or absence of a pricing anchor did little to alter these findings. Failure to find a complexity by price interaction is interesting. Price is clearly a salient feature of any consumptive decision. Although speculative, it may be the case that pricing plays a subservient role to assessments of quality and purchase intention, and it is only after these primary decisions are reached does pricing information play a role in the selection process.

Menu design is in essence a form of menu psychology. Food Services of America recommends that menu "designers" and restaurateurs follow a number simple rules: (a) Be selective about what appears on the menu, (b) Be objective and base decisions on what items to include or delete on data not hunches, (c) Place desirable and profitable items where customers will notice them, (d) Use pictures of items but do so selectively. To this list, we add the following recommendation: Selectively increase the descriptive complexity of those items you wish to represent as upper tier selections. This investigation may at first appear limited such that college students may not represent the entire spectrum of all diners. However, college students do represent a category of restaurant customers who tend to eat out in large numbers. Perhaps more importantly, these customers eat out at restaurants more frequently than the general population (Auty, 1992). It is likely that the lessons learned while dining and perceptions of food quality will influence future dining choices. Nevertheless, further research is needed to expand both the range of findings described here as well as to examine other cohorts of restaurant diners.

To sum, menu analysis continues to sit at the center of restaurant marketing strategy. Often this process is performed intuitively with mixed results. This research note adds to the growing body of evidence suggesting that menu strategy should be empirically driven while taking into account the perspective taken by the consumer.

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