

Café Menu Psychology Blueprint

Increasing Average Order Value & Customer Satisfaction

What is Menu Psychology?

The strategic design of menus to influence customer purchasing decisions and enhance satisfaction.

Key Benefits:

- Increases average order value by **10-30%**
- Enhances customer satisfaction
- Creates competitive advantage

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MENU DESIGN
HOW RESTAURANTS PURSUADE US TO BUY MORE

COLOR CONFUSION
The colors on a menu can affect what we order. Green implies the food is fresh, and orange stimulates the appetite. Yellow is a happy hue and is used to catch the diner's attention. Red encourages action and is used to persuade us to buy the meals with the highest profit margins.

THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE
When we look at a menu, our eyes typically move to the middle first before traveling to the top right corner and then, finally, to the top left. This has been dubbed the 'Golden Triangle' by menu engineers, and these three areas are where you'll find the dishes with the highest profit margins.

DECAY DISHES
Some restaurants try to deceive their diners by placing a slightly more expensive item at the top of the menu. This makes all the other dishes appear to offer more bang for your buck. It also gives us the impression we're getting a bargain, encouraging us to spend more.

SUBCONSCIOUS SCHEMING
We subconsciously order the top two items in each menu section more often, so restaurant owners tend to list their highest-margin dishes first. However, some people tend to pick the bottom option, so the last item in each section is usually a restaurant's third most cost-effective dish.

COVERT CURRENCY
Paying for a meal is the biggest pain point when dining out. Crafty restaurateurs remove currency signs from the menu to take the emphasis away from the cost of the items you're ordering. Beware of prices written out in letters – this tactic can encourage us to spend up to 30 percent more.

LA BELLE VUE
A selection of dishes served with olive oil & balsamic dip.

DESSERTS
CHOCOLATE FUDGE CAKE (6)
Served with fresh cream. 6
SORBET A LA FRAMBOISE (4)
Served with fresh raspberries. 4

CONTROLLED COSTING
No matter how tempting each dish sounds, diners still take the price into account. Restaurateurs use this to their advantage – for example, a meal priced at \$10.95 makes us feel like we're getting a good deal. Exclusive establishments tend to use round numbers, adding an air of chic sophistication.

FEEDING THE IMAGINATION
Restaurants pay close attention to how each meal description is written. Superlative claims – descriptions like "the world's best burger" – can't possibly be true, and diners will simply ignore them. However, enticing adjectives, like "line-caught" or "sun-dried" will feed the imagination and get our taste buds tingling.

STARTERS
OLIVES (5)
A selection of olives served with olive oil & balsamic dip. 5
GARLIC BREAD (6)
Homemade, butter garlic bread served straight from the oven. 6
HALOUMI SKEWERS (6)
Warm haloumi skewers served with a tangy falafel dip. 6

MAINS
SEA BASS IN WHITE WINE SAUCE
Line caught sea bass served with a fresh white wine sauce and new potatoes. 25
STEAK FRITES (20)
Prime beef steak cooked to requirements, served with salad and golden fries. 25

LIMITED CHOICES
A huge menu might seem like a good idea, but being forced to choose between hundreds of options can make us feel stressed. Savvy restaurant owners list just seven dishes in each section – enough to make us feel like we have plenty of options without overwhelming us.

EL CLASSICO
MEXICAN BURGER
A spicy chicken burger with Pepperjack cheese and tangy tomato salsa in a soft bun. 12

LINE CAUGHT BATTERED COD & POTATO HEDGES
Line-caught cod in a light crispy batter served with home-made potato wedges. 13

SCALLOPS & PRAWNS
A selection of hand-dived scallops and prawns served with lemon. 12

LOBSTER TAIL
CRAB LOUWER SAUCE
Lobster tail served with a delicious louwer sauce. 85

PORTUGUESE PIRI PIRI CHICKEN
Authentic Portuguese Piri Piri chicken served with potato beans and a fresh green salad. 18

THAI GREEN CURRY (6)
Tender pieces of chicken in a creamy coconut and curry sauce, served with rice. 17

MOZZARELLA CALZONE (7)
Light calzone with a Italian mozzarella, tomato and basil filling. 15

ANGUS STEAK FRITES (20)
Prime Angus beef steak cooked to requirements, served with salad and golden fries. 25

EMPOWER THE CUSTOMER
Restaurant wine lists can rival the average novel in length, especially in high-end establishments. This is a deliberate marketing tactic designed to empower guests to make a decision. The more information listed about each vintage, the more likely we are to choose the wine.

WINE LIST
1 - VIN DE LA VALLEE DE HAUTE MONTAGNE - 85 GLASS - 25 BOTTLE
For over seven centuries winds from the Le Chaffaut-Saint-Jeanne monastery have been used for the grape vines to grow and ripen. Left to mature through a long, slow process, this wine is a true expression of the terroir. Only once a day is it harvested and pressed.

NEGATIVE SPACE
If a menu is crammed with text, the eye will naturally be drawn to any open spaces. Menu designers use this to their advantage – items with the largest profit margins are often set in their own space, away from the hustle and bustle of the rest of the descriptions.

MATERIAL WORLD
The material of the menu is used to communicate the brand image. High-end restaurants use leather and thick paper to suggest their food is of a similar quality (and, therefore, worth ordering), while a cheaper restaurant might use vinyl to communicate a menu that represents good value for the money.

GLOSSARIES
Look out for a glossary section on the menu. You're more likely to order the pricy steak tartare if you know exactly how it's prepared (and produced). This is also why restaurants sometimes list their fancy-sounding wines by the number, so patrons don't feel intimidated by the unfamiliar names.

SOURCES + REFERENCES
smh.com.au
womansday.com
mentalfloss.com

AARON ALLEN & ASSOCIATES
GLOBAL RESTAURANT CONSULTING
AARONALLEN.COM

LINKEDIN.COM/COMPANY/AARON-ALLEN-&-ASSOCIATES

DESIGN & LAYOUT

STRATEGIC PRICING

STAFF TRAINING

IMPLEMENTATION

DESCRIPTIVE LANGUAGE

In This Presentation:

- Design & Layout
- Strategic Pricing
- Staff Training
- Implementation
- Menu Engineering

The Power of First Impressions: Menu Design Fundamentals

Why First Impressions Matter

The menu is often the first detailed interaction customers have with your food offerings. Research shows customers spend an average of just **109 seconds** reading a menu.

Impact on Customer Behavior:

- Sets price expectations
- Establishes quality perception
- Influences order decisions
- Affects overall dining experience



Material Quality

The physical material of your menu communicates value. High-end restaurants use quality paper, leather, or wood to signal premium experience.



Typography

Font choice affects readability and brand perception. Serif fonts convey tradition, while sans-serif fonts signal modernity.



Color Psychology

Colors evoke emotional responses. Red stimulates appetite, blue suppresses it, while green suggests freshness and health.

Key Design Elements to Consider:

- ✓ Menu size appropriate to table space
- ✓ Consistent branding with restaurant theme
- ✓ Clean, uncluttered layout with white space
- ✓ Strategic use of images (quality over quantity)

Strategic Layout: The Golden Triangle and Beyond

The Golden Triangle

When customers open a menu, their eyes typically follow a specific pattern:

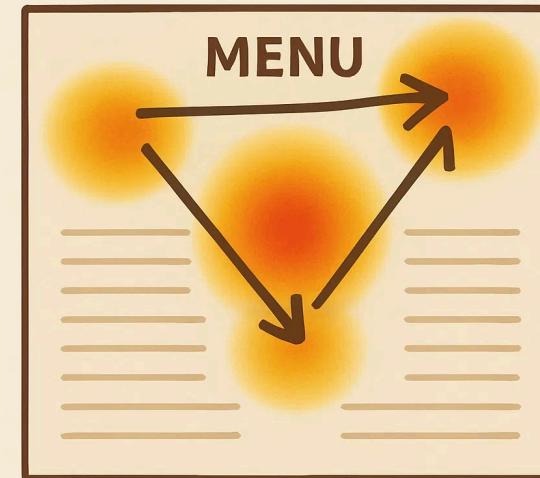
1. **First:** Middle of the page
2. **Second:** Top right corner
3. **Third:** Top left corner

This creates a triangle-shaped viewing pattern that menu engineers leverage to position high-profit items.

Strategic Placement:

- Position signature dishes and high-margin items within this triangle
- Use visual cues (boxes, colors) to draw attention to these areas

GOLDEN TRIANGLE IN MENU DESIGN



Sweet Spots & Placement

- ★ **Top Right:** Place premium, high-profit items here
- ★ **First & Last Items:** These get 25% more attention in each section
- ★ **Visual Anchors:** Use boxes, colors, or icons to highlight profitable items

Section Organization

- ✓ Organize in logical order (appetizers → desserts)
- ✓ Group similar items together to reduce decision fatigue
- ✓ Use clear section headers to guide navigation
- ✓ Consider separate dessert menu to increase appetizer sales

The Art of Pricing: Covert Currency and Anchoring

Psychological Pricing Techniques

Currency Symbol Removal

Removing the currency symbol (\$) reduces price awareness and pain of paying.

Studies show this can increase spending by up to **8-12%**.

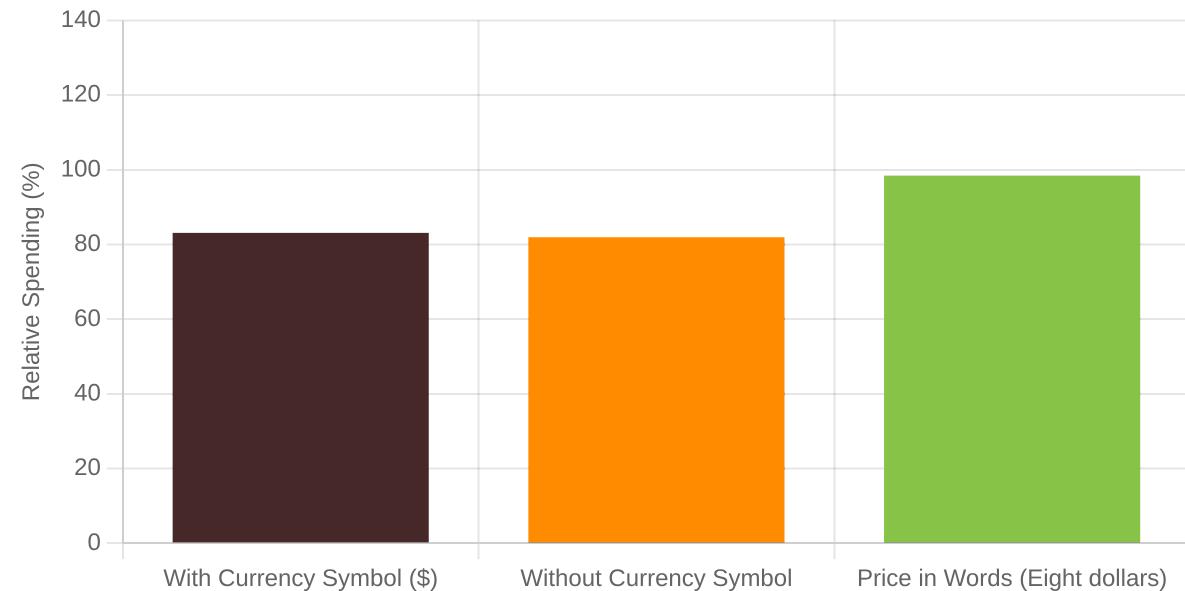
Price Anchoring

Place a high-priced item at the top of each section to make other items seem more reasonable by comparison.

Effective Price Presentation:

- Use round numbers for premium items (50 vs. 49.95)
- Avoid price alignment (prevents price shopping)
- Place price after description, not in a separate column

Price Presentation Impact



Source: Based on research from Cornell University School of Hotel Administration

Decoy Pricing

Add a slightly less appealing option at a similar price point to make your target item seem like a better value.

💡 Example: Offering a 12oz coffee for \$3.50 and 16oz for \$4.00 makes the larger size seem like a better deal.

Menu Engineering Matrix

★ Stars: High popularity, high profit margin

☛ Plow Horses: High popularity, lower profit margin

☛ Puzzles: Low popularity, high profit margin

☛ Dogs: Low popularity, low profit margin

Descriptive Language: Enticing Descriptions and Nostalgia

The Power of Words

Well-crafted menu descriptions can increase sales of an item by up to **27%**.

Basic vs. Descriptive:

Basic: "Chocolate Cake" → **Descriptive:** "Decadent Belgian Chocolate Layer Cake with Vanilla Bean Cream"

Effective Description Categories:

- Geographic labels
- Sensory words
- Nostalgic references
- Preparation methods



Nostalgia & Storytelling

Effective Example:

"Grandma Maria's Sunday Gravy - A century-old family recipe of slow-simmered tomatoes, herbs, and tender beef, served over house-made pasta."

♥ Nostalgic references can increase willingness to pay by **15-20%**

Language Do's and Don'ts

DO:

- Use vivid, sensory language
- Highlight unique ingredients
- Include origin stories

DON'T:

- Make superlative claims
- Use technical jargon
- Write overly long descriptions

Limiting Choices: The Paradox of Choice

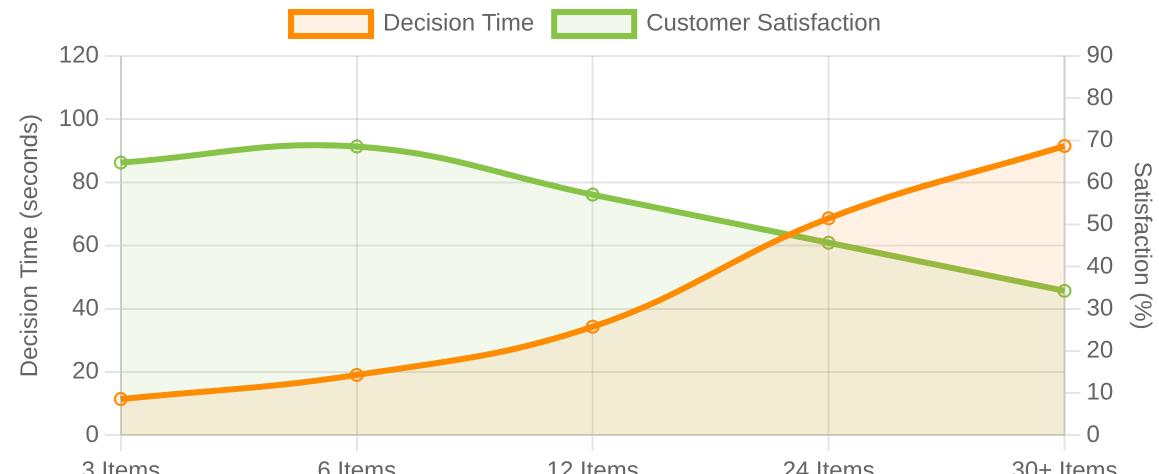
The Paradox of Choice

While variety seems appealing, too many options can overwhelm customers, leading to decision paralysis and reduced satisfaction.

Research Findings:

- Customers are more satisfied with fewer, well-curated choices
- Decision fatigue leads to default or "safe" choices
- Optimal number: **5-7 items** per menu category

Impact of Menu Size on Decision Time



Source: Based on research from Columbia University and Stanford University

Benefits of Limited Choices

- ✓ Faster ordering decisions
- ✓ Higher customer satisfaction
- ✓ Reduced food waste
- ✓ Streamlined inventory

Implementation Strategies

- 💡 Create signature items that define your brand
- 💡 Use clear categories with distinct offerings
- 💡 Consider seasonal rotating menus to maintain variety

Color Psychology in Menu Design

How Colors Influence Decisions

Colors evoke emotional responses that directly impact ordering behavior and perception of food.

Key Findings:

- Influences taste perception
- Directs attention to items
- Varies by culture/cuisine
- Creates emotional response



Strategic Color Applications

Red

Stimulates appetite, creates urgency. Ideal for high-profit items.

Orange

Encourages impulse ordering. Effective for promotions.

Green

Signals freshness and health. For vegetarian options.

Blue

Creates trust. Better for drink menus than food items.

Implementation Tips

Match cuisine:

Italian (red/green)
Japanese (neutral/black)

Consider lighting:

Test colors under actual conditions

Create contrast:

Use complementary colors for important items

Readability:

Ensure text-background contrast

Decoy Dishes and Menu Engineering

The Decoy Effect

Strategic placement of "decoy" options makes target items appear more attractive by comparison.

How It Works:

- Add a slightly inferior option at a similar price point
- Creates a perception of value for the target item
- Example: Small coffee (\$3.50) vs. Medium (\$4.00) vs. Large (\$4.25)
- Makes the large size seem like the best value

CAFÉ MENU

COFFEE	
Caffe Latte	4
Smeom and creamy	
Cappuccino	4
Rich and foemy	
Americano	3
Bold and intense	
Macha	5
With chocolate indulgence	
BREAKFAST	
Avocado Toast	8
Fresh avocado, chemy tomatoes, multigrain bread	
PASTRIES	
Croissant	3
Perfection by Bob	
SANDWICHES	
Turkey & Swiss	9
Roasted taskey, swas, cheese	
Veggie Delight	8
Grilled cegetables, hummius, aprouts	
Chicken & Bacon	10
Grilled chicken, chepy bacoe, tomate	

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Menu Engineering Matrix

★ STARS

High Popularity
High Profit

Strategy: Feature prominently

PUZZLES

Low Popularity
High Profit

Strategy: Improve descriptions

PLOW HORSES

High Popularity
Low Profit

Strategy: Increase prices

DOGS

Low Popularity
Low Profit

Strategy: Replace or remove

Implementation Steps:

1. Analyze menu item performance (sales volume and profit margin)
2. Categorize items using the matrix
3. Apply appropriate strategies to each category
4. Regularly review and adjust based on performance

Pro Tip: Focus on converting Puzzles to Stars by improving visibility and descriptions

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Demo Cafe Menu Analysis

STARTERS	
Appetite-stimulating colors (red/orange)	
CRISPY CALAMARI <i>served with a zesty lime-mayonnaise.</i>	16 GARLIC SHRIMP SCAMPI <i>Lingerie au beurre with a spicy aioli.</i>
BRUSCHETTA <i>Wav od linguizzi, vineo mperad burruvies, jeam basil</i>	12 GRILLED SALMON <i>lesnus durk haline xpastigus, n al rine</i>
Descriptive language	
STEAKS	
FILET MIGNON	
<i>Priinc zu, erd wine xelueines, seakeid fingetting parances</i>	
RIBEYE STEAK <i>12 ex ciu, gadic meaked paratives, seasonal vegetables</i>	88
ENTREES	
HERB-CRUSTED CHICKEN <i>pancuserad, paractuui crores, surried apinait</i>	
WILD MUSHROOM RISOTTO <i>Athorio rics, porcici enil attucke-muchivonis, truffic eit</i>	22
No currency symbols	

Key Psychological Elements

⌚ Strategic Color Usage

Red and orange headers stimulate appetite and create urgency. Warm beige background creates comfort and approachability.

✖️ Limited, Focused Options

Each category contains only 3-4 items, reducing decision fatigue while maintaining adequate variety.

✍ Descriptive Language

Sensory descriptions like "rich and foamy" and "bold and intense" create anticipation and justify pricing.

💲 Pricing Psychology

No currency symbols reduce "pain of paying." The Mocha at \$5 serves as an anchor, making other coffee options seem more reasonable.

◎ Strategic Item Placement

High-margin items (Chicken & Bacon sandwich, Mocha) are positioned prominently to draw attention.

Demo Restaurant Menu Analysis



Upscale Menu Psychology

滴 Sophisticated Color Scheme

Dark background with gold and green accents creates an upscale, premium feel. Green highlights on key items suggest freshness and quality.

\$ Strategic Price Anchoring

The \$88 Ribeye Steak serves as a price anchor, making the \$48 Filet Mignon and other items seem more reasonable by comparison.

A Elegant Typography

Serif fonts for headings and gold accents convey luxury and tradition. Clean spacing and alignment create a sense of order and sophistication.

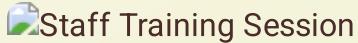
笔 Evocative Descriptions

Detailed, sensory-rich descriptions like "lingering white wine garlic" create anticipation and justify premium pricing.

田 Clean Categorization

Clear section headers (STARTERS, STEAKS, ENTREES) guide the customer through a logical progression of the meal, encouraging multi-course ordering.

Staff Training for Menu Psychology Implementation



Training Essentials

1. Menu Knowledge

Staff must thoroughly understand all menu items, including ingredients, preparation methods, and flavor profiles. This knowledge builds confidence and enables authentic recommendations.

2. Suggestive Selling Techniques

Train staff to recommend high-margin items naturally by highlighting unique qualities or pairing suggestions. Focus on value-adding recommendations rather than obvious upselling.

3. Understanding Menu Psychology

Educate staff on the psychological principles behind the menu design so they can reinforce these elements through their service and recommendations.

4. Role-Playing Scenarios

Practice customer interactions through role-play to build confidence and refine techniques. Include scenarios with different customer types and preferences.

Implementation Timeline:

- Initial training: 2-3 hours
- Follow-up session: 1 hour
- Practice period: 1-2 weeks
- Ongoing coaching: Weekly

Key Performance Metrics



Average Check Size

Track increases in average order value after training implementation



Attachment Rate

Measure how often add-ons or upgrades are successfully sold



Item Mix

Monitor shifts toward high-margin menu items



Customer Satisfaction

Ensure upselling doesn't negatively impact guest experience

Conclusion: Maximizing Profit and Customer Satisfaction

Key Takeaways

Strategic Design

Menu design is not just aesthetics—it's a strategic tool that directly impacts customer behavior and business profitability.

Psychological Principles

Understanding how customers interact with menus allows you to guide choices while maintaining a positive dining experience.

Holistic Approach

Combining menu design with staff training creates a comprehensive strategy that reinforces your business goals.



Design

- Strategic layout
- Color psychology
- Typography
- Visual hierarchy



Content

- Descriptive language
- Limited choices
- Storytelling
- Nostalgia elements



Pricing

- Price anchoring
- Currency symbol removal
- Decoy pricing
- Menu engineering



Training

- Menu knowledge
- Suggestive selling
- Psychology awareness
- Performance tracking

Implementation Roadmap

1

Analyze current menu performance

2

Apply design principles

3

Train staff thoroughly

4

Measure performance

5

Refine and optimize

Remember: Small changes can lead to significant results

Implementing even a few of these principles can increase average order value by 10-30%