

5 KEY TECHNIQUES

FOR BOOSTING RESTAURANT CHECK AVERAGES

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Successful restaurant operators are able to juggle numerous financial and operational demands on an ongoing basis. One of the most overlooked yet critical for boosting the bottom line is check average. The fact of the matter is, determining when you are losing valuable income from existing guests and taking proactive measures to recoup that revenue is essential to surviving in today's challenging marketplace.



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THE IMPORTANCE OF CHECK AVERAGE

We all know that running a restaurant is demanding, but just how challenging is being an operator in the current foodservice climate?

Here are some eye-opening facts:

- Although overall foodservice industry growth remains positive, total sales have seen a trend of gradual growth deceleration, spanning back to 2015, per Technomic.
- According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are more than 1 million restaurants in the U.S. right now, and more pop up every day: The industry adds about 10,000 units a year, from a combination of 60,000 openings and 50,000 closures.

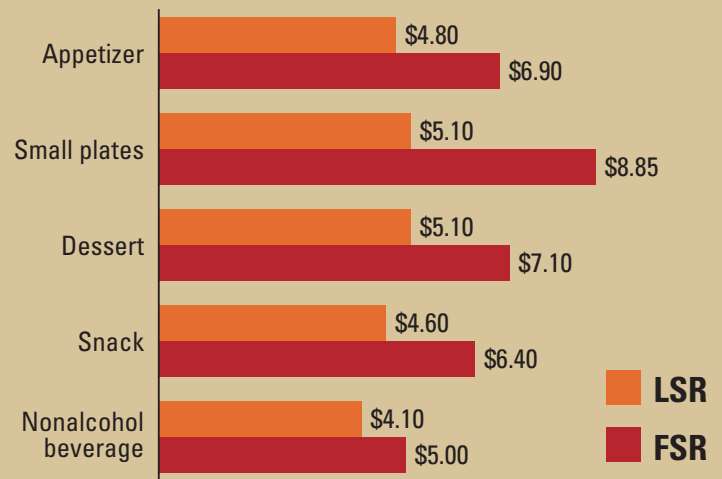
According to Technomic Principal Wade Hanson, “The foodservice industry is in the midst of a five-year run of flat traffic, so growth is dependent on finding ways to better market your different menu parts and add \$1, \$2, \$5 to your check average.” Thus, regardless of what type of foodservice operation you run, boosting check averages can help you succeed where others fail. Let’s delve into the five areas of focus for upping those dollar signs on guests’ receipts.

Technique 1

MENU CATEGORIES TO CONSIDER

The first operator step of the menu approach is to determine what food and drink categories to spotlight. There’s a dollar limit as to how much consumers would likely be willing to pay for various mealparts. Thus, operators need to find the sweet spot of achieving the maximum profit without turning off the guest.

At what point does a _____ cost so much that you wouldn’t even consider buying it at...?



Base: Approx. 750
Source: Technomic's Value and Pricing Consumer Trend Report

Here are a few additional takeaways for operators:

- Consumers are willing to pay more for desserts than appetizers; therefore, physical menus, marketing materials and service staff should focus more attention on pushing sweets over apps.
- Consider adding a few more cents to apps, small plates, desserts, snacks and beverages if you come under the average; those additional pennies will significantly boost check averages over time.
- Because consumers are more likely to spend a premium on small plates over appetizers, think about repositioning your menu as such.

Beyond the traditional mealparts, there are a number of other menu categories to consider when boosting check averages. Here are a few:

Add-ons, such as 50 cents extra for guacamole at a build-your-own burrito restaurant

Pairing menus, such as three mini desserts paired with three different drinks

Upgraded sides, such as sweet potato fries with a premium sauce over traditional fries with ketchup

Technique 2

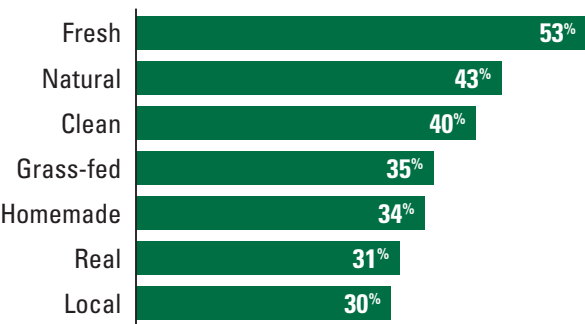
MENU BUZZWORDS
AND DESCRIPTORS

After determining which menu categories to consider and which menu items to feature, the next step in the menu approach concerns the specific words used to title and describe your menu items.

Buzzwords: More Bang for Your Buck

There are a number of buzzwords that—if featured on the menu—prompt diners to pay a premium. For example, about a third of consumers would be willing to pay more for a creme anglaise sauce that’s described as homemade and featuring real dairy.

“I am willing to pay more for food or beverage described as _____.”



Source: Technomic’s Healthy Eating Consumer Trend Report

Descriptors

Vivid descriptions of menu items will also entice guests to order particular dishes or beverages. As a case study, below are two separate descriptors for the exact same menu item.

It’s clear that the Napa Chicken & Portobellos dish is promoted in a more colorful light. Specificity is key; for instance, mushrooms become portobellos and creamy wine sauce becomes Napa Valley wine sauce with Parmesan cheese. Further, words that connote bland flavor, such as low-fat, are replaced with craveable descriptors that imply the same health connotations but with a more flavorful twist.

It’s evident that consumers agree. When asked to rank both descriptions separately regarding purchase intent, uniqueness, craveability and draw, consumers give higher marks to the Napa Chicken than the Low Fat Chicken on all counts.

	Low Fat Chicken & Mushrooms	Napa Chicken & Portobellos
Purchase intent	43%	46%
Uniqueness	47%	60%
Craveability	54%	59%
Draw	63%	68%

Source: Technomic’s MenuSurf

Bland Description:

LOW FAT chicken & mushrooms

A low-fat twist on a traditional classic. Our broiled chicken breast is seasoned with our unique blend of herbs, smothered with flavorful mushrooms and creamy wine sauce, and served over a bed of rice with a side of our vegetable medley.



Exciting Description:

napa chicken & portobellos

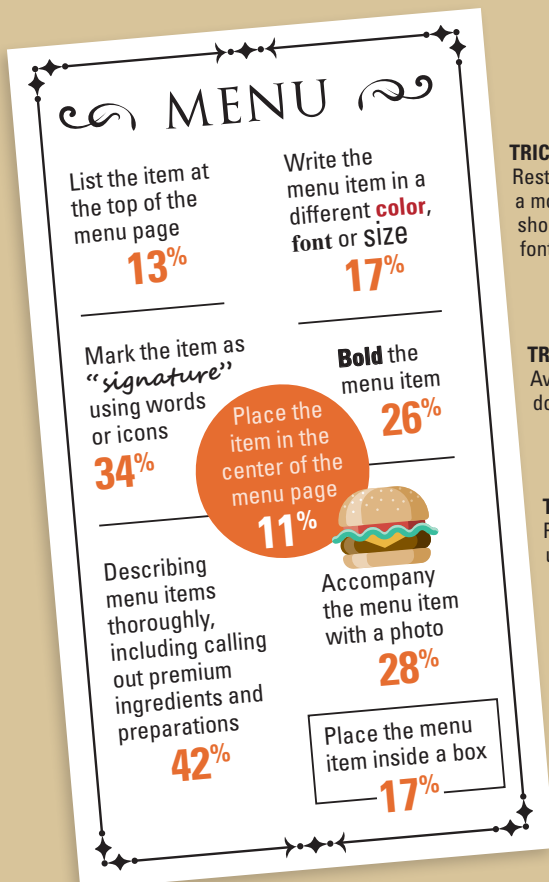
A grilled chicken breast topped with portobello mushrooms, smothered in a rich Napa Valley wine sauce and Parmesan cheese. Served over sauteed farmers market zucchini, roasted red peppers, red onions and organic wild rice pilaf.

Technique 3

MENU DESIGN HACKS

Beyond properly describing menu items, the third step is the physical menu layout. The most obvious menu design hack to boost check averages is to spotlight the highest-priced items on the menu so your guests are heavily encouraged to order them. These items tend to feature upscale proteins, such as steak or seafood, or other premium ingredients, such as truffle. Therefore, to ensure that the most profitable items are highlighted and easy for customers to find, you should use one or more of these eight menu psychology strategies.

Techniques operators agree to using to highlight the most profitable menu items



TRICK:
Restaurants that appeal to a mostly older demographic should consider using large font with a light background.

TRICK:
Avoid holding the price so it doesn't stand out.

TRICK:
Photos are especially useful for urban restaurants with international guests. Marketing Manager Mandy Groff of Auntie Anne's (with locations in more than 30 countries), for example, says the chain's pretzel photos "can transcend any of our guests' languages around the world."

Although some operators in the past have relied on eye-tracking tools for their menu designs, the idea of typical menu scanpath and "sweet spots" has largely been debunked by researchers. Instead, you should consider the eight techniques underscored above.

Source: Technomic's Operator Community Panel

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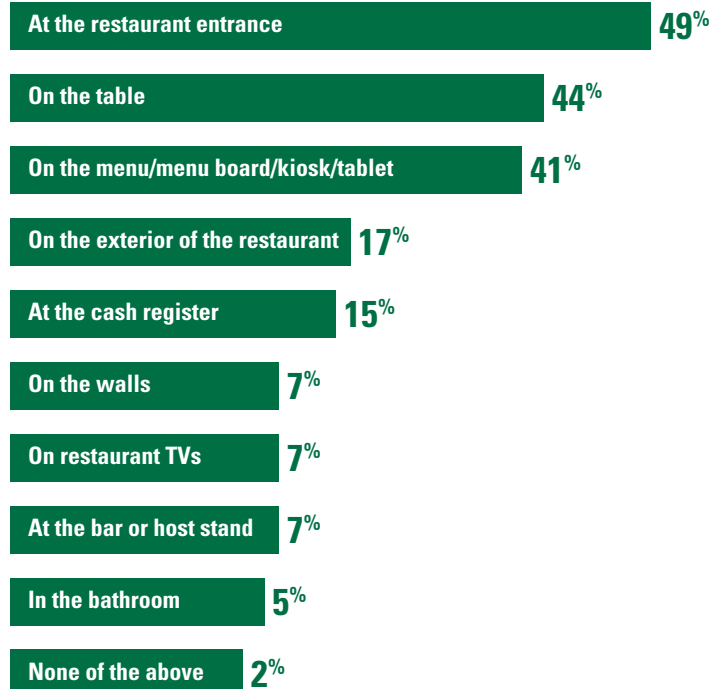
Technique 4

IN-STORE PROMOTIONS

There are a number of beyond-menu check-boosting tactics to heed within the four walls of your restaurant. Decor selections to encourage folks to buy more should be researched. For example, having food (namely desserts) in glass display cases or on carts in view of customers, or providing food and beverage samples are two effortless ways to entice guests to indulge.

More traditionally, placing in-store marketing materials in various locations around the restaurant can encourage add-on purchases, according to 98% of operators polled by Technomic.

Best places to display in-store marketing to boost check averages



Base: 59 operators

Source: Technomic's Operator Community Panel

Technique 5

TRAINING SERVICE STAFF TO SELL

The final key to boosting check averages are well-trained employees who know what and how to upsell. Your staff has the most influence over customer orders in your restaurant and must know how to guide diners not only toward the expensive menu items but also to ordering more items.

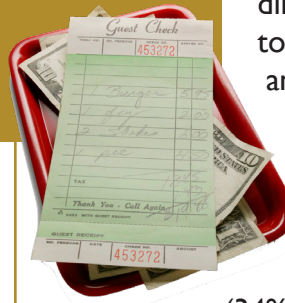
Preservice Initiatives

The first step is training your staff to recognize and read the diner to know when upselling is appropriate and which upselling techniques will work best for their patrons.

Heavy importance should also be placed on daily preservice staff meetings, during which front-of-house and back-of-house employees communicate to build stronger work relationships and management can train front-of-house staff on upselling techniques. Potential preservice meeting initiatives could include:

- The chef talking through specials
- Role-playing activities to practice check-boosting techniques
- Sommelier wine tasting and training

Offering incentives for staff with the largest daily check averages (or other competitive features) is one way to encourage upselling.



Midservice Initiatives

During service hours, it's imperative that your front-of-house service staff be freed up to cater to guests' needs and focus on upselling. That can be accomplished by having designated roles, such as expeditors who deal with back-of-house interactions to keep waitstaff interacting with tables and out of the weeds.

Once directly in front of the customer, a server is the key salesperson in the restaurant. Some 86% of operators admit to training their servers on staff-selling techniques to increase checks.

Thirty-nine percent of restaurant operators train staff to ask diners if they want any additional add-ons or customization. For example, asking diners if they want to add guacamole to their burrito for \$2 is an easy and quick technique. More than a third of operators encourage staff to give vivid verbal descriptions or compelling narratives for menu items (36%) and suggest a shareable appetizer or dessert (34%). Each of these techniques require the staff member to have a solid understanding of items from every part of the menu, as well as a top-of-mind personal favorite.

Techniques taught to staff to help boost check averages



Base: 58 operators

Source: Technomic's Operator Community Panel

It's clear that many operators aren't utilizing a number of these strategies to their advantage. For example, only a fifth of operators train their staff to suggest alcohol pairings or offer additional food as a takeaway option, such as a to-go dessert if the guest is too full after the entree. This encouragement at the very least puts the idea in guests' minds that additional items are available, and thus may entice more item orders, which boosts check averages.

The Bottom Line

Every operator wants to increase sales. From adding 50 cents to an order by encouraging extra toppings to guiding diners to purchase the \$150 seafood tower over the \$45 lobster, any extra money is good for your business. When it comes to boosting check averages, this five-pronged approach will give operators the greatest odds of success.

To gain more insight into techniques for boosting check average, contact Custom Culinary®—the leading provider of culinary flavor systems and solutions to the foodservice and food processing industries.

<http://www.customculinary.com/>

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