



Review Article

# A review of literature on restaurant menus: Specifying the managerial issues

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## Abstract

This conceptual study specifically aims at reviewing the critical managerial issues of menu, and demonstrating the conceptual structure of menu management. Based on the conceptual and empirical findings of menu literature, the major menu management issues are menu planning, menu pricing, menu designing, menu operating and menu development. Additionally, the paper makes a discussion on the conceptual relations between menu and meal experience. Given the scarcity of research that incorporates evidences and concepts of previous studies in one single study, the conceptual structure of menu management presented in this paper allows a comprehensive understanding of menu and forms a theoretical basis for future research.

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*Keywords:* Menu; Menu management; Restaurant firms

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## Introduction

Menu maintains its dominant position in restaurant firms, since it is the core of food and beverage operations. Specifically, menu is an instructor that clearly dictates (i) what will be produced, (ii) what type of equipment and ingredients are needed, and (iii) which qualifications employees should have. Menu also functions as a communicating and selling tool

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(Kincaid and Corsun, 2003). More specifically, it communicates not only the food and beverage offerings, but also the image of the firm. Furthermore, menu is a base on which the customers make their food choices and a well designed menu can direct customers' attention to the items the firm wants to sell more (Antun and Gustafson, 2005).

The critical qualifications attributed to menu describe its importance to restaurant operations and customer experiences. In fact, in contemporary understandings of menu, it has material and immaterial meanings. Materially, menu is a list or a card which documents the food and beverage options being offered by a restaurant. Immaterial meanings of menu highlight that it is a medium that affects customers' perceptions of restaurant experience (Wansink et al., 2005), and it is also an element of restaurant management that requires conducting critical managerial activities such as planning, pricing, designing and analyzing (Jones and Mifflin, 2001). It also differs from the main product of a restaurant. Prior research (Johns and Kivela, 2001; Gustafsson, 2004; Hansen et al., 2005) claim that the primary product of restaurants is meal experience and it is constituted by many components such as food and beverages, atmosphere, social factors and management. What customers receive from consumption in restaurants is their memories and overall perceptions of meal experience, and menu is part of that experience and has associations with customers' perceptions. Consequently, menu cannot be considered as the overall product of a restaurant but it is an important component complementing atmosphere, interactions with servers and other customers, and managerial systems which are jointly available in a restaurant where a good, memorable meal experience is the main product.

Since it is a key factor in attracting and satisfying customers and effecting performance of restaurant firms, menu has been gaining a considerable academic attention from researchers. The previous studies on menu constitute a substantial body of literature and they primarily examined the issues including menu planning, menu pricing, menu designing, and menu analysis. For instance, Kivela (2003) investigated menu planning through employing an experimental research design and proposed a menu item selection framework. Menu pricing was examined by several authors from a range of perspectives including the price perceptions of customers (Shoemaker, 1994; Iglesias and Guillen, 2002), price sensitivity, pricing methods (Kelly et al., 1994; Raab et al., 2009; Kelly et al., 2009), and psychological pricing (Carmin and Norkus, 1990; Naipaul and Parsa, 2001; Parsa and Hu, 2004). Menu designing has also gained a particular attention from menu researchers who have particularly focused on positioning the menu item on the menu card (Bowen and Morris, 1995; Kincaid and Corsun, 2003; Reynolds et al., 2005), labeling (Lockyer, 2006; Wansink et al., 2001) and describing menu items (McCall and Lynn, 2008; Hwang and Lorenzon, 2008). In the field of menu analysis, researchers have offered several models such as menu engineering (Kasavana and Smith, 1982), analysis of menu items' profitability (Hayes and Huffman, 1985), and more recently multi-dimensional analysis of menu items (Taylor and Brown, 2007). From a

practical perspective, menu is directly related to many functions of food and beverage operations and also absorbs a wide range of interrelated managerial decisions in the areas of planning, pricing, designing, operating, and developing menus.

Despite the growing academic attention to restaurant menus, previous research has a certain drawback. Principally, there is an apparent lack of an attempt at incorporating the major thoughts and ideas of menu research into one single study. Given the above background, this conceptual study presents a review of relevant literature to frame the current discussion on menu with an attempt to identify critical managerial issues. Thus, the specific objectives of the current study are (i) to identify the critical managerial issues of menu, and (ii) to demonstrate the conceptual structure of menu management. As the menu is a key to influencing success of firms in foodservice industries, this study could assist restaurateurs in understanding the role of menu in their managerial decisions. From an academic perspective, this paper presents a holistic framework for menu researchers since it incorporates the conceptual and empirical findings of previous menu research into one single study.

## Literature review

### *Theoretical underpinnings*

The perspectives of organizational, marketing and strategic management theories provide a reliable theoretical groundwork to understand the important managerial aspects of menu. For instance, organization theory explicitly emphasizes the influence of external environment both on the decisions of firm managers and the survival of firms on the long run. More specifically, external environment is one of the central themes of organization theory and the relevant studies (Duncan, 1972; Jurkovich, 1974; Dess and Beard, 1984; Ashill and Jobber, 1999) primarily propose that managers essentially consider the influential external factors that create uncertainty, diversity and volatility while making their decisions. Planning and operating menus in a restaurant context involve considering external factors such as customers, rivals, and vendors that have a great potential in creating uncertainty, diversity and volatility in the restaurants' immediate business environment. Complementing this view, marketing theory recognizes the importance of identifying the needs and expectations of customers, and developing and improving products and service perfectly fit to those needs and expectations. Additionally, pricing, promoting and distributing the products and services should also be consistent with the customers' needs and expectations on the one hand, and with the firm's objectives on the other hand. Thus, in the restaurant context, it is imperative that menu as the food and beverage combinations offered by a restaurant reflects the expectations and needs of customers. Moreover, managing menus involves planning, pricing, designing, distributing and promotional decisions which are also the main issues of marketing.

Strategic management is another promising theoretical perspective that helps us understand the importance of menu

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