

Food Truck Menu Engineering



The Art and Science of Profitable Menus

Creating an effective food truck menu involves much more than listing offerings and prices. Smart food truck operators use menu engineering, a strategic approach to menu design and pricing that can significantly boost their trucks' profitability.

Here are some key principles of menu engineering to consider, along with some actionable tips for each.

Design for Easy Readability

Your menu's design and layout are crucial and should be readable by all age groups. This applies to the menu on or near your food truck, your online ordering system, and your website.

Website and Online Ordering System

It's important to have a digital presence where customers can find you and browse your menu. Use a font size that is easily readable, at least a 12-point font or larger. Avoid fancy or script fonts that are hard to read. Leave plenty of white space to avoid a cluttered look. Consider using boxes, lines, or other design elements to organize menu sections clearly.

Menu Displayed On or Near the Food Truck or Trailer

There are different ways to showcase your menu, and many food trucks will use more than one option.

- **Mounted Digital Displays:** Attach a screen to the truck's exterior or near the order window. (Tip: make sure the screen is weather-resistant or covered)
- **A-Frame Boards:** Place a freestanding board near the truck.
- **Magnetic Strips or Tiles:** Use magnetic strips for easy rearrangement of items and prices, which can get stuck directly to the outside of a truck or trailer.
- **Roll-Up Banners:** Set up a banner next to the truck.
- **QR Code Posters:** Display codes that customers can scan to access a digital menu.
- **Hanging Chalkboards:** Suspend from the truck window or side for visibility.
- **Dry Erase Boards:** Suspend from the truck window or side for visibility.



Keep in mind that one downside to handwritten boards is that they are prone to smudging, and the menu writer must have good handwriting.

Tips for Effective Visual Menu Displays

- Use large, clear fonts and contrasting colors.
- Organize items logically (e.g., appetizers, mains, drinks).
- Ensure outdoor menus are waterproof or laminated.
- Place the menu at eye level or higher, ensuring it's visible even in crowds, or where it can be seen by people in line or soon to be in line.
- Match the menu design to the truck's overall theme and vibe.

Research and Know Your Competition

Before settling on your final menu, check out your competitors' menus. In developing and fine-tuning your menu, almost all of these things can impact what you do. Speed of service, for example, can give an indication of how many menu items work well for a small kitchen space. While not everything in this list is menu-related, it is operations and business-related, so while researching the competitor's food offerings, take the time to do a full overview of their businesses.

Here are some things to look for:

- How long have they been operating?
- What is on their menu?
- What beverages do they offer?
- What is their pricing?
- Where do they source their ingredients and other supplies from?
- What are their portion sizes?
- What do their menu items taste like?
- How is their service speed?
- Where and how do they advertise?
- How many staff do they have?
- What are the typical hours and days they operate their food truck or trailer?
- Where do they bring their food truck or trailer, and on what days and times?
- Do they offer swag (t-shirts, caps, other items) for sale?
- Do they have a loyalty program or other customer incentive program?
- Do they sell gift cards?



- Do they offer daily/weekly/monthly specials or sales? What are they?
- Is the food truck or trailer clean (outside and what you can see inside)?
- Are they a member of any local chambers or associations?
- Do they have a website?
- What online ordering platform are they using?
- Do they use social media? If so, which ones? How often do they post? What kinds of things are they posting?
- What are their reviews like on Google My Business, Yelp, Tripadvisor, Facebook and other review sites?
- Are they responding to reviews?
- What can you learn from their reviews?

Even food trucks or trailers serving different cuisines can compete for your customers' dollars. Understanding your competitors helps you better position your business for long-term success.

Tip: Don't just do an initial check of your competition. Stay on top of them and review them several times per year. New competitors might open, and current competitors may change their pricing and their menu offerings. They may also visit different locations and current locations at different times and days. Create a spreadsheet documenting everything you have found, date it, and update it when you do a review.

Tip: Use your cell phone as a tool. Take photos of the trucks and trailers and their menus. When you visit outdoor venues, markets, or festivals that have food trucks or trailers, use your phone to document new ideas that you can take back for your own business.

“Selling the Menu”: It’s All in How You Word It

Concepting: A quiche is a quiche unless it's a grilled vegetable, smoked gouda, creamy goat cheese and oven-roasted tomato savory tart.

Use vivid, appetizing language to describe menu items. Instead of just “grilled chicken breast,” try “herb-marinated grilled chicken breast with lemon butter sauce.” Highlight unique ingredients, cooking methods, or flavor profiles.

Well-crafted descriptions can significantly increase sales of particular dishes. People “feast” with their eyes prior to ordering. An excellent description can help you sell more menu items and convince people, even prior to tasting the dish, that it's going to be good. Descriptive menu labeling can increase sales by 27% and improve customer ratings by 28%, compared to plain labels.

Example:

Mediterranean Wrap: Cucumbers, chickpeas, spinach, olives, onion and feta wrapped in a wheat wrap
VS.

Mediterranean Wrap: Crisp cucumbers, hearty chickpeas, and tender baby spinach are joined by the bold flavors of Kalamata olives, sweet red onion, and tangy feta cheese, drizzled with a vibrant, zesty family recipe Mediterranean dressing and tucked into a soft wheat wrap.

Tip: For each menu item, list at least 3 descriptive adjectives and 1 unique selling point (e.g., organic, local, homemade, handmade, house made, made in house, chef’s special, our favorite, house favorite, staff favorite, imported, sourced from). Descriptive Words: zippy, roasted, savory, grilled, oven roasted, zesty, fresh, glazed, pan roasted, tangy, sweet, slightly sweet, smoked, crispy, crunchy, caramelized, rich, crunchy, creamy, etc.

Item Menu Placement

The placement of dishes on your menu matters. Many food trucks use the “Golden Triangle” concept - placing high-profit items in the upper right corner, where eyes tend to travel first. Group similar items together, but avoid putting your most and least expensive options right next to each other.

Tips:

- Identify your top 3 most profitable items and prominently place them on your menu—at the top right corner, at the top of a section, or in a highlighted box.
- Menu placement and pricing psychology work well if you do not use consecutive numbers. For example, you offer four salads ranging from \$10 to \$17. Instead of listing them \$10, \$14, \$15, \$17, put the highest-priced items near the end, but not at the end, so \$10, \$14, \$17, \$15. People will tend to pay more attention to the menu descriptions than to the prices when deciding what to order.
- If you are running specials, highlight them both online and offline by adding a box around the special or specials, making the text bolder or a different color or adding white text on a much darker background. If using this technique online, try to avoid red or green backgrounds with black or white text, as people who are colorblind (1 in 12 men and 1 in 200 women) may not see the visual properly.



Truth in Menu

You have a right to advertise your food and beverage products in a way that casts them in their best light. To misrepresent your products violates what is known as Truth in Menu laws.

Inaccurate or incomplete menus can lead to injuries and illness, especially for guests with food allergies. They can also be cause for legal action by patrons who feel you have misrepresented your products or by governing agencies for failing to comply with their requirements.

Tip: Although truth in menu laws vary by state, it's wise to accurately advertise menus and ingredients to avoid potential online backlash.

Consider Pricing Carefully

Pricing strategy is key to profitability. Know your food costs and aim for profit margins on each menu item. Keep in mind that you should also account for labor costs, overhead (utilities, insurance, etc.) and packaging (take-out containers, napkins, straws, etc.).

Consider using prices that are round numbers. Be strategic about your use of dollar signs. Some studies show that removing dollar signs can increase spending. Include sales tax as part of the pricing. As an example: Your menu item in a restaurant would sell for \$10.47; round it up to \$11.00. This can help cut down time when serving customers, as it's much easier and less time-consuming to make changes for them.

Tip: Calculate the food cost percentage for each menu item. Aim for an average food cost of 28-35% across your menu. Adjust prices to ensure no item exceeds 40% of food cost. Don't forget to keep track of market prices that fluctuate, and consider that some ingredients may save labor time and money by buying them pre-done or pre-prepared. An example would be fresh bell peppers. With waste and labor time, the cost of diced bell peppers is typically less expensive than preparing them in-house. The lower the food cost, the greater the profit.

Dietary Needs and Preferences

Clearly mark vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free, and other dietary options. Have alternatives available for common allergens. Learn about common allergens and make sure your staff is also aware of them. There are allergens out there, like allium allergies, which is an immune system reaction to plants in the allium family, which includes garlic, onions, leeks, chives, scallions, and shallots. While being allergic to allium isn't typically life-threatening, it can make people very ill.

Well-labeled menus cater to more customers and reduce questions for whoever is taking orders. With the continued growth of people trying to eat healthier diets, the demand for what used to be known in

the food business as the occasionally ordered “veg plate” has grown from a plate of steamed vegetables to more elaborate and tasty options.

Tip: Develop at least 3 menu items that cater to each major dietary restriction (vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free). Use clear symbols on your menu to denote these options.

Beverage Pairings

Offer pairing suggestions for those who might like to try new things, or just don't know and sometimes are afraid to ask for suggestions. By suggesting wine, beer, or other pairings for menu items, you can increase beverage sales. This can boost your sales averages and enhance the customer experience. Train any staff who might take orders on pairing basics so they can make knowledgeable recommendations.

Tip: For each main menu item, suggest at least one wine pairing and one beer or cocktail pairing (if applicable).

Using AI To Research, Test And Optimize Your Menu

Generative AI like ChatGPT, Google Gemini and Claude.ai, to name a few, can help a food truck operator get new menu ideas, do research on menu and food trends, help analyze profitability, and get ideas to reword menu items. Refer to the paragraph on “Selling the Menu” for some things you could ask Generative AI to give your descriptive ideas for menu items.

Tip: Getting good results from Generative AI prompts (asking the AI a question) depends on how you word the question. Giving more detailed information back from what you ask can result in getting back more detailed results.

Example 1:

Prompt: Give me some vegetarian ideas for a food truck.

These Are The Results From A Request To ChatGPT

Here are some creative vegetarian food truck ideas that can cater to a variety of tastes and preferences:

1. Plant-Based Comfort Food

Menu Ideas: Mac and cheese bowls, loaded vegetarian chili fries, grilled cheese with gourmet toppings, veggie burgers, and sliders.

Theme: "Comfort in Every Bite."

2. Mediterranean Mezze Truck

Menu Ideas: Falafel wraps, hummus bowls, spanakopita, dolmas, and tabbouleh salads.

Theme: "Mediterranean Bliss on Wheels."

3. Veggie Tacos & Bowls

Menu Ideas: Sweet potato and black bean tacos, jackfruit "carnitas," cauliflower rice bowls, and roasted veggie quesadillas.

Theme: "Taco Verde: Plant Power Packed."

4. Asian-Inspired Vegetarian Fusion

Menu Ideas: Veggie dumplings, tofu banh mi, miso-glazed eggplant rice bowls, and vegetable sushi rolls.

Theme: "Wok the Garden."

5. Vegetarian BBQ Truck

Menu Ideas: Smoked jackfruit sandwiches, BBQ tempeh sliders, grilled veggie skewers, and cornbread with vegan butter.

Theme: "BBQ Without the Moo."

6. Indian Street Food

Menu Ideas: Paneer tikka wraps, aloo paratha, samosas, pav bhaji, and chickpea curry bowls.

Theme: "Curry Caravan."

7. Hearty Soups and Salads

Menu Ideas: Seasonal vegetable soups, lentil stew, quinoa salads, and loaded avocado toast.

Theme: "Soup & Greens Mobile."

8. Breakfast All Day

Menu Ideas: Veggie breakfast burritos, avocado toast, tofu scramble bowls, and vegan pancakes.

Theme: "Morning Glory."

9. Gourmet Grilled Veggies

Menu Ideas: Grilled veggie paninis, stuffed portobello mushrooms, veggie kebabs, and roasted sweet potato chips.

Theme: "The Veggie Grill Spot."

10. Smoothie and Juice Bar

Menu Ideas: Fresh smoothies, cold-pressed juices, acai bowls, and healthy snacks like energy balls.

Theme: "Purely Refreshing."

----- End Results-----

That question is vague and will give a variety of results. Being more specific about the request will return more specific and targeted results.

Example 2:

Prompt: Give me six vegetarian and three vegan ideas for a food truck specializing in Greek cuisine. The criteria are that menu items need to use fewer than 9 ingredients each and must be easy and quick to prepare on a food truck or trailer.

These are the results from a request to ChatGPT

Here's a Greek-inspired vegetarian and vegan menu tailored for food truck service. Each item is under 9 ingredients and optimized for quick preparation:

Vegetarian Menu (6 Items)

Spinach and Feta Pita Wrap

Ingredients: Spinach, feta cheese, red onions, olives, tomatoes, tzatziki, oregano, pita bread.

Preparation: Pre-cook spinach mix; assemble in pita with fresh toppings and drizzle tzatziki.

Greek Salad Cup

Ingredients: Romaine lettuce, cucumber, cherry tomatoes, red onion, olives, feta cheese, oregano, olive oil, red wine vinegar.

Preparation: Pre-chop veggies; layer in portable cups for grab-and-go.

Halloumi Souvlaki Skewers

Ingredients: Halloumi, zucchini, cherry tomatoes, red onion, olive oil, lemon juice, oregano, pita (optional).

Preparation: Pre-skewer ingredients; grill to order; serve with a lemon wedge.

Stuffed Grape Leaves (Dolmas)

Ingredients: Grape leaves, rice, dill, mint, lemon, olive oil, garlic, salt.

Preparation: Pre-make and store chilled; serve with a side of tzatziki or lemon wedges.

Greek Potato Wedges

Ingredients: Potatoes, olive oil, lemon, oregano, garlic, salt, feta (optional).

Preparation: Pre-cook potatoes; crisp in fryer or oven and toss with seasoning.

Spanakopita Triangles

Ingredients: Phyllo dough, spinach, feta, onion, dill, olive oil, egg, garlic.

Preparation: Pre-bake and reheat to order; serve with a dollop of tzatziki.

Vegan Menu (3 Items)

Vegan Gyro Bowl

Ingredients: Roasted chickpeas, cucumber, tomato, red onion, olives, lettuce, tahini sauce, lemon, pita chips.

Preparation: Roast chickpeas ahead; assemble bowl to order with fresh veggies and tahini drizzle.

Grilled Veggie Pita Wrap

Ingredients: Zucchini, eggplant, bell peppers, red onion, garlic hummus, lemon, olive oil, pita bread.

Preparation: Pre-grill veggies; assemble in pita with hummus and a lemon squeeze.

*Lentil Soup (Fakes) *Fakes is a traditional Greek lentil soup*

Ingredients: Brown lentils, carrots, celery, onion, garlic, tomato paste, olive oil, oregano, lemon.

Preparation: Cook soup in batches; serve in cups with a slice of pita.

Food Truck Efficiency Tips

Pre-prep where possible: Cook fillings and chop fresh veggies in advance.

Assemble to order: Keep components separate for quick assembly and freshness.

Streamlined packaging: Use portable wraps, cups, and eco-friendly containers.

----- End Results-----

Test, Test, Test Again, And Refine.

Menu engineering is an ongoing process. Using your point-of-sale system to track menu sales will help you fine-tune your menus. Regularly analyze which dishes are most and least popular and pay attention to seasonal differences. Spicy menu items, for example, could have an increase in sales during cooler weather but may not be hot sellers midsummer. Be willing to replace poor sellers with other options. Use specials to test new menu items that you are considering putting on the menu permanently or seasonally.

Tip: Review your menu's performance monthly. Replace or redo the bottom 10% of sellers every quarter. Introduce at least 2-3 new dishes each season to keep the menu fresh.

Additional Tips:

- If including images on your menu, use professional food photography for at least your top 5 signature dishes.
- Implement the "Rule of Three". Every ingredient should be in at least three other dishes. This cuts down on wastage, as well as preparation time.
- Conduct regular taste testing. Have your staff taste new menu items and provide feedback. This not only improves the quality of the dishes but also helps staff make informed recommendations to customers.

By applying these menu engineering principles and actionable tips, food trucks and trailers can design menus that appeal to customers and maximize their profitability. An optimized menu is a powerful tool for success.