How Digital Menu Boards Help Reduce Your "Foodprint"

By Cheryl K

It's fall and harvest time for most farmers in the United States. As the bumper crop of raw grains, fruits and vegetables are processed for consumption and distributed through various wholesalers, it's a reality that millions of dollars' worth of food gets discarded and thrown out by end-users in this country alone. This raises an interesting question: how can technology help the restaurant industry reduce their "foodprint" and make an impact on minimizing food waste in their stores?

Unfortunately POS systems, while flexible enough to document food inventory with related sales, can't easily update a static menu board when a store has a special LTO item it needs to promote or the ability to quickly change out low volume seller. Testing new items isn't even a consideration with a traditional-style menu board system.

With the latest trend of digital menu boards and digital displays making a visual impact in engaging restaurant guests, savvy restaurant owners are seeing the possibility of using digital menu systems to further define their menu mix and reduce wasted inventory issues. Here's a quick summary of four ways digital menu boards can help restaurants control not only their food costs, but make a difference in their "foodprint" .

Integrate your POS/Inventory systems with a Digital Display to control food cost.

Reduce Your "Foodprint"

1. Promotion of Limited Time Offers

We've all seen taped-on LTO posters on static menu boards. Not only is it unattractive visually to your guests, it doesn't speak to the quality impression you want them to have of your business. And how about the LTO's that are out of date, and it's too hard to physically change out the image on the menu board? There's nothing like telling your guest you don't have that item any more, or the price is no longer valid.

With a digital menu board, promotions are easy to update, especially if you have multiple stores needing an update at the same time. Perhaps one store has surplus stock of an item: the easiest way to reduce the inventory is to offer a store special. Once the promotion is over, the menu board can quickly be changed back to a regular menu. No need to climb a ladder to access the static board to change out a whole graphic or menu strip. Your LTO's will accurately be displayed as an available food item.

2. Managing Your Food Costs

It is never easy to predict the best menu mix for a restaurant – what works best in one location might not be tempting in another. And your food costs can vary from location to location, depending upon what is more readily available. How do you promote the special chicken wings you got at a great price because the warehouse serving the area needed to get rid of stock? How can you sell out the lower margin but quicker spoilage fresh apple pies?

A digital menu board can help manage your food costs by allowing you to design and display a menu mix that works for each store location. Offer the chicken wings as a special item on football Sundays, programmed to be displayed for the two hours before and after the game. Program the apple pies at a special price during the dinner rush. Digital software allows flexibility in setting up the programming to run certain images at a designated time, giving operators better control over food management and able to make better purchasing decisions.

3. Keeping Customers Happy

What excuses have you made when you've run out of a menu item? Do you tape up the line item on your menu board? How about the disgruntled guest who is upset the sandwich he sees listed isn't available today because you ran out of the special sauce used?

You can't always anticipate having enough food ingredients on hand. Even the best POS/inventory system can't predict what menu listing will be "hot" this week. With a digital menu board, the software program allows quick and immediate changes to your display if your "hot" seller isn't available today. And if you use digital in your drive-thru lane, the change can apply to both your indoor and outdoor menu boards. Simply add the listing back in once your item can be sold again.
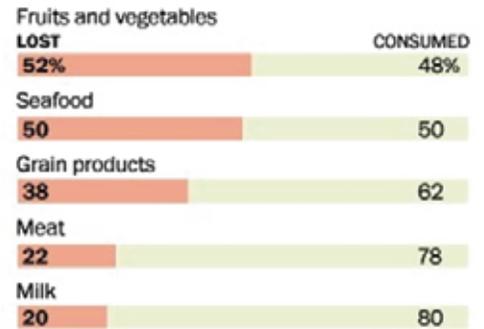
4. New Menu Concepts

Testing a new menu listing can be a challenge. How do you best promote a new addition to your menu? Pictures sell: a nicely shot food picture with all the bells and whistles can put your new signature sandwich or burger on the trays of your guests faster than a simple text menu strip.

Digital menu systems make uploading and featuring new promotions or LTO's a quick process. Seeing the same stale promotion for months on end tells your guests you aren't innovative or interested in trying new products. Guests enjoy seeing what's new on your menu, and visual images mean nice revenue bumps compared to static displays. And if guests are sampling your new promotion it means the ingredients you've purchased will be used accordingly, resulting in a positive "foodprint" – less wasted product in the trash. And because your POS/inventory control is in place, you know if the new promotion is a success you can move the item into your regular menu mix.

Down the drain

Food lost and consumed, in percent, calculated collectively for the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand

Fruits and vegetables

LOST		CONSUMED
52%		48%

Seafood

| 50 | | 50 |

Grain products

| 38 | | 62 |

Meat

| 22 | | 78 |

Milk

| 20 | | 80 |

Sources: Natural Resources Defense Council, U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization | The Washington Post

Tying in a digital menu board system with your POS/Inventory control process can help you make a significant reduction of your "foodprint" by reducing the effect of food purchase fluctuations. By easily updating your menu board to reflect new menu items, special promotions, current LTO's, and current menu mix, you have the ability to cut down the amount of food tossed into the trash while boosting your bottom line.