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Upselling: From Starters to Dessert



There's hard evidence that suggestions—from waitstaff in full-service restaurants and from counter staff in limited-service restaurants—are important in boosting diners' check averages. But there's an art to making suggestions to consumers. Whole books have been written about servers and suggestive selling, but here's a look at a few basic principles and winning techniques, based on recent Technomic research and best practices.

Restaurant servers and counter staff, and even operators, sometimes have mixed feelings about the idea of making product suggestions to diners. But servers, including counter staff in LSRs, bring value to their transactions with diners precisely because they know the menu and can make suggestions to optimize the particular dining occasion and each diner's experience.

Marketing by Meal Part

Research shows that servers' menu knowledge and suggestions are weighed heavily when consumers evaluate the "value proposition" posed by a given restaurant. For example, in a full-service restaurant, consumers demand friendly, knowledgeable waitstaff; in a limited-service restaurant, patrons seek convenience and efficiency.

Overall, about a quarter of items purchased in full-service restaurants are influenced by server suggestions. For some types of items, servers influence almost half of orders.

Let's take a look at suggestive selling by meal part.

Marketing appetizers. The beginning of a meal is a great place for servers to start upselling. Most diners arrive at the restaurant already hungry—and in a celebratory frame of mind. Just a little suggestion might persuade them to purchase an appetizer, to buy a higher-end starter than they might originally have considered, or to share an appetizer or sampler plate if they've decided to take a pass on an individual appetizer order. Consumers are especially looking to indulge for special occasions, so servers may want to offer more "extras" such as appetizers, adult beverages and desserts (and to suggest more indulgent entrée options).

Three-quarters of consumers base their buying decision on the appearance of appetizers and how they are described. Servers can succeed in increasing appetizer sales by emphasizing flavors, ingredients and other taste attributes, such as the freshness of the item and the appetizer's ability to satisfy a craving.

As with all meal parts, it can be most effective for servers to begin with specific suggestions. A waiter could suggest the restaurant's signature

calamari appetizer, for instance, by describing the freshness of the seafood; the light, crispy, crunchy batter; and the tangy sauce with which it's served.

Servers' menu knowledge and suggestions are a big part of a restaurant's value equation.

Marketing salads. This is one of many areas where offering options for customization can be quite powerful. Diners appreciate a server's upselling suggestion to add a protein (such as chicken or shrimp) or a tangy cheese atop a salad for a small additional charge. Most consumers also indicate a strong interest in choosing from a variety of salad dressings, so operators might want to allow their patrons to customize salads with whatever dressings the restaurant offers. Restaurants may still create specialty salads with a suggested dressing that complement's the salad's flavor profile, but guests will have the option to substitute another dressing if desired.

Marketing entrées. Most consumers who are not sure what they want are willing to explore types of entrées by protein category (beef, pork, poultry, seafood, vegetarian) and have an idea of what type of flavor profile sounds appetizing (bold or mild, something edgy or a classic comfort food). A good server makes suggestions accordingly.

Here again, customization options have wide appeal. For instance, most consumers find build-your-own-burger options appealing, and many say they want restaurants or servers to provide suggestions for flavor pairings. Operators may want to consider listing a few chef-recommended combinations on the menu, and should make sure servers are trained to know which ingredients and flavors will complement one another best.

Marketing by Meal Part—*continued*

Healthy eating is a concern to an increasing number of diners. There's also a growing group who have specific dietary requirements: some have an allergy or a chronic condition that limits what they can eat, while others follow a vegetarian or gluten-free regimen. More than half of consumers indicate that it is somewhat or very important to them that menu items can be altered to accommodate allergies, while nearly as many feel the same about the inclusion of low-sodium items as well as the ability to learn precisely what ingredients go into each dish. About a quarter are looking for gluten-free items. Consumers appreciate it when a server can offer detailed and correct nutritional information about menu items, and suggest ways the preparation could be altered to fit the diner's needs.

Marketing specials. With the growing emphasis on fresh, in-season fare, seasonal specials and limited-time offers have become a bigger part of the menu mix. Server suggestions play an especially important role here. Servers or counter staff should taste the items and should be able to explain in detail the ingredients and what makes the dish distinctive.

Marketing Beverages

Waitstaff suggestions have a substantial impact on orders of both alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, and are effective in encouraging diners to try new beverages. Nearly a quarter of consumers polled say they would consider trying a beverage they had not tried before if their waiter recommended it. More than four out of 10 consumers are interested in premium and/or healthy beverage options. Operators should focus on training servers to know which beverages pair best with certain dishes and about how to provide suggestions based on specific consumer preferences.

Marketing Beverages—*continued*

Server suggestions have an impact on nearly half of wine orders. Restaurants that serve wine—even fast-casual eateries—benefit from educating servers on the menued wines and wine/food pairings. Food pairings with beer and spirits are also becoming more common. Like wine, beer can also convey earthy, spicy and fruity flavors to provide a complementary accent to any part of a meal.

Non-alcoholic beverages are also ripe for the idea of food pairings. In fact, some restaurants now offer food pairing suggestions for their array of gourmet coffees or teas.

Leaving Room for Dessert

The end of the meal is an important time for boosting check averages. In full-service restaurants, servers can begin the suggestive selling of dessert when they initially take the meal order—mentioning, for instance, that diners may want to “save room” for dessert and naming one or two signature items.

Although servers may plant a suggestion early, consumers report that the majority of away-from-home desserts they consume are spur-of-the-moment decisions, often based on cravings. This is especially true for health-conscious consumers. Server suggestions can give diners “permission” to go ahead and order a dessert they really crave. A server's prompt that a dessert or part of it could be boxed to go, a proposal that a dessert can be shared with others in

Server suggestions have disproportionate influence on consumers' beverage and dessert decisions.

Leaving Room for Dessert—*continued*

the party, or the offer of a mini-size dessert instead of a full portion could push a diner who's wavering on the dessert decision into placing the order.

Visual cues also play a strong role in the dessert decision. Many consumers say they are more likely to order dessert if they can see the options on a tray or cart or in a display case at the counter. A spectacular dessert tray brought to a table can even prompt *other* parties in the dining room to begin thinking about dessert.

In addition, consumers' ideas about what constitutes "dessert" are changing. Many who take a pass on a food item might respond enthusiastically to the idea of an after-dinner drink, a specialty coffee or tea.

On the Way Out

More and more restaurants offer grab-and-go items as well as packaged food and other merchandise for retail sale. These items are a final opportunity for upselling.

For instance, at family-style restaurants, consumers enjoy picking up bakery items and pastries to take home. Operators might want to consider putting more effort into marketing bakery items by offering display cases near the cashier or hostess station, and reminding servers to inform guests about what's available. Other restaurants offer items such as signature sauces; servers can suggest to diners as they leave that they might want to pick up a bottled or packaged specialty item that they can't obtain elsewhere, as a way to extend to future occasions the unique experience offered by the restaurant.

Sysco Can Help

Independent restaurants generally excel at warm, personalized service. That distinction alone is not enough to compete effectively, however, if operators, chefs and servers aren't also keeping up with menu trends, the latest nutrition issues, and changing consumer needs.

Your partnership with Sysco can help level the playing field. Your Sysco Marketing Associate, backed by Sysco's team of restaurant operations experts, can help you understand and take advantage of the latest research in what consumers are seeking from restaurants today and what types of server interactions they expect and appreciate.

Sysco's Business Reviews offer powerful tools for independent restaurants, including help with server training. During your Business Review, specialists may offer you waitstaff coaching tips as well as recommendations for capitalizing on the latest trends.

In addition, Sysco's iCare suite of services provides restaurateurs with connections to business partners that help them compete; local and national partners can assist operators with services in operations, finance, human resources and marketing.

For more information, contact your Sysco Marketing Associate.

