

Digital menu boards drive college, university sales

Operators cater to adventurous, tech-savvy students with constantly changing menu platform.

By Richard Ventura



Up-and-coming generations love technology and they love good food. That's good news for foodservice operators looking to boost sales and drive traffic in colleges and universities.

Info from a screen

Today's young adults are fully accustomed to getting their information from a screen. According to research firm Nielsen, smartphone usage is highest among millennials ages 18- to 24-years old, with 98 percent of this group owning smartphones. Millennials ages 25- to 34-years old rank second, with a 97 percent ownership rate. That group is followed by Gen Xers between the ages of 35- and 44-years old, with a 96 percent ownership rate. That means smartphones are nearly ubiquitous among these generational segments, according to Nielsen.

Often these consumers are looking at screens because they are deciding what to eat, even after arriving in the dining services area. Digital menu boards can help to make it easier for these tech-savvy consumers to see clearly what foods and beverages are available, which can facilitate a smoother, more satisfying food selection and purchasing process.

By making the process faster and more customer friendly, college and university operators can improve throughput, which contributes to increased foodservice sales and higher customer satisfaction. The key, experts point out, is to be proactive, and not just use the boards to change items when something runs out.

Formulate a strategy

"Lay out a strategy of what your goals and objectives are," says Richard Ventura, the vice president of strategy for NEC Display Solutions of America. "Use measurement tools like big data analytics to analyze what [customers] are doing and suggest actions that will increase revenues and profits and decrease [ordering] time."

NEC is a leading provider of commercial LCD displays and projectors, and offers a portfolio of solutions for retail, education, health care and other facilities. In the foodservice business, digital menu boards can enable an establishment to do much more than just post a list of the daily specials. These high-tech solutions can provide a way to decrease wait times, encourage impulse buys and even save energy, experts say.

Easy to change

One of the chief advantages of the digital menu boards is their ability to update content quickly and easily. At the very least, Ventura says, a foodservice operator on a college or university campus has to change the menu to accommodate the various dayparts, so different menus will appear on the screen for breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks, a growing category in the foodservice industry – particularly among students.

It is also easy to change a digital menu board to promote a high-margin item, remove a selection from the menu when inventory levels are exhausted, and even add a last-minute special to promote a particular product. The high-quality screens possess a crisp, vivid picture that can enable the operator to enliven the presentation by adding some creative touches such as food photos or even animation.

Automating the system makes it easy to update content, Ventura says, because the system can tie inventory and pricing together. For example, during the fall, a dining services operator can highlight the ever-popular pumpkin spice latte or push a particular soup. When the promotion ends or a location runs out of a key ingredient, the operator can remove the item from the menu without having to resort to an unattractive strip of tape and paper that might be used to cover a cardboard menu board. A content manager can even make the changes remotely, if the manager is well versed in User Experience Design (UX). "A web browser and simple UX make this process easy," Ventura says.

Save money, energy

The technology can also help the operator save money and energy, as the screens can be programmed to shut off when the dining venue is closed. Also, the screens never go black inadvertently, as self-monitoring software sends an email to the NEC support team when something is amiss.

Changing content frequently is a good way to keep adventurous, restless college students engaged. They will read the boards as they decide what to eat, and can also be entertained with photos, announcements, trivia and even social media tie-ins.

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