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Brian Wansink, James Painter and Koert Van Ittersum  
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# Descriptive Menu Labels' Effect on Sales

If descriptive menu-item labels are used sparingly and appropriately, they may be able to improve sales and post-consumption attitudes of both the food and the restaurant.

BY BRIAN WANSINK, JAMES PAINTER, AND  
KOERT VAN ITTERSUM

Many restaurant chains have turned to descriptive menu labels—such as Jack Daniels® Chicken, Psychedelic Sorbet®, or the Blooming Onion®—in an effort to influence customers' choices and attitudes. The use of descriptive menu labels is common in the hospitality industry,<sup>1</sup> but we wondered whether simply changing the menu labels from generic, straightforward names to descriptive names actually influences sales, or, for that matter, makes a customer actually believe the food tastes better. While there are indications that labels can influence taste,<sup>2</sup> most labeling

studies have focused only on the effect of nutritional labels, health labels, and warning labels,<sup>3</sup> and not on descriptive marketing-oriented labels.

To learn more about the effect of descriptive labels, we conducted a six-week-long field study of six items on a cafeteria's menu to answer these three questions:

- Do descriptive labels increase sales?
- Do descriptive labels make customers believe the food tastes better?, and

<sup>3</sup> See: M.A. DeTurck and G.M. Goldhaber, "Effectiveness of Product Warning Labels: Effects of Consumers' Information Processing Objectives," *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, Vol. 23 (1989), pp. 111–126; E.C. Hackleman, "Food Label Information: What Consumers Say They Want and What They Need," *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 8, 1981, pp. 477–483; and Debra L. Miller, Victoria H. Castellanos, David J. Shide, John C. Peters, and Barbara Rolls, "Effect of Fat-free Potato Chips with and without Nutrition Labels on Fat and Energy Intakes," *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, Vol. 68, 1998, pp. 282–290.

<sup>1</sup> For example, see: "Boutique Brands," *Restaurant Business; Brand Power Supplement*, June 1997, pp. 20–21; "Signature Dishes," *Restaurant Business; Brand Power Supplement*, June 1997, pp. 36–37; and "Pork: Cut to the Profits, Fruit of the Loin," *Restaurant Business; Brand Power Supplement*, June 1998, pp. 118–119.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Wansink, Se-Bum Park, Steven Sonka, and Michelle Morganosky, "How Soy Labeling Influences Preference and Taste," *International Food and Agribusiness Management Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2000), pp. 85–94.

- Do descriptive labels influence customers' attitudes toward a restaurant and their intent to return?

After showing how some consumers evaluate descriptive labels, we describe a controlled field study that investigated how descriptive menu-item labels influenced customers' purchases, post-consumption evaluation, and repurchase intentions of six menu items (see the sidebar at right). Following this, we give suggestions that managers might use in generating descriptive labels and where they should draw the line in using them.

**How consumers evaluate descriptive menu labels.** Consumers' selection of items from a menu entails more than simply the process of elimination.<sup>4</sup> Customers scan menus (or, in the case of our study, cafeteria signs) looking for benefits they believe will satisfy their expectations at that point in time.<sup>5</sup> Consider how consumers will evaluate "Grandma's Homemade Apple Pie." If they associate "Grandma's" with "a lot of flavor," they will adjust their beliefs about the characteristics of Grandma's cooking (flavorful) with the characteristics of apple pie (sweet, spicy). They then apply the assumptions they have about Grandma's cooking to what they believe about the product.<sup>6</sup>

If the associations are favorable, the resulting "halo effect" should not only influence customers' purchases, but it should also influence their post-purchase evaluation of the product and possibly that of the restaurant also.<sup>7</sup> Following that logic, we believe that descriptive menu labels will not only increase menu items' sales, but will also

<sup>4</sup>Cynthia Huffman and Michael J. Houston, "Goal-oriented Experiences and the Development of Knowledge," *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (September 1993), pp. 190–207.

<sup>5</sup>See: Douglas A. Schellinck, "Cue Choice as a Function of Time Pressure and Perceived Risk," *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 10 (1983), pp. 470–475; and Jan-Benedict E.M. Steenkamp, "Conceptual Model of the Quality Perception Process," *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (December 1990), pp. 309–333.

<sup>6</sup>John R. Anderson and G.H. Bower, *Human Associative Memory* (Washington, DC: V.H. Winston & Sons, 1973).

<sup>7</sup>J.C. Olson, "The Importance of Cognitive Processes and Existing Knowledge Structure for Understanding Food Acceptance," in *Criteria of Food Acceptance: How Man Chooses What He Eats*, ed. J. Solms and R.L. Hal (Zurich: Forster, 1981), pp. 69–80.

## The Study Methodology

To determine how consumers respond to descriptive labels, we conducted a six-week field experiment in a faculty cafeteria at the University of Illinois. After reviewing the past sales of products in the cafeteria, we selected six products that were popular enough to be offered twice a week and which represented a wide variety of foods (see Exhibit 2). Descriptive labels included a mix of geographic labels, nostalgia labels, or sensory labels that were presented next to the items in the cafeteria line.

During the Tuesday and Friday lunch period of each of the six test weeks, two of the items were presented with a basic label (e.g., "grilled chicken"); two items were presented with a descriptive label (e.g., "Tender Grilled Chicken"); and two items were not offered. For the next two weeks, the items and the conditions were systematically rotated until all menu items were present in all conditions. In the fourth week, the rotation was repeated. The rotation was planned to minimize any unexpected variations that might affect either preferences or participation (such as blizzards, religious holidays, or at-home sporting events). Each item was available six times during the six-week period.<sup>1</sup>

Diners who selected one of the six targeted menu items were asked to complete a questionnaire. Approximately 56 percent of those customers selected menu items with descriptive labels (the other 44 percent selected regular-label counterparts). Ninety-eight percent of the customers (140) completed and returned their questionnaires upon finishing their meal and leaving the cafeteria.<sup>2</sup> Customers were asked single-item questions about their attitudes toward the target menu item and the restaurant. We measured their attitudes about the target food by asking about their perception of the quality and value of the menu item. The questionnaire also asked them to rate how well this restaurant followed trends and maintained food quality compared to similar dining establishments. Most of the questions were asked in the form of Likert-type questions (e.g., from strongly disagree = 1 to strongly agree = 9). The willingness to pay was measured based on the amount of money customers said would be the most they would be willing to pay for their menu item. Of those participating (average age = 43 years), 87 percent were faculty or staff, 9 percent were graduate students, and 4 percent were visitors from off-campus.

There were no differences between those who bought the descriptively labeled menu items and those who bought the regular-label menu items. That is, both groups were analyzed on demographic characteristics (including age, gender, education), on the basis of the menu items they selected, on the basis of how healthy they perceived themselves to be, and on the extent to which they were watching their weight. Nothing was significantly different between the two groups ( $p < .05$ ), and the only variable that remotely neared significance was that of dieting ( $p = .21$ ). Consumers who purchased the descriptively labeled desserts (e.g., "Grandma's Zucchini Cookies" and "Satin Chocolate Pudding") were directionally more likely to be on a diet than those who bought them under the regularly labeled versions of those products.—*B.W., J.P., and K.I.*

<sup>1</sup> Reasonable efforts were made to control the production of the items, and there was no reason to believe there were production variations across days or across conditions. In addition, since every product was offered at least six times, we expect that an unnoticed problem with quality control would have been moderated by the five serving occasions.

<sup>2</sup> While it is not clear as to why three individuals did not hand in their questionnaires, past experience has indicated that this can largely be attributed to their forgetting to do so, or because they misplaced either the survey or the pencil.

## EXHIBIT 1

## How restaurant managers can revitalize menus

Customers associate the descriptions on labels with their expectations of how the quality of the food will taste and make them feel. Vivid adjectives that portray geographic, nostalgic, or sensory themes can help trigger those anticipated feelings and expectations. Here are some suggestions that owners and managers in the hospitality industry can use to generate some of these themes.

**1. Geographic Labels:** Labels that claim to reproduce the same flavors that are specifically found in geographic areas have proven successful. The key is in deciding the region into which your spices or products fit, and then deciding which adjectives create that image or ideology. For example:

- Southwestern Tex-Mex Salad
- Iowa Pork Chops
- “Real” Carolina Barbeque
- Country Peach Tart

**2. Affective Labels:** Alluding to emotions can trigger happy memories of family, tradition, and nationalism. Customers sometimes like the feeling of tasting something wholesome and traditional because “They sure don’t make ‘em like they used to.” Affective, or nostalgic, labels might include, for example:

- Classic Old World Italian Pasta
- Legendary Chocolate Mousse Pie
- Ye Olde Potato Bread
- Nana’s Favorite Chicken Soup

**3. Sensory Labels:** If labels accurately describe the taste, smell, and “mouth feel” of the menu item, then customers will be more able to picture themselves buying it and enjoying it. While ice-cream shops accomplish this masterfully—note names like “Chocolate Velvet”—this approach can also be found on other creative menus:

- Hearty Wholesome Steaks
- Snappy Seasonal Carrots
- Buttery Plump Pasta

**4. Brand Labels:** Another category of labels involves a cross-promotion with a related brand that has important associations that can make the menu item seem more attractive. The idea of cross-promotions is not new, but based on our personal experience it appears to be becoming more common. One drawback of brand labels is that the legal costs and licensing costs can be expensive for single-unit restaurants. Nevertheless, the use of brands says to consumers, “If you love the brand, you’ll love this menu item.” Examples are:

- Black Angus® Beef Burgers
- Jack Daniels® BBQ Ribs
- Butterfinger® Blizzard

One method to generate ideas for descriptive labels is to think of food-related associations that tie in with relevant places or memories and evocative adjectives. A second means for jump-starting descriptive labeling is to note the variety of descriptive labels used at other restaurants. Two great places to start are at theme restaurants and ice-cream stores.—*B.W., J.P., and K.I.*

improve perceptions of quality and value. In turn, that should improve customers’ perceptions of the restaurant and result in repeat patronage.<sup>8</sup>

## Testing the Effect of Menu Labels on Customer Satisfaction

Descriptive labels can be divided into a number of categories (see Exhibit 1), such as geographic labels (e.g., Cajun and Italian), affective labels (e.g., home-style or grandma’s), and sensory labels (e.g., tender or satin). The general objective of our research was to test a mix of those labels to determine whether the general use of descriptive labels was more effective than not using them.

To see how consumers respond to descriptive labels, we conducted a six-week field experiment of six menu items in a faculty cafeteria at the University of Illinois (see Exhibit 2). As described in the box on the previous page, during the Tuesday and Friday lunch periods of each of the six test weeks, two of the items were presented with a regular or basic label; two items were presented with a descriptive label; and two items were not offered. The items were rotated throughout the six-week period, and presented in the same way as the regular fare.

At the cash register, anyone who selected a target item was given a questionnaire to complete. Approximately 56 percent of the customers in the sample selected menu items with descriptive labels and 44 percent selected their regular-label counterparts. In each questionnaire, customers were asked about their attitudes toward the target menu item and the restaurant. Most of the survey items were asked in the form of Likert-type “strongly disagree” or “strongly agree” questions (strongly disagree = 1 and strongly agree = 9). Of those participating, 87 percent were faculty or staff members, 9 percent were graduate students, and 4 percent were visitors from off campus. The average age of the respondents was 43 years.

## Descriptive Menu Labels’ Effect

As noted earlier, we expected that descriptive labels would positively affect sales and diners’ post-consumption evaluation of the labeled menu

<sup>8</sup>Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen, *Beliefs, Attitude, Intention, and Behavior: An Introduction to Theory and Research* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1975).

item. Our expectation was supported by the results. When products were given descriptive labels, their sales increased by more than one-fourth. Moreover, customers who ate the descriptively labeled food consistently rated those meals as being of higher quality and better value than did customers who ordered and rated products with regular labels (Exhibit 3). In addition, customers who ate descriptively labeled products formed more positive attitudes toward the restaurant, and believed that the restaurant was keeping up to date with the latest food trends. It is important to underscore that not only did the descriptive labels increase sales by 27 percent, they also increased the likelihood that customers would purchase those items again on return visits.

Interestingly, despite the overwhelmingly positive effect that descriptive labels had on sales and on diners' attitudes and intentions, they did not influence how much money customers said would be the most that they would pay for the descriptively labeled item.<sup>9</sup> Rarely did they say that they would pay more for an item than what they'd already paid. One possible explanation of this can be attributed to the anchoring effect that the purchase price had on their estimate of how much they would be willing to pay. Were the purchase price still salient, it would be the most prominent predictor of how much a customer believes she *should* pay.<sup>10</sup> That is, if a customer recently paid \$3.99 for an entrée, she is likely to say that \$3.99 is the most she would pay for that item, even if she would pay more in another context.

What this means for managers is that descriptive menu labels can help stimulate first-time consumption and can help encourage repeat sales. Our supposition is that when people associate a positive experience with a descriptive label, a

**EXHIBIT 2**

Menu items with regular and descriptive labels

**Regular menu-item names**

- Red Beans with Rice
- Seafood Filet
- Grilled Chicken
- Chicken Parmesan
- Chocolate Pudding
- Zucchini Cookies

**Descriptive menu-item names**

- Traditional Cajun Red Beans with Rice
- Succulent Italian Seafood Filet
- Tender Grilled Chicken
- Home-style Chicken Parmesan
- Satin Chocolate Pudding
- Grandma's Zucchini Cookies

**EXHIBIT 3**

How descriptive labels influence sales and post-consumption attitudes

	<u>Regular label</u>	<u>Descriptive label</u>
<b>• Increase in unit sales</b>		
— Percentage increase	0	27%
<b>• Attitude toward Menu Item*</b>		
— "This is high quality"	6.2	6.9
— "This is good value"	6.3	7.1
<b>• Attitude toward Restaurant*</b>		
— "Up to speed with food trends"	5.7	6.5
— "A fine, quality establishment"	4.8	5.8
<b>• Repurchase Intention*</b>		
— "I would eat this again during the next two weeks"	5.9	7.1
<b>• Willingness to Pay</b>		
— "For this [\$2.99] entrée, I would spend a maximum of..."	...\$3.08	...\$3.30

\* Attitude and intention items were measured on a scale of 1 to 9 (1 = strongly disagree; 9 = strongly agree).

\* =  $p < .05$

<sup>9</sup>See: Thomas J. Kelly, Nicholas M. Kiefer, and Kenneth Burdett, "A Demand-based Approach to Menu Pricing," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administrative Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (May 1994), pp. 48–52; and Thomas J. Kelly, Nicholas M. Kiefer, and Kenneth Burdett, "Menu Pricing: An Experimental Approach," *Journal of Business and Economic Statistics*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (July 1994), pp. 329–337.

<sup>10</sup>Brian Wansink, Robert J. Kent, and Stephen J. Hoch, "An Anchoring and Adjustment Model of Purchase-quantity Decisions," *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (February 1998), pp. 71–81.

chain reaction of positive attitudes and intentions usually follows. That is, after enjoying their meal, customers are likely to give the meal a positive evaluation for quality and value, and they are likely to rate their chosen menu items as being of higher quality and offering a better value than do other items. Once again, however, that positive attitude does not seem to extend to a willingness to pay more for those menu items.

### What's in a Name?

The description of a menu item is important for consumers' decision making. By providing quality cues, such as descriptive labels, restaurateurs not only enhance the perceived attractiveness of menu items, they may also favorably influence diners' actual consumption experience. We found that descriptive labels, such as "Grandma's Zucchini Cookies" and "Tender Chicken Parmesan"...

- ...increased sales by 27 percent,
- ...increased post-trial evaluations of quality and value,
- ...increased restaurant-related attitudes, and
- ...increased customers' intentions to return to the cafeteria.

**Naming your baby.** There are a number of different ways to generate descriptive labels, including the use of geographic labels (Cajun and Italian), affective labels ("home-style" or "Grandma's"), sensory labels ("tender" or "satin"), or a mix. The type of label that would be most effective depends on the product it describes. (Of course, certain types of labels work better with certain foods than they do with others.)

All of the menu items used in our study were of reasonably high quality. If food of only average or below-average quality were served, descriptive labels might have had little if any effect. Moreover, the descriptive labels that we used were all pretested to evoke favorable associations with the food. Clearly, using labels that evoke unfavorable associations with food would not be wise. It is less clear what influence labels would have if they had only neutral associations or if they had no associations (such as might be the case with foreign words).

We found that by using descriptive labels, restaurateurs may raise customer expectations about

the quality of the menu items.<sup>11</sup> Of course, those expectations need to be met by the actual product. If a restaurateur is unable to do so, using an unmerited descriptive label might backfire and negatively influence customers' attitudes about the item and, ultimately, the restaurant.<sup>12</sup> In other words, restaurant managers should monitor their use of descriptive labels to avoid unjustifiably inflating their customers' expectations—for example, beware of the temptation to label yesterday's goulash as "Royal Hungarian Top Sirloin Blend." Doing so may generate first time sales, but those sales may also be the last. ■

<sup>11</sup>Bernd H. Schmitt and Laurette Dubé, "Contextualized Representations of Brand Extensions: Are Feature Lists or Frames the Basic Components of Consumer Cognition," *Marketing Letters*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1992), pp. 115–126.

<sup>12</sup>Richard L. Oliver, "A Cognitive Model of the Antecedents and Consequences of Satisfaction Decisions," *Journal of Marketing Research*, November 1980, pp. 460–469.



Pictured from left to right: **Brian Wansink**, Ph.D., is a professor of marketing, nutritional science, and agricultural and consumer economics at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (Wansink@uiuc.edu), where **James Painter**, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of nutritional science and is the human nutrition and quantity-foods laboratory manager (Painter@uiuc.edu) and **Koert van Ittersum**, Ph.D., is a post-doctoral fellow (Ittersum@uiuc.edu).

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