

Descriptive menu labels “taste better”

Background

Say that you are at the cafeteria and you see two cheese cakes “New York Style Cheesecake with Godiva Chocolate Sauce” vs. “Cheesecake”. Which one will you take and which one will taste better? What if they are both exactly the same.

A six-week controlled cafeteria study by the Food and Brand Lab* found that descriptive menu-item labels increase food sales and improve the attitudes customers have towards both the food and the restaurant. Over the course of 6 weeks, 6 food items were labeled with descriptive labels or standard plain labels; for example, “New York Style Cheesecake with Godiva Chocolate Sauce” vs. “Cheesecake”.

Results showed that of the 140 diners surveyed, people chose the descriptive menu item 27% more than the normally labeled menu choice. In fact, diners who chose the descriptive menu item had better attitudes about the product and restaurant, including the willingness to go back. They even indicated that they would be willing to pay almost 10% more for each descriptive menu item.

Key Teaching Point

- Descriptive labels in restaurants make people think that the product tastes better.
- Diners like the food and restaurant more overall, and would even pay more for the same item.

* This study was conducted at the University of Illinois, former location of the Cornell Food and Brand Lab.

Student Demonstration

At the beginning of this session have the students take out a piece of paper and a pencil and say . . .

I’m going to show you some menu items. Please pick 2 or 3 of the items that you would likely choose to eat in a restaurant.

- *Southwest Chicken Wraps*
- *Chicken Fingers*
- *Farm Raised Chicken Breast Pita*
- *Turkey Sandwich*
- *Asiago Roast Beef Panini*
- *Cheesecake*
- *Black Forest German Chocolate Cake*
- *Ice Cream Sundae*

Tally the class’ choices on the blackboard. Have them described any patterns that they see

Next, let the students read, or discuss, the study conducted by the Food and Brand Lab. Let them know that most people choose the descriptive menu items, as did the class.

Finally, ask the students to give you examples of descriptive menu items that they remember on their own. Reiterate how many of the items and the restaurants are remembered by students.

Wansink, Brian, James M. Painter, and Koert van Ittersum, (2001) “Descriptive Menu Labels Effect on Sales,” Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administrative Quarterly, 42:6 (December), 68-72