

Bohse & Associates

“DISHING IT OUT” THE BOHSE WAY:

Menu Planning 1-2-3

Who are you planning menus for? Whether you are a not-for-profit organization preparing meals for seniors or children in day care, a for-profit caterer preparing meals for the homebound, or a commercial restaurant, knowing your customer is key. For those food services that are funded to serve particular groups, the requirements of the program dictates whether you are serving children and/or adults, the community to be served and the general content or specifications of the meals prepared.

Who’s writing the menu? The food service manager and/or cook/chef, dietitians or nutrition professionals, program staff and the consumer should all be involved. Such collaborative or team efforts have successfully improved the taste, appeal, nutrition and cost of the meals served. Often, small changes to the menus are made during the year to reflect new menu items and recipes, seasonal variety, holidays and special events. Most organizations are not writing menus for the first time. Cycle menus, which repeat every 4-6 weeks, are often developed for various seasons. Likewise, there is no lack of menu ideas and recipes to offer, whether they are from other programs, commercial or lay press cookbooks, manuals, and online resources from government agencies like the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) or commercial enterprises.

Who is the customer? Your customer group determines the content of your menu. Children have different requirements and preferences than older adults. The ethnic and culturally mix of the group served also influences the menu and how the food is prepared. Some programs may serve individuals that require special diets to address health conditions such diabetes or high blood pressure or require their food chopped or pureed. Other menus may need to address vegetarian needs or conform to religious requirements (e.g., Kosher, Hallal). Loss of taste and smell acuity can occur with age or can be side effects of some medications, making it difficult to discriminate food smells. Special attention to enhance food flavors using herbs, spices, flavoring extracts, and pungent condiments have been used successfully.

What does the customer want? You find out by observing how people are consuming the meal served or checking the plate waste. You conduct surveys and seek suggestions. You have a menu committee or conduct focus groups to get suggestions. From focus groups conducted for senior nutrition programs, consumers wanted a choice of menu items (i.e., sandwich or hot meal, salad bar). They wanted a diversity of meals from various cultures. They wanted meals that were appealing to the eyes and nose with a variety of foods with different textures and taste sensations nicely arranged on the plate. And they expected the meals to be nutritious (including dessert).

What do your menus cost? You have a budget to work with and likely an estimate of the number of meals to prepare. Or your contract is based on a per meal unit cost, requiring the calculation of raw food, supply, labor, and overhead cost to determine this cost. Typically, the average meal cost includes menus that provide a combination of low- to high-priced food items and the trick is to balance the two. Cost-effective purchasing practices, using the staff and equipment efficiently to prepare meals, and limiting over production and waste can stretch your food dollar. Likewise, government subsidized programs can often take advantage of food banks and other food donation outlets for products.

What are your program meal requirements?

If your food services is under contract or funded to provide meals to specific groups, it is likely that the nutritional make-up of the meal is defined. Some programs require that meals provide for the Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDA), which are a component of the new Dietary Reference Intakes. In addition to RDAs, menu planning must consider the recommendations in the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and *Food Guide Pyramid*. Some programs require that meals and snacks provide a minimum number of food groups (meat/protein, bread/grain, milk, fruit/vegetable) be provided in certain quantities or portion sizes. This is referred to as a meal pattern. Such meal patterns may require specific foods high in nutrients be included (i.e., vitamin C, vitamin A, fiber, etc.). Programs may require using a meal pattern as a menu-planning tool (ensuring food plate coverage, and as a component of a catering contract) but require the use of computerized nutrient analysis to ensure that the meal adequately meets the RDAs and other requirements. Although such analysis may be time-consuming initially, it allows for more flexibility in menu planning if one is not tied to the meal pattern.

Other menu planning considerations What's on your menu must take into account the equipment available at any one time. If oven space is limited, baking potatoes, chicken, and muffins at the same time may not be possible. Likewise, refrigerated items such as salads, puddings, and juices must be planned to consider holding storage. Depending on your food service staff skill level and equipment availability, having the right mix of ready-made and scratch cook items should be considered. Standardized recipes should be used to encourage consistency in production. How the meal will be packaged, delivered, and/or served will influence whether a food item is used at all, whether it requires a sauce to keep it moist and hot during transit, or whether the food items will fit on the plate or tray. Balancing food flavors and experimenting with flavor enhancers and natural ingredients, and providing a variety of foods within each meal, can reduce taste bud fatigue. Increasing the use of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains in recipes and meals can increase its variety and nutrient density. Did they like the meal? Usually, people are outspoken when it comes to telling you what they like and don't like about the menu or meal served. Surveys and committees will often address these concerns. However, daily monitoring of each day's food service from labor, food usage, cost, and customer satisfaction can help food service managers ensure that their meals meet program and customer expectations.

Resources on the Web

USDA Team Nutrition Resources

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/>

Older Americans Act Nutrition Program Menu Planning Guidance

http://www.fiu.edu/~nutreldr/OANP_Toolkit/Menu_Planning_1_28_03.htm

Ask the Expert Articles on Menu Planning

http://www.fiu.edu/~nutreldr/Ask_the_Expert/ask_the_expert.htm

Menu Planning Resources

http://www.fiu.edu/~nutreldr/SubjectList/M/Menu_Planning.htm