THE *Taste* OF TECHNOLOGY

Could software your bakery is already using help you improve menu planning?

By Erin Brereton

D eveloping the perfect menu for a bakery business is no simple task.

There are so many factors to consider, and leveraging technology for menu-planning can help ensure accuracy and efficiency. And while an all-in-one menu creation tool for bakeries may not exist yet, some businesses are finding that solutions they use for other areas of operations can provide valuable insight into what products to offer.

"Obviously, there's the whole question of what's most profitable for me to put on my menu and what will sell best to my customers," says Adam Graber, Dawn Foods' Senior Director, Customer and Consumer Experience. "The other big area that impacts menu planning is how to know what to add so you have growth opportunities for the business or are adding creativity to the menu. What's the right mix of new versus old?"

Terri Horn, owner of Kayak Cookies in Hyannis, Massachusetts, uses ReciPal to create printable product labels.

"For a while, I was getting an organization to generate my nutritional facts, and it was extremely expensive—like $200 per label," Horn says. "By using ReciPal's database, we're able to tap into the nutritional information for each item; if they don't have what you want, you can add specialized ingredients. We do get a fair amount of people who ask for that information—this program has really helped us get up to snuff in terms of what we do."

It wasn't until recently that she found a secondary use for the solution: calculating product costs.

Horn uses ReciPal to enter ingredient prices and packaging, labor and overhead costs. She can then make adjustments if the projected cost of a new item looks like it might be too high.

"You can choose what you want the margins to be—[if it's] 30 percent for distributors, this is what I need to be charging; and I can go back and say, 'What if I reduced the size by a quarter ounce to get this many more items? How would that affect it?' That gives you a little leeway to play with it," Horn explains.

Tracking Social Media and Sales

Minnesota-based cupcake and custom cake bakery Nadia's Cakes uses social media to promote its cupcakes, which come in unique flavors like Mountain Dew-Dorito and Angry Orchard hard cider and Fireball Cinnamon Whisky.

Facebook votes have helped the bakery gauge interest in which specialty flavors it should include on upcoming holiday menus, according to Erin Campbell, general manager of Nadia's Woodbury, Minnesota, location.

"It's a direct link to our customers," Campbell says. "For Mother's Day, a RumChata cupcake was

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on the menu last year, and a mimosa cupcake; they were picked by clients using that technology."

Keeping an eye on Pinterest, Instagram and other social media sites helps Nadia's Cakes identify trends it may want to incorporate into new baked goods. Employees from all three stores can also share ideas they have and customer suggestions for new flavors on a private Facebook page.

"We actually use the page so it can be an open dialogue with all staff members—cashiers, dishwashers, anyone who buses tables," Campbell says. "Everyone has an opinion because everyone hears something different. We want all employees to have a voice."

Once a specialty item or limited-time offering has been offered, Nadia's Cakes analyzes sales reports from its point-of-sale (POS) system to gauge the response and plan accordingly.

For instance, for April Fools' Day in 2018, Nadia's sold two versions of a similar cupcake: the regular Unicorn Poop and the Unicorn Party Pooper, the latter of which is loaded with pastel confetti in the center. Sales data indicated which cupcake performed better at each of its three locations.

"[The] Woodbury [store] sold more of the regular Unicorn Poop; we may just do Unicorn Poop there in the future," Campbell says. "It's helpful seeing how different flavors affect different stores and different demographics; we're able to gauge—ingredientwise—for next year what to bring in."

Assessing Past, Present and Future Ingredient Use

Horn purchased QuickBooks to help with accounting when launching her cookie line in 2005; she has since realized the software can provide information that's useful when estimating upcoming seasonal

item ingredient needs.

"We're able to generate reports on the quantity of products sold," Horn says. "It will also tell me how many pounds of something I've purchased from [a supplier] over the course of a year or two years," Horn says.

In addition, some production planning software can help bakeries avoid overbuying ingredients when adding a new menu item because it factors in ingredients the bakery already has in stock, according to Robert Reesink, managing director and senior bakery technologist at bakery consultancy GeoBake.

FlexiBake is an example of production planning software.

"Every day, when you make your [production] plan, you know how much is left," Reesink says. "If you invest in new ingredients, you start from there."