

## CHAPTER 10

### Deciding on a menu

I see HDVs go out and buy the cheapest products and supplies, no name sodas, no name chips, stale buns and cheap no name hot dogs. These vendors will need either to change locations frequently or close up eventually. No matter your prices, if the food sucks the word will spread.

I am not opposed to serving no name brands – well, at least I don't mind if the hot dogs or buns are no name. The trick is to sample different brands. Try as many as you like and find the best flavor to cost ratio. Now, if you are in an area where price doesn't matter, then by all means, buy Boars Head or one of the other premium brands.

Even before you have a cart, you can buy several brands and put different colored toothpicks in each one, cook them up and serve in bite size pieces or just test them yourself. The key is to have a blind taste test. Several private label generic brands are excellent.

In Tennessee, if you say that you're serving Vienna, which is one of my favorite brands, people will look at you like you're crazy! A popular food in the south is the little Vienna sausages that come in a can, but when people see your Vienna sign, at least in East Tennessee, they will think you're serving a larger version of that little mushy thing.

Don't scrimp on sodas and chips; buy name brands. Chicago dogs are delicious, but try serving those in East TN or parts of North Carolina, and people will think you're serving a salad on a dog. New name:  
Salad Dog

Your area and the demographics for that area may play a large part in what you should serve. Many vendors up north serve Vienna, but go to New York and you will find more Nathan's vendors. Stay away from chicken pecker dogs! Wherever I have been, from out west to up north, people love all beef dogs. Hot dogs made from beaks and peckers are not going to win you any points.

Soft buns are also important. Don't go to the ten-day old bread store and get stale, old bread. You can be thrifty, but don't be cheap.

Anyway, always do some blind taste tests. I make sure my condiments are name brands; people love Heinz Ketchup, they love French's mustard and Kraft or Hellman's mayonnaise.

When you first start out and you're deciding on a menu, try to keep it simple. This will allow you to get familiar with your cart and serving in a rush. If you are offering five different dogs, sausages and brats, you will have more waste and more headaches.

Maybe start with a normal hot dog and a brat or sausage. Your overhead will be less and you can always add as you gain experience.

In some areas, vegetarian hot dogs will do better than or as well as all beef dogs, so you will want to research your area and what others offer. Specialty dogs like Japanese hot dogs are a great idea, but you may want to make this in addition to normal everyday hot dogs. Decide on something that will set your business apart. I know a man that offers around nine different types of mustard, and another offers multiple hot sauces. I use my Coke and onions. I also have a friend that serves grilled BBQ dogs.

If your area has a favorite soda, serve it along with your standard line up. Root beer is a popular one among many crowds, and I serve the bottled version for \$2.00 each. A profit of \$1.58 and I display them in an old washtub with lots of ice.

Use ice packs or gel packs instead of ice when possible. With your drinks, you can line the bottom of the cooler with ice packs and then add ice. Always use ice with your drinks. It's appealing, and I have set up at a location and sold three or four drinks over hot dogs. You'll only pay for the ice packs and gel packs once, and then you'll refreeze them each evening; this will save you money and reduce your overhead. Water is important to serve also. Bottled water, even the generic labels, will do well. I keep those flavor packs on my cart, so people can add them to their water. Kool-Aid brand or Crystal Light are great. When you get your first cart, have family and friends over for a practice run or two. This will familiarize you with the cart and how best to set it up.

When I got my first cart, I did a family get-together and incorporated my taste test at the same time, killing two birds with one stone.

This also includes where I buy my products, too!

- Hot dogs (all beef), Sam's Club, 8 to 1's. This means 8 dogs to a pound in a 10 pound box for a total of 80 dogs, for only \$18.82, or \$.24 each
- Buns (Sarah Lee), Sam's Club, 16 to a bag at \$1.77, or \$.11 each
- Relish (Little Sister), Sam's Club, 1 gallon at \$4.46, or \$.03 each serving
- Fresh Onions (50 lb. bag Sweet), Sam's Club \$18.00, or \$ .01 each serving
- Ketchup (Heinz,) 44oz. bottle, Sam's Club, \$3.82 or \$.02 each serving
- Mustard (French's), Sam's Club, 30 oz bottle, \$.03 each serving
- Chips (Frito-lay Assorted), Sam's Club, 50 one oz. bags at \$11.22, or \$.22 each bag
- Candy Bars (assorted brands,) Sam's Club, \$12.84, or \$.43 each
- Drinks: Sam's Club is my faithful source, but I search the paper for the specials at the local grocery stores. Sometimes they run these without any limit, so I buy a lot. Sam's Club average is about \$.32 a can, but by buying all over, I get an average closer to \$.28 a can.
- Napkins (Marathon), Sam's Club, 4500 for \$18.77, or \$.004 each. Less than ó a penny.
- Foil Sheets (Bakery & Chefs), 500 for \$11.02, or \$.02 each. I use foil sheets, because they aren't as messy and they look better than the wax paper sheets.
- I don't buy a lot of ice; the only thing I have in ice is my can drinks. My condiments and dogs are in a cooler with frozen jugs of water or ice packs. Less than 1/2 cent per serving
- Propane is a true cost, and I have averaged it out to about \$.015 per serving. This may be a little high, but it's a good figure to use. (That's

\$1.5 cents per serving.)

You're probably noticing that the websites that say that you make about \$.90 cent out of each dollar, are misleading. I saw one recently give costs when tempting you to buy their hot dog carts, and it stated that the average hot dog cost is \$.11.

Well, I am sure you could find a hot dog that cheap, but no one would want to eat it. It even stated that a meal costs the vendor \$.65 cent with a drink and chips. This is not true at all.

Food service distributors like US Foodservice or Sysco can be great sources for some of your foods. Carefully compare prices. Sam's Club and/or Costco have some great deals and don't require a minimum purchase.

Most big distributors won't deliver to a residence and the portions are so large that you would need large refrigerated coolers. I buy onions sometimes from Sysco, and when I do a big private party, I have purchased the 100% Certified Black Angus Beef hot dogs from them, too.