

Menu Innovation vs. Simplification

ELEVATE HUDDLE

March 2026



Elevate

this study

OBJECTIVES

- ✓ How are operators thinking about innovation to drive traffic versus menu simplification?
- ✓ Has the cadence of menu innovation increased or decreased?
- ✓ What parts of the menu are operators simplifying versus innovating?
- ✓ Which products support menu simplification versus innovation?
- ✓ What are the most important factors driving the decision for where operators simplify versus innovate on the menu?

// fielded February – March 2026

METHOD

- ✓ Online survey of **250 restaurant operators** from Datassential's OPERA panel with some level of authority in making purchasing decisions for the operation
 - ✓ All operators have made at least one menu change within the past year

DEMOGRAPHICS

SEGMENT	QSR	20%
	Fast Casual	20%
	Midscale	20%
	Casual dining	20%
	Fine dining	20%
RESTAURANT TYPE	Independent	64%
	Chain	36%
CUISINE TYPE	Non-Global	70%
	Global	30%
REGION	South	29%
	West	26%
	Midwest	28%
	Northeast	17%
DISTRIBUTOR	Sysco	29%
	US Foods	23%
	Club Stores	6%
	Cash and Carry	4%
	Other Broadliner	38%

KEY FINDINGS



01

Key Finding

LTOs and small menu changes are more common and more frequent than major menu overhauls. Operators make changes to their menus to keep customers coming back, to increase sales, and to improve customer satisfaction. **Higher-performing operators are more likely to focus on improving customer satisfaction while lower-performing operators are more likely to focus on increasing sales.**

In the coming year, operators say they **are three times as likely to make small changes to existing menu items as to create an entirely new menu item.** Higher-performing operators turn to menu tweaks to be more seasonal and more easily stay on top of trends. Lower-performing operators are more likely to prefer menu tweaks so they can be sure to not disappoint their regulars, keep BOH updates simple, and more easily incorporate customer feedback.



02

Key Finding

Nearly **two-thirds of operators removed poorly selling items from their menu in the last year**, by far the largest menu change overall. Nearly half added dishes using already purchased products which was especially true among operators with higher traffic and sales in the last year compared to their under-performing peers. In addition, adding menu items that require less prep and purchasing entirely new products to create a new menu item are updates that were more likely made among operators with positive sales/traffic compared to those who were flat or down in the last year.



03

Key Finding

Beverages, small plates, and desserts are seeing the largest share of operators increasing their offerings. Non-fried appetizers and cold non-alcoholic beverages are two key areas of expansion and operators with higher sales/traffic in the last year are especially likely to expanding those parts of their menus. In addition, key dayparts are seeing more menu item expansion than are snacking occasions. Operators overall are leaning most into expanding their dinner offerings, but the more successful operators are leaning more heavily than their peers into breakfast and lunch expansion. When it comes to innovation, **operators are focused most on innovating their salads, alcoholic beverages, bowls, and appetizers.** Simplification is happening most with kids' menus, vegetarian entrees, and non-alcoholic beverages.



04

Key Finding

Just under two-thirds of operators think they can BOTH innovate and simplify their menus at the same time while one-third say you must pick between innovating and simplifying. And although over half said they did both in the last year, four times as many operators said that they focused on simplification (34%) as focused on innovation (8%). In the coming year, the large majority again plan to focus on both innovating and simplifying and although simplification remains a priority, the gap is smaller **with two times as many operators planning to emphasize simplification (20%) over innovation (10%).**

Operators are somewhat more likely to say that **changing the products they purchase will help more with innovation (95%) than simplification (87%).** The products that are seen as more helping with innovation are alcoholic beverages and proteins. Categories that are seen as helping more with menu simplification tend to be those that are pre-packaged or prepared such as packaged snacks, canned goods, or frozen produce.





05

Key Finding

The top reasons for updating menus and changing the balance of simplicity versus innovation are focused on improving sales, margins, and traffic, and on reducing costs. Notably, **innovation is seen as an especially strong driver of increasing sales and traffic while simplification is seen as especially key in improving labor challenges and BOH efficiency.** Overall success metrics for each are similar, however, successful menu innovation is seen as needing to create items that work well for off-premise and drive traffic, sales, and customer satisfaction. Successful menu simplification is measured more by improved profitability, better inventory management, reduced BOH labor needs, and lower food costs.

MENU CHANGES



Menu changes operators have EVER made...

96% of operators **added limited-time offers (LTOs) or daily specials**

98% of operators **made minor tweaks/updates to existing menu items**

98% of operators **changed/swapped out just a few items**

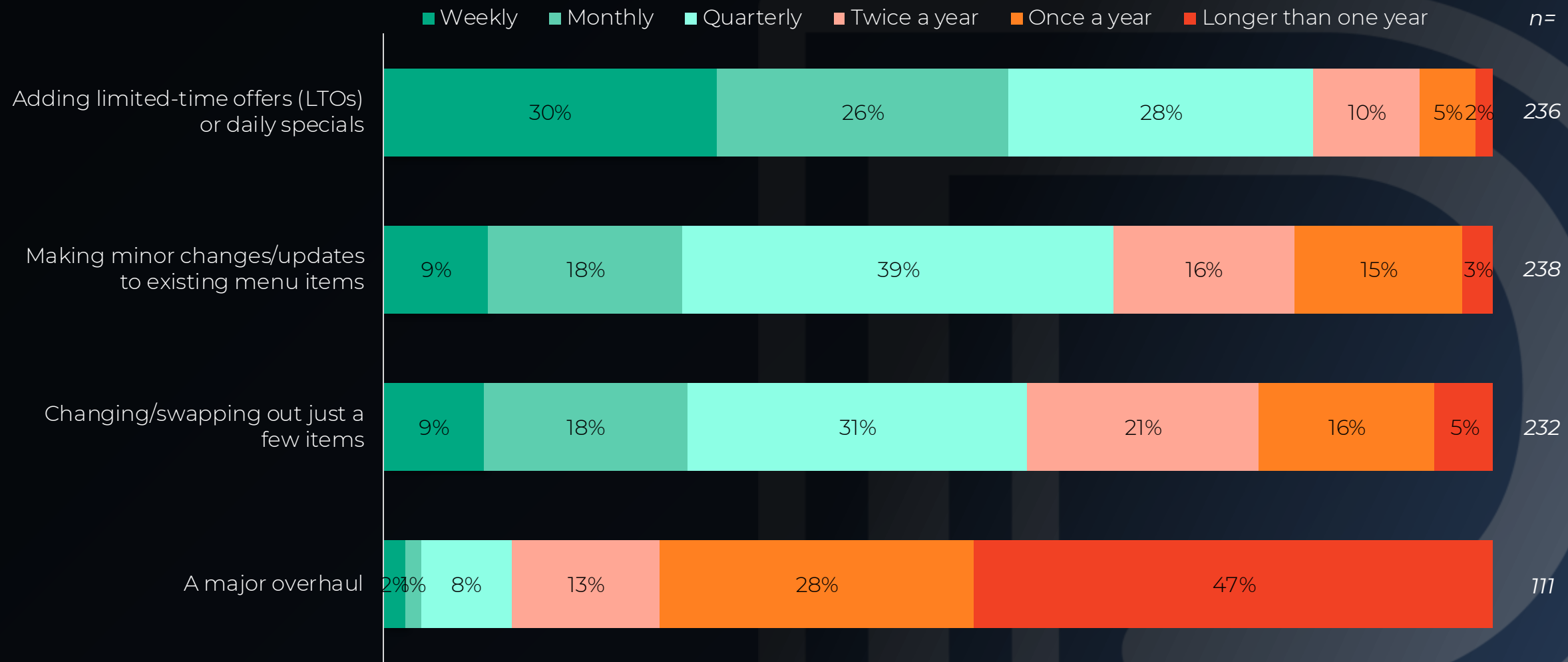
84% of operators **did a major menu overhaul**



Q: How often do you make the following types of changes to what is offered on your menu? (% who have ever made that menu change; n=250)

AMONG OPERATORS WHO MADE THAT SPECIFIC MENU CHANGE IN THE LAST YEAR

Menu Change Frequency



Q: How often do you make the following types of changes to what is offered on your menu? (n=varies)

30%

OF OPERATORS ARE MAKING
LTO/SPECIALS UPDATES WEEKLY

Traffic Up	36%	Sales Up	36%
Traffic Flat	30%	Sales Flat	33%
Traffic Down	16%	Sales Down	13%

statistically higher statistically lower

18%

OF OPERATORS ARE MAKING MINOR UPDATES MONTHLY

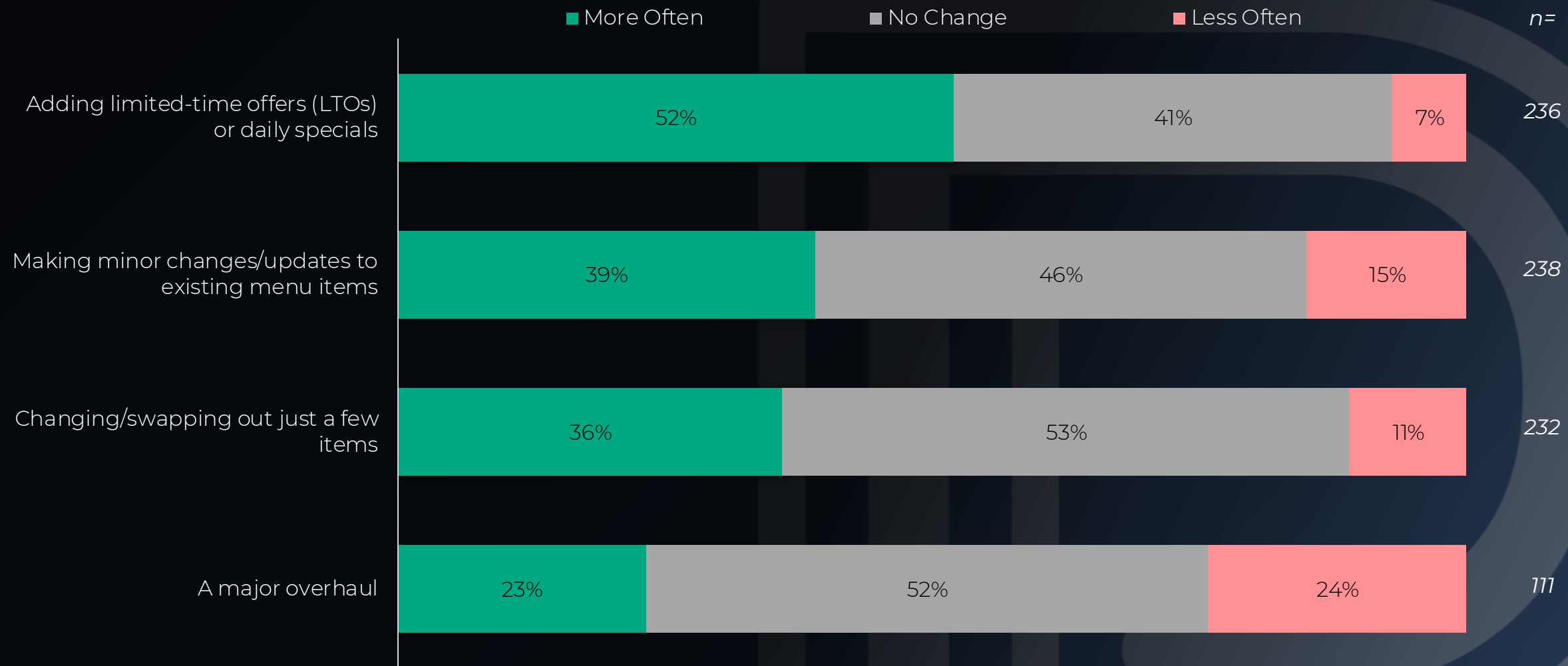
Traffic Up	24%	Sales Up	24%
Traffic Flat	11%	Sales Flat	13%
Traffic Down	14%	Sales Down	10%

statistically higher statistically lower

Q: How often do you make the following types of changes to what is offered on your menu? (n=varies)

AMONG OPERATORS WHO MADE THAT SPECIFIC MENU CHANGE IN THE LAST YEAR

Frequency Change



Q: For the following types of menu changes, compared to one year ago would you say you are... (n=varies)

AMONG OPERATORS WHO MADE THAT SPECIFIC MENU CHANGE IN THE LAST YEAR

Frequency Change

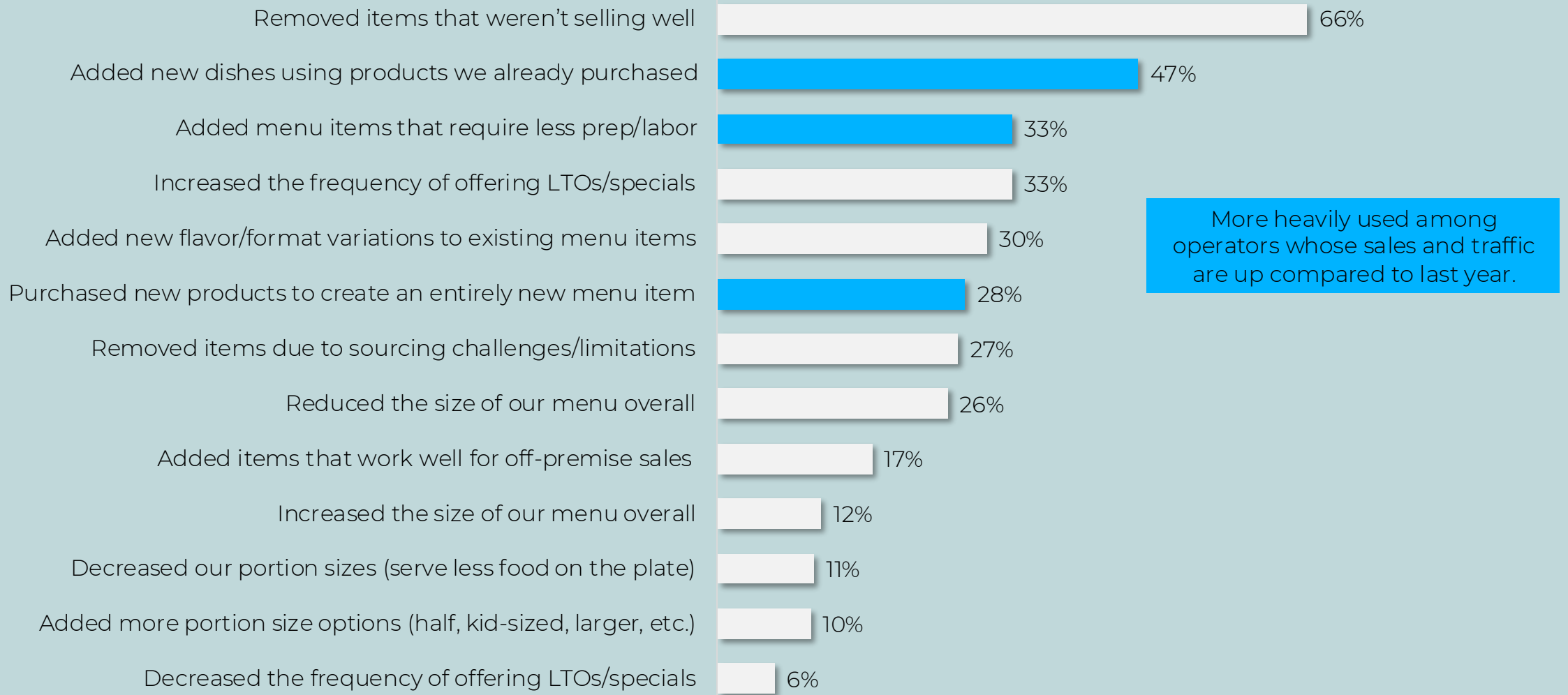
UPDATING MORE OFTEN		TRAFFIC			SALES		
	Total	Up	Flat	Down	Up	Flat	Down
Adding limited-time offers (LTOs) or daily specials	52%	55%	49%	50%	56%	53%	41%
Making minor changes/updates to existing menu items	39%	43%	35%	35%	45%	33%	32%
Changing/swapping out just a few items	36%	43%	28%	35%	43%	32%	26%
A major overhaul	23%	35%	13%	9%	33%	16%	5%



Q: For the following types of menu changes, compared to one year ago would you say you are... (n=varies)

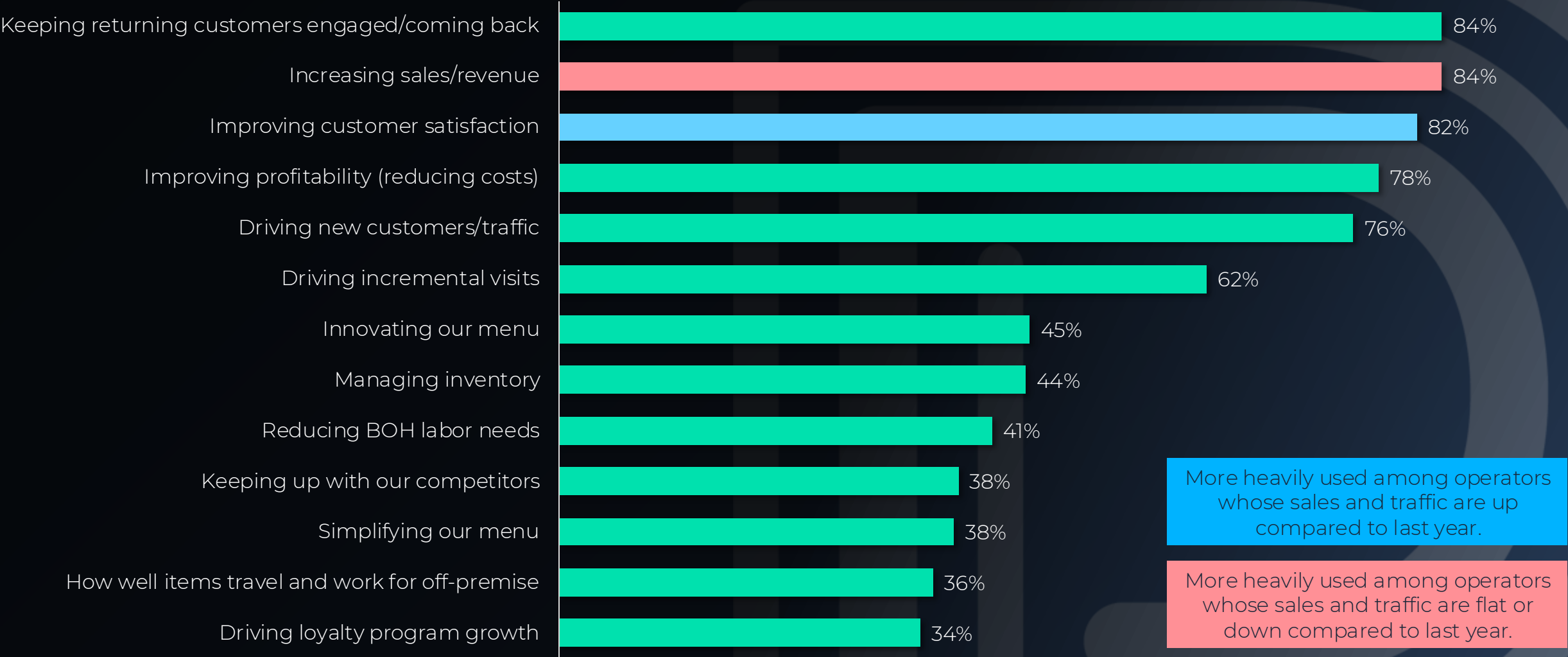
statistically higher statistically lower

Past Year Menu Changes



Q: In general, which of the following are changes you made to your menu in the last year? (n=250)

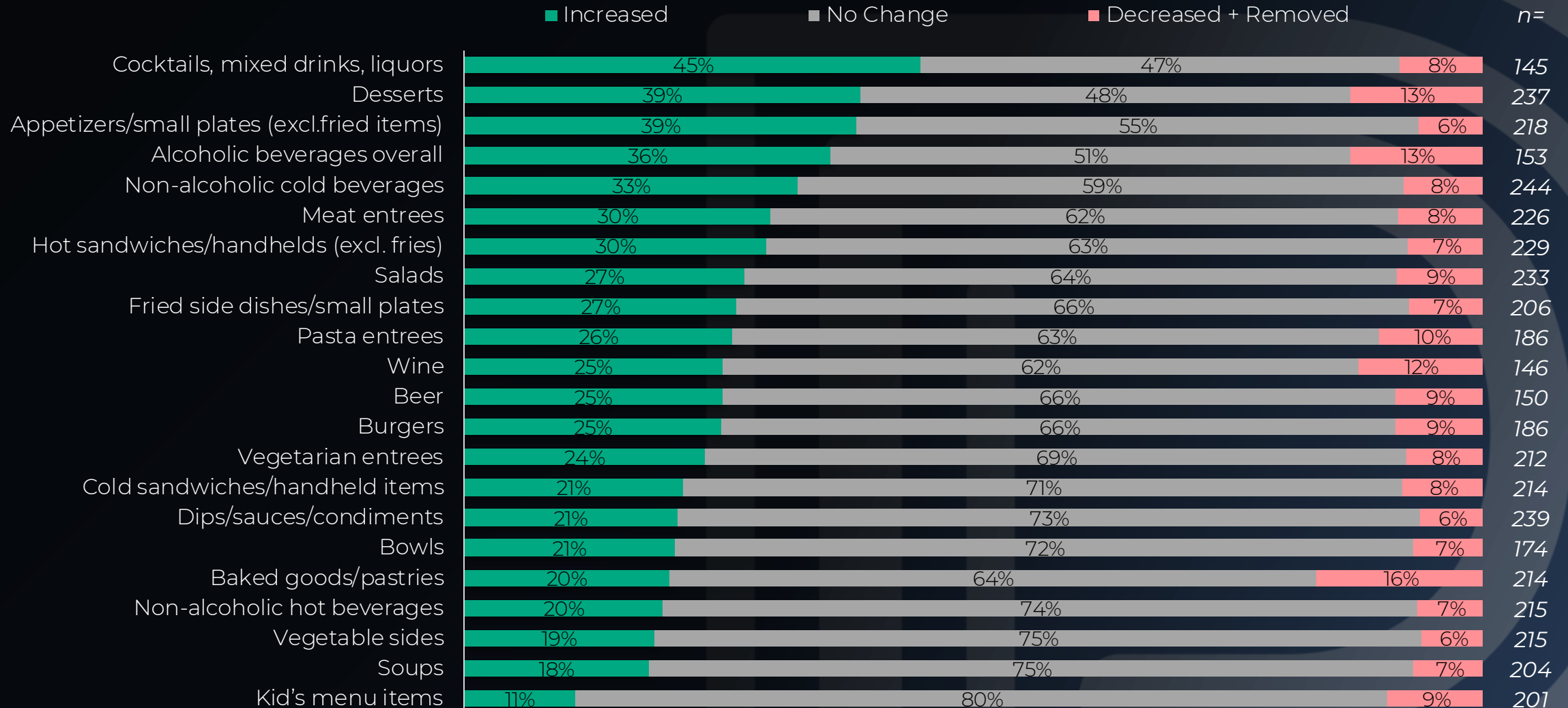
Overall Menu Update Motivators



Q: How large of a consideration are the following when making changes/updates to your menu? (top-2, 5 pt. scale; n=250)

AMONG OPERATORS WHO OFFER THAT MENUPART

Change in Number of Items by Menupart



Q: Thinking about the following parts of your menu, compared to one year ago have you... (n=varies)

39%

OF ALL OPERATORS HAVE
INCREASED THEIR NON-FRIED
APPETIZER OFFERINGS

Traffic Up	48%	Sales Up	48%
Traffic Flat	29%	Sales Flat	34%
Traffic Down	30%	Sales Down	26%

statistically higher statistically lower



33%

OF ALL OPERATORS HAVE
INCREASED THEIR NON-ALCOHOLIC
COLD BEVERAGE OPTIONS

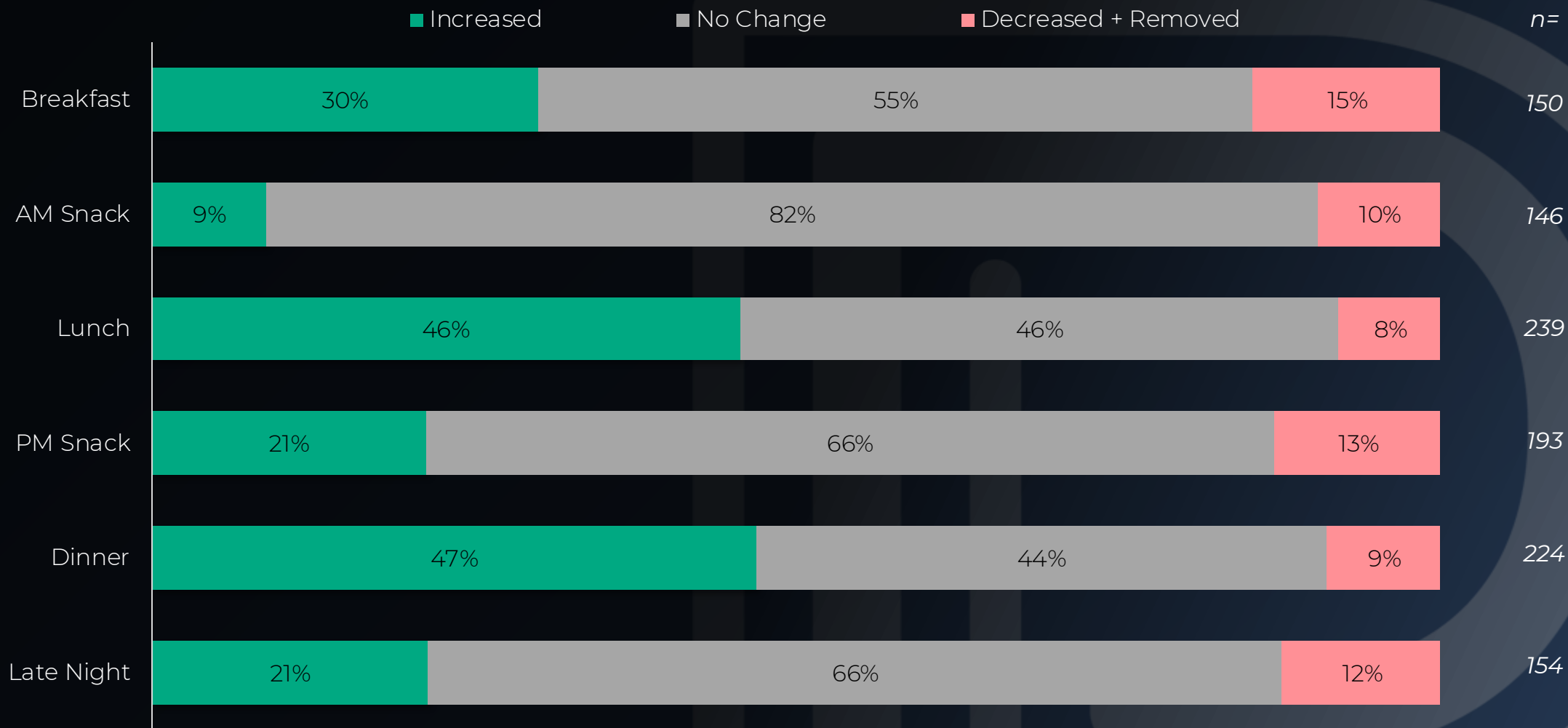
Traffic Up	40%	Sales Up	38%
Traffic Flat	21%	Sales Flat	23%
Traffic Down	35%	Sales Down	36%

statistically higher statistically lower



AMONG OPERATORS WHO OFFER THAT DAYPART

Change in Number of Items by Daypart



Q: Thinking about the following dayparts, compared to one year ago have you... (n=varies)

Change in Number of Items by Daypart

INCREASED NUMBER OF OFFERINGS

TRAFFIC

SALES

	Total	Up	Flat	Down	Up	Flat	Down
Breakfast	30%	39%	17%	26%	43%	13%	28%
Lunch	46%	54%	40%	34%	57%	36%	35%
Dinner	47%	54%	42%	37%	54%	41%	40%

statistically higher statistically lower

Q: Thinking about the following parts of your menu, compared to one year ago, how many items have you increased, decreased, or kept the same?

Average Number of Menu Updates in the Last Year

10 Small tweaks

7 Entirely new items

4 Items removed



Q: In the last year, for how many different menu items have you made TWEAKS OR SMALL CHANGES? (n=250)

Q: In the last year, how many ENTIRELY NEW menu items have you added? (n=250)

Q: In the last year, how many ENTIRE MENU ITEMS have been REMOVED? (n=250)

Menu Updates in the Last Year

AVERAGE NUMBER IN THE LAST YEAR		TRAFFIC			SALES		
	Total	Up	Flat	Down	Up	Flat	Down
Small Tweaks	10	13	8	9	13	9	7
Entirely New Items	7	9	4	4	9	5	3
Items Removed	4	4	4	4	4	4	3

statistically higher statistically lower



Q: In the last year, for how many different menu items have you made TWEAKS OR SMALL CHANGES? (n=250)
Q: In the last year, how many ENTIRELY NEW menu items have you added? (n=250)
Q: In the last year, how many ENTIRE MENU ITEMS have been REMOVED? (n=250)

74%

**Are more likely to
make a change to an
existing menu item**

**vs. 26% who are more likely to
create an entirely new menu item**



AMONG THOSE WHO WOULD PREFER TO CHANGE EXISTING MENU ITEMS IN THE NEXT YEAR

Menu Item Tweak Drivers



Q: Why are you more likely to make a change to an existing menu item than to create an entirely new menu item? (n=185)

AMONG THOSE WHO WOULD PREFER TO CREATE ENTIRELY NEW MENU ITEMS IN THE NEXT YEAR

New Menu Item Drivers



Q: Why are you more likely to create an entirely new menu item than to change an existing menu item? (n=65)

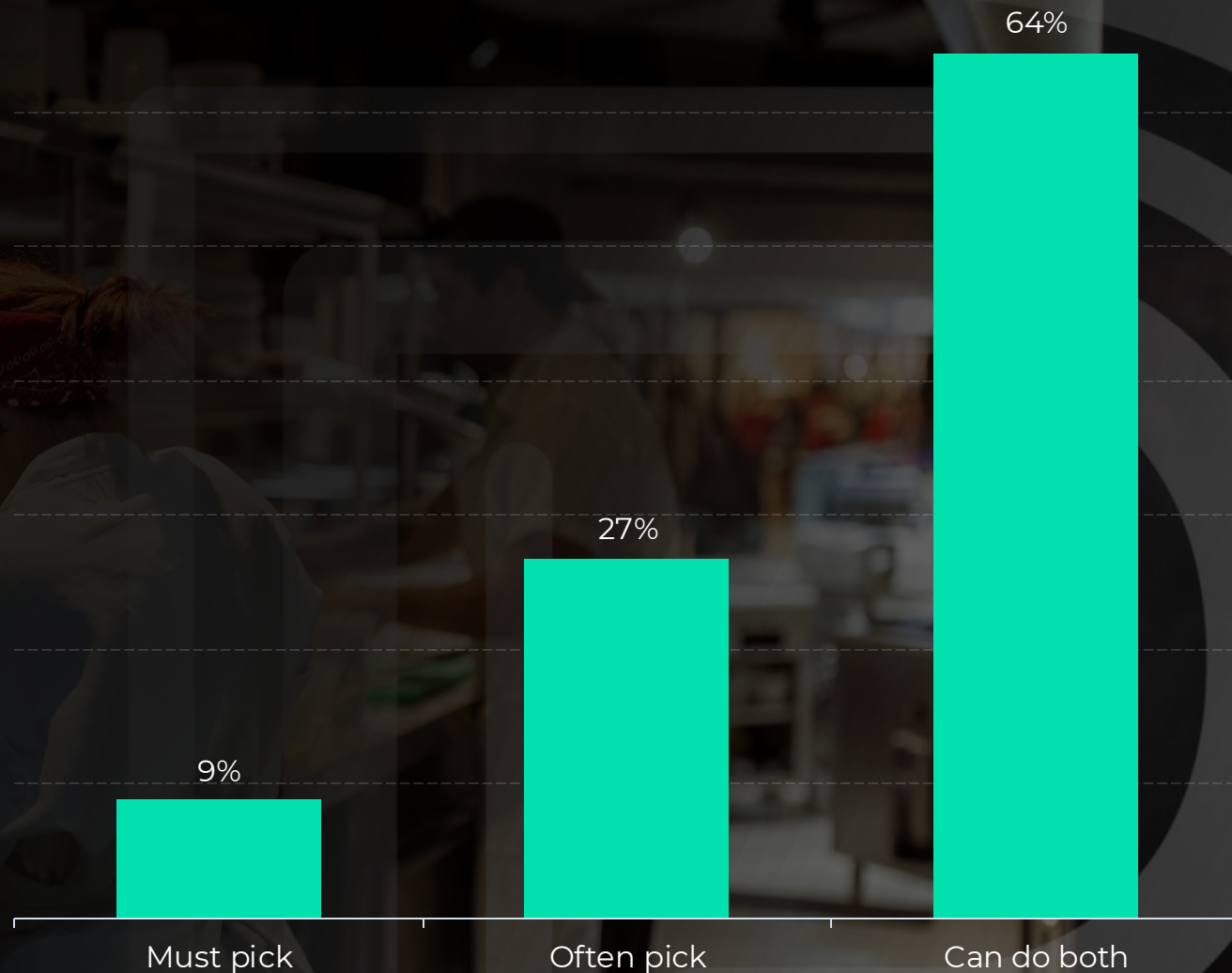
SIMPLIFICATION VS. INNOVATION



64%

OF OPERATORS SAY

**you can BOTH
simplify and
innovate menus**



Q: Do you think menu SIMPLIFICATION and menu INNOVATION are in opposition to each other? (n=250)

4X

AS MANY OPERATORS

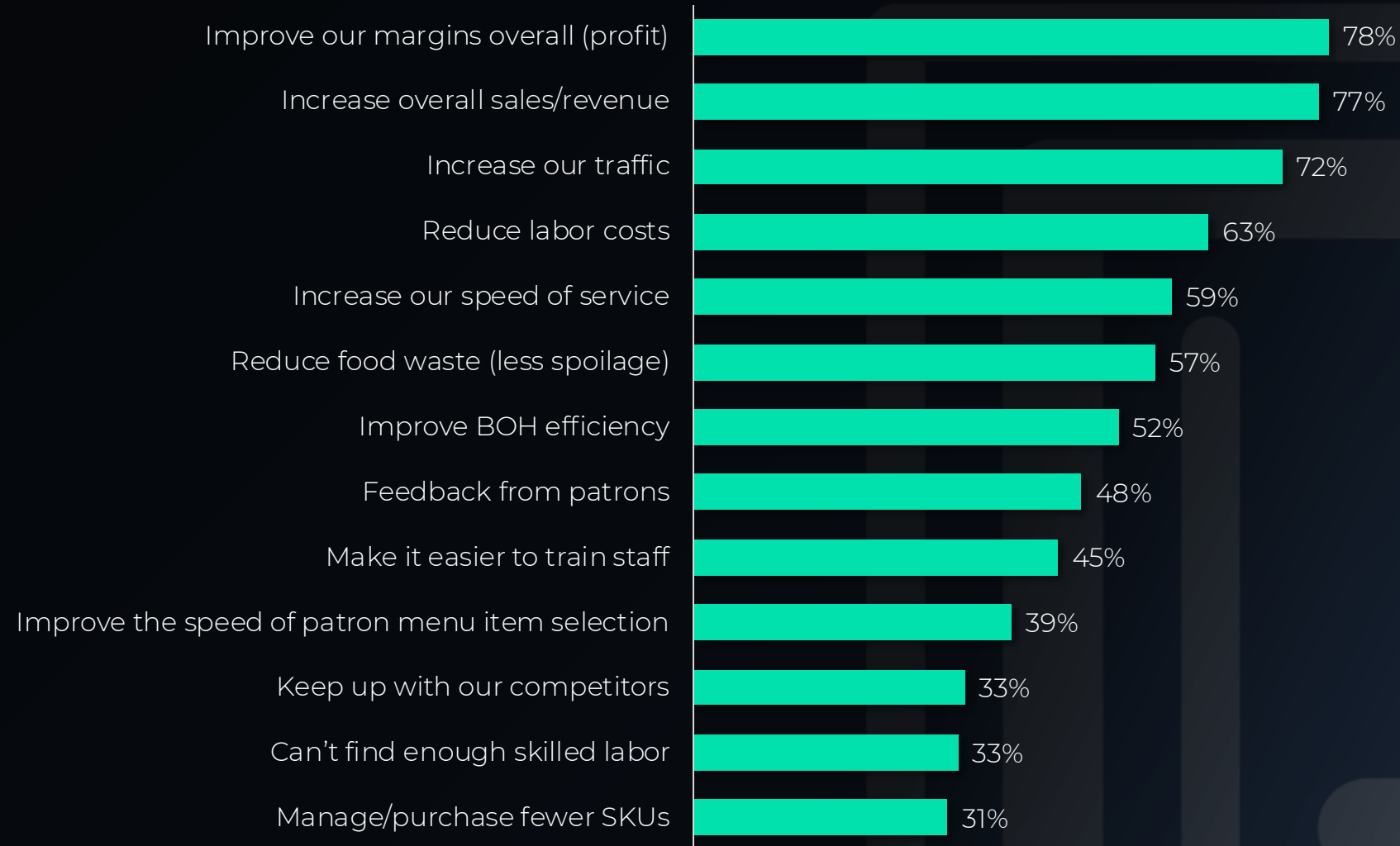
**focused on
simplification as
focused on
innovation in the
last year**



Q: In the LAST year, would you say you have been... (n=250)

AMONG OPERATORS WHO DID AT LEAST SOME MENU SIMPLIFICATION IN THE LAST YEAR

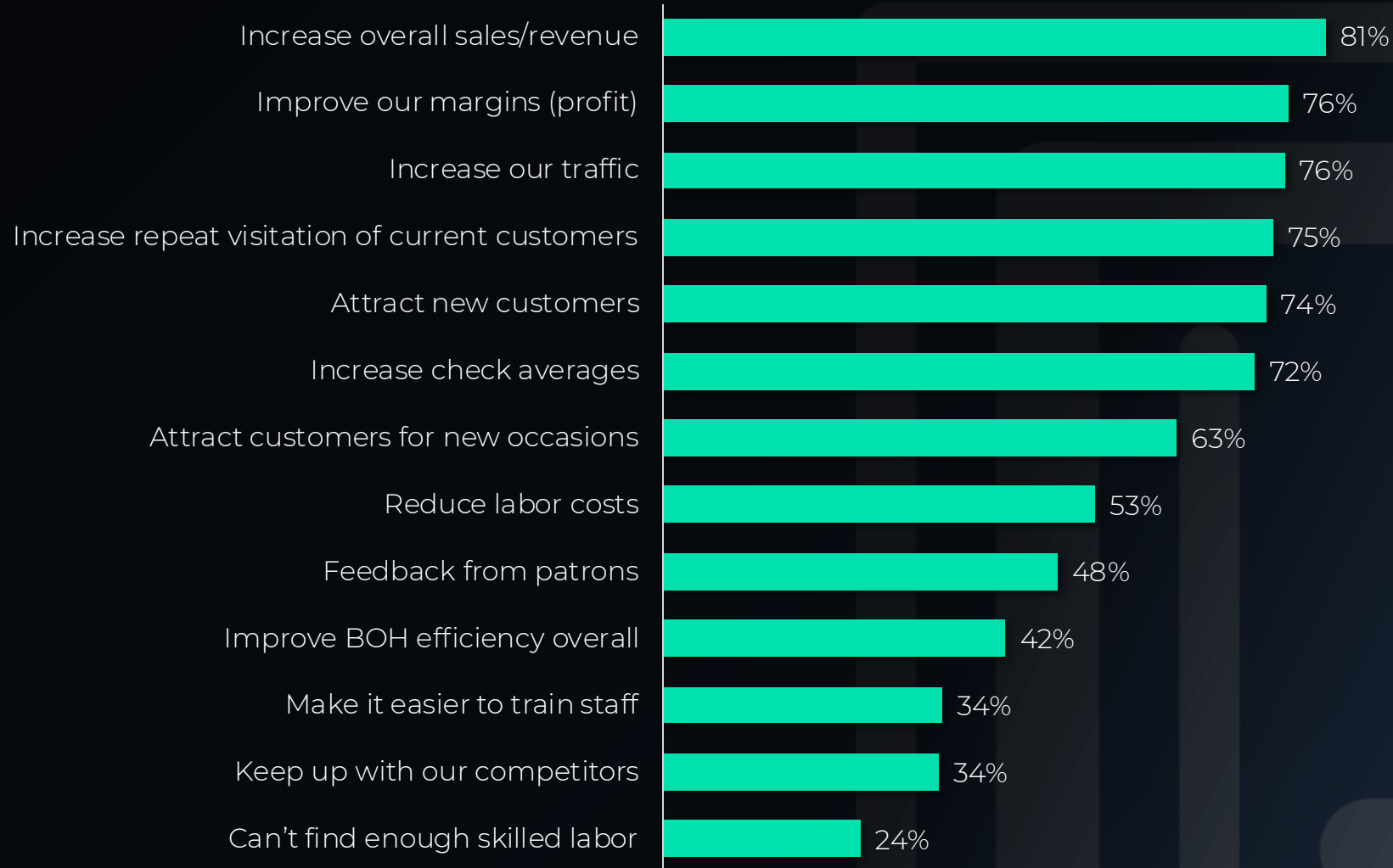
Reasons to Simplify



Q: How large of a factor are the following in making the decision to SIMPLIFY your menu?
(top-2, 5 pt. scale; among operators who did at least some menu simplification in the last year; n=243)

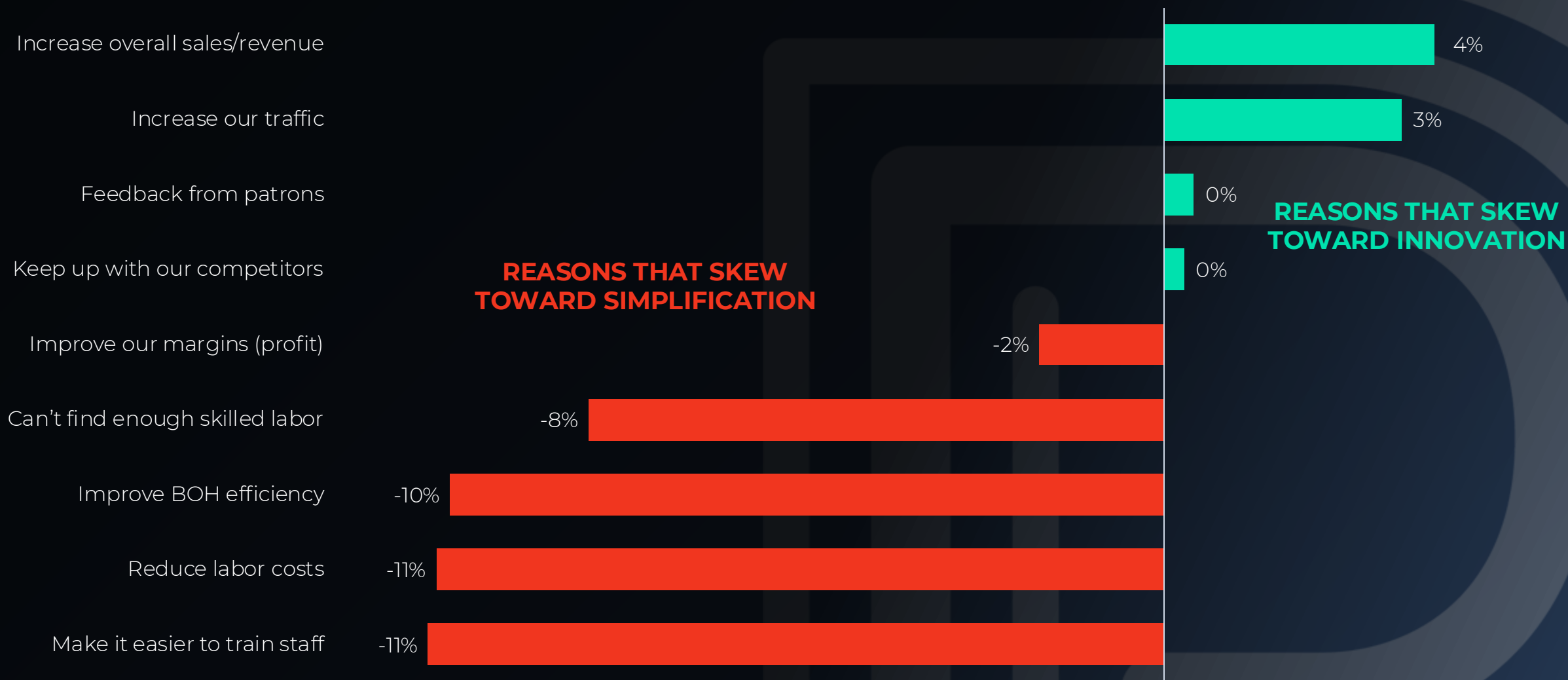
AMONG OPERATORS WHO DID AT LEAST SOME MENU INNOVATION IN THE LAST YEAR

Reasons to Innovate



Q: How large of a factor are the following in making the decision to INNOVATE your menu?
(top-2, 5 pt. scale; among operators who did at least some menu innovation in the last year; n=220)

% SELECTED AS A FACTOR FOR INNOVATION - % SELECTED AS A FACTOR FOR SIMPLIFICATION



Q: How large of a factor are the following in making the decision to SIMPLIFY your menu?
(top-2, 5 pt. scale; among operators who did at least some menu simplification in the last year; n=243)

Q: How large of a factor are the following in making the decision to INNOVATE your menu?
(top-2, 5 pt. scale; among operators who did at least some menu innovation in the last year; n=220)

USED IN THE LAST YEAR

Simplification Tools



Q: What, if anything, have you done in the last year to SIMPLIFY your menu? (n=250)

USED IN THE LAST YEAR

Innovation Tools



Q: What, if anything, have you done in the last year to INNOVATE your menu? (n=250)

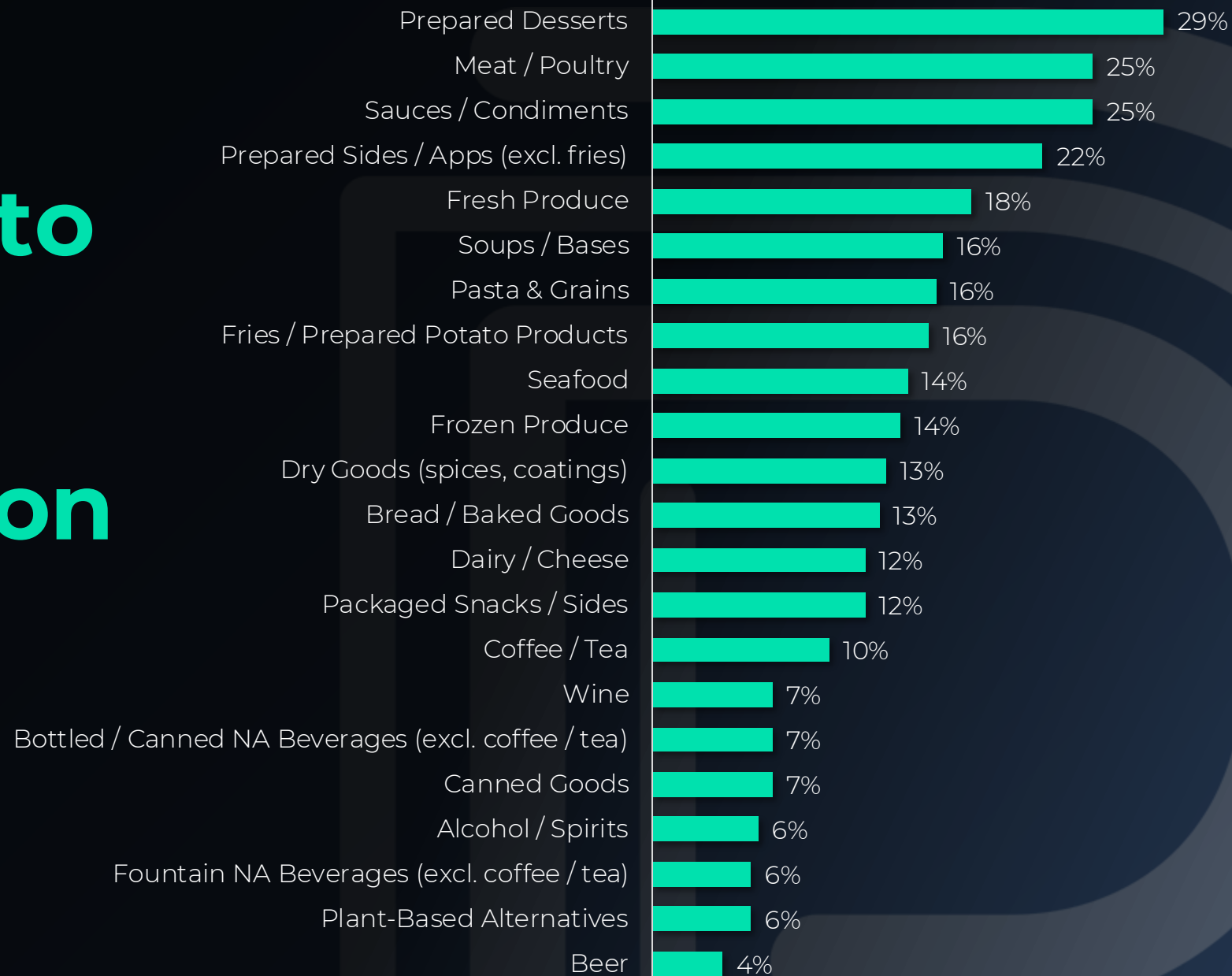
A close-up photograph of a person's hand pointing at a menu. The menu is open, showing various sections like 'Menu', 'Pizza/Pasta', 'Alcohol drinks', 'Salads', 'Non-Alcoholic', 'Desserts', and 'Burgers'. A large red rounded rectangle is overlaid on the center of the image, containing the text '87%'. Below this, there is a line of text in white and red. The background is slightly blurred, showing more of the menu and the hand holding it.

87%

of operators **think that switching products purchased can help with menu SIMPLIFICATION**

Q: If you were looking to SIMPLIFY your menu, which of the following types of products would MOST help you simplify? (select up to five; n=250)

Product Categories to Help with Menu Simplification



Q: If you were looking to SIMPLIFY your menu, which of the following types of products would MOST help you simplify? (select up to five; n=250)

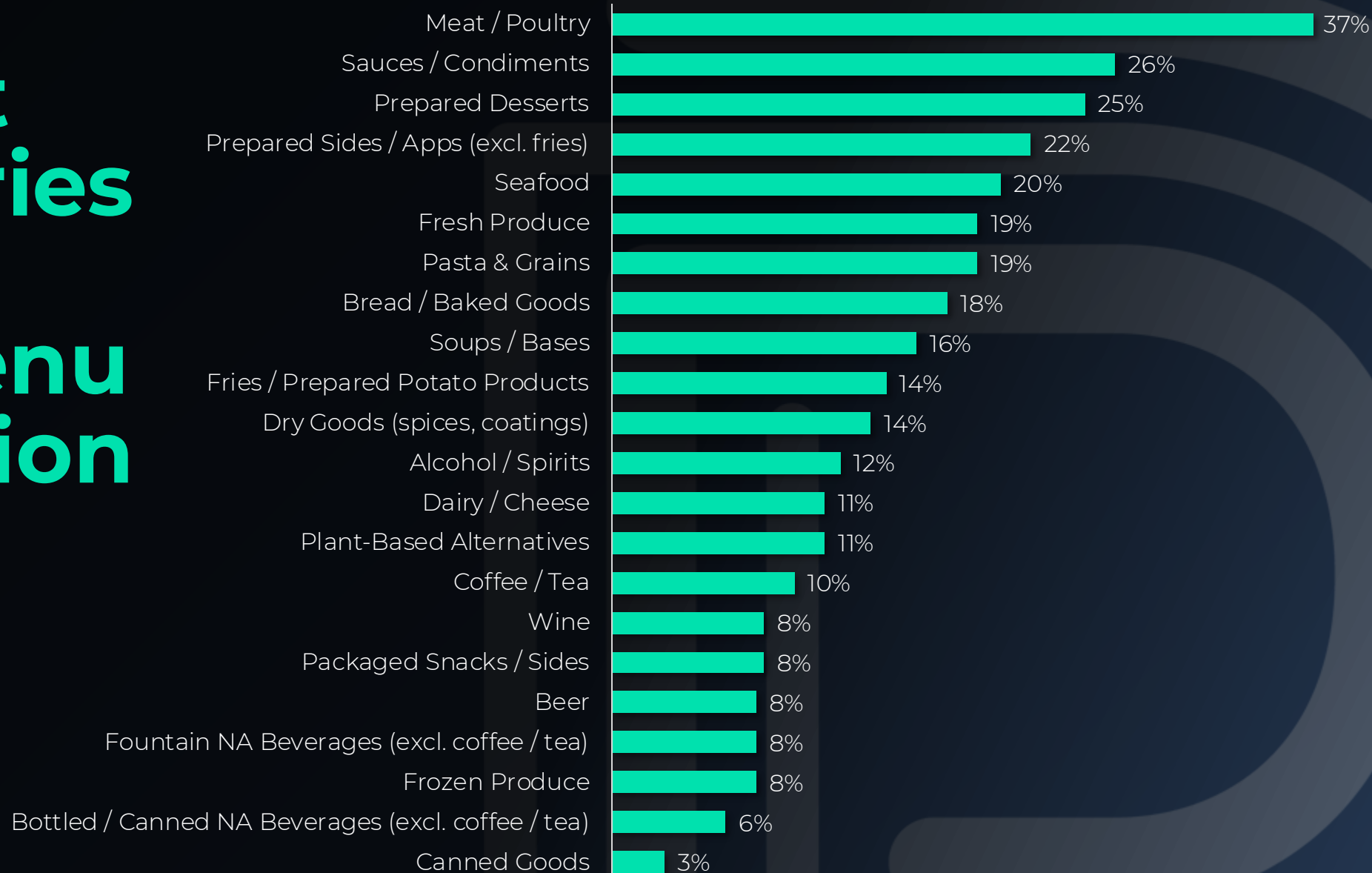
A close-up photograph of a person's hand pointing at a menu. The menu is open, showing various food and drink categories. A large, semi-transparent red oval with the text '95%' is centered over the image. Below the oval, text explains that 95% of operators think switching products purchased can help with menu innovation. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

95%

of operators **think that switching products purchased can help with menu INNOVATION**

Q: If you were looking to INNOVATE your menu, which of the following product categories would you focus on MOST for menu innovation? (select up to five; n=250)

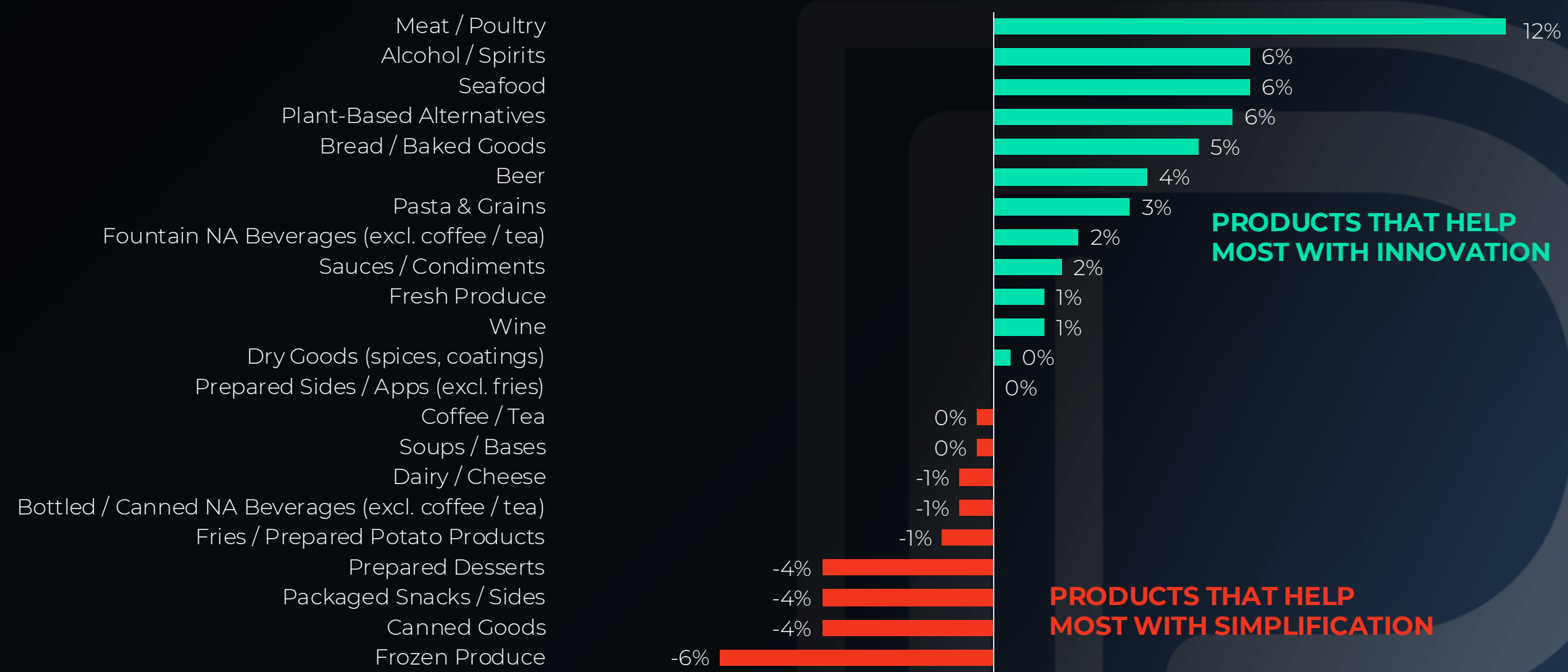
Product Categories to Help with Menu Innovation



Q: If you were looking to INNOVATE your menu, which of the following product categories would you focus on MOST for menu innovation? (select up to five; n=250)

% WHO SAY IT HELPS THEM INNOVATE - % WHO SAY IT HELPS THEM SIMPLIFY

Role by Product Category



AMONG OPERATORS WHO DID AT LEAST SOME MENU SIMPLIFICATION IN THE LAST YEAR

Simplified Menu Success Markers



Q: How important are the following in determining if you SUCCESSFULLY SIMPLIFIED your menu? (top-2, 5 pt. scale; n=243)

AMONG OPERATORS WHO DID AT LEAST SOME MENU INNOVATION IN THE LAST YEAR

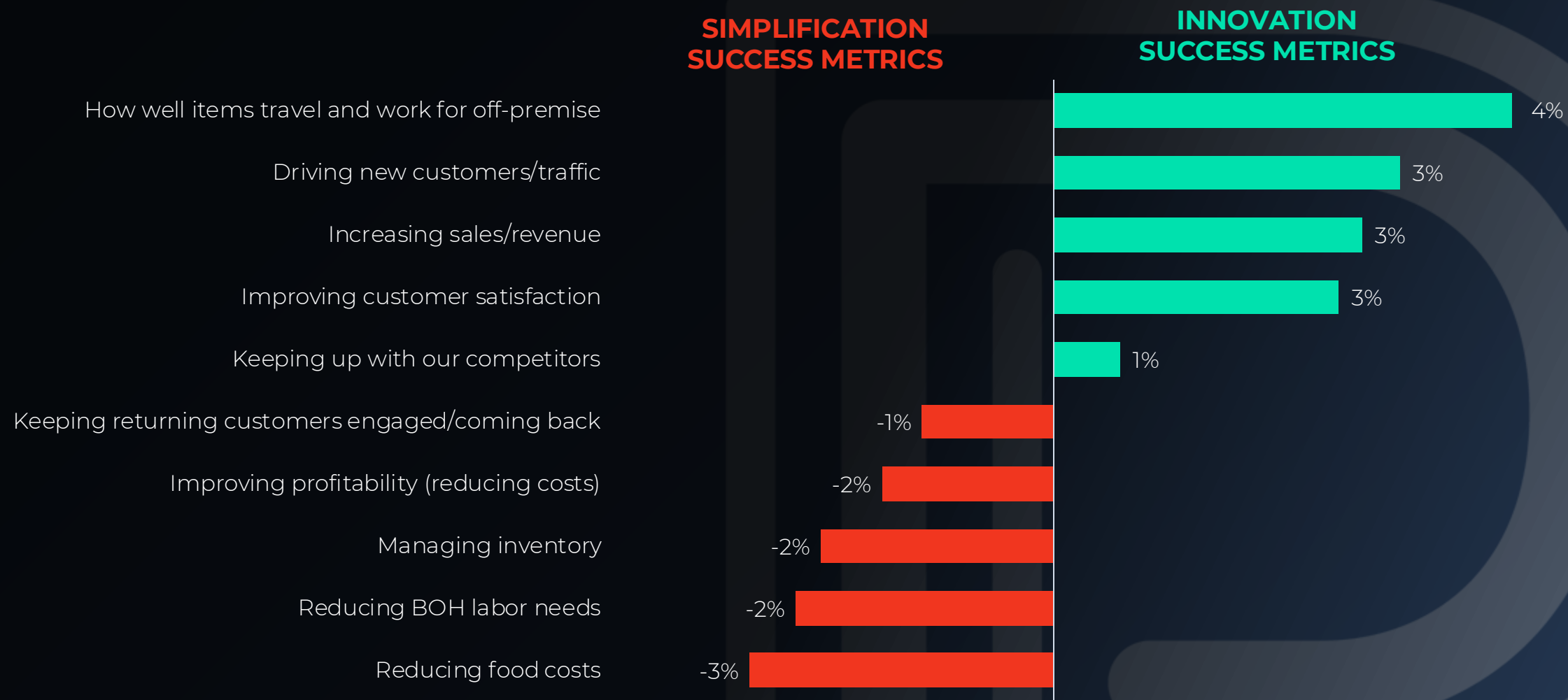
Innovation Success Markers



Q: How important are the following in determining if you SUCCESSFULLY INNOVATED your menu? (top -2, 5 pt. scale; n=220)

% INDICATING A SUCCESSFUL INDICATOR OF INNOVATION - % INDICATING A SUCCESSFUL INDICATOR OF SIMPLIFICATION

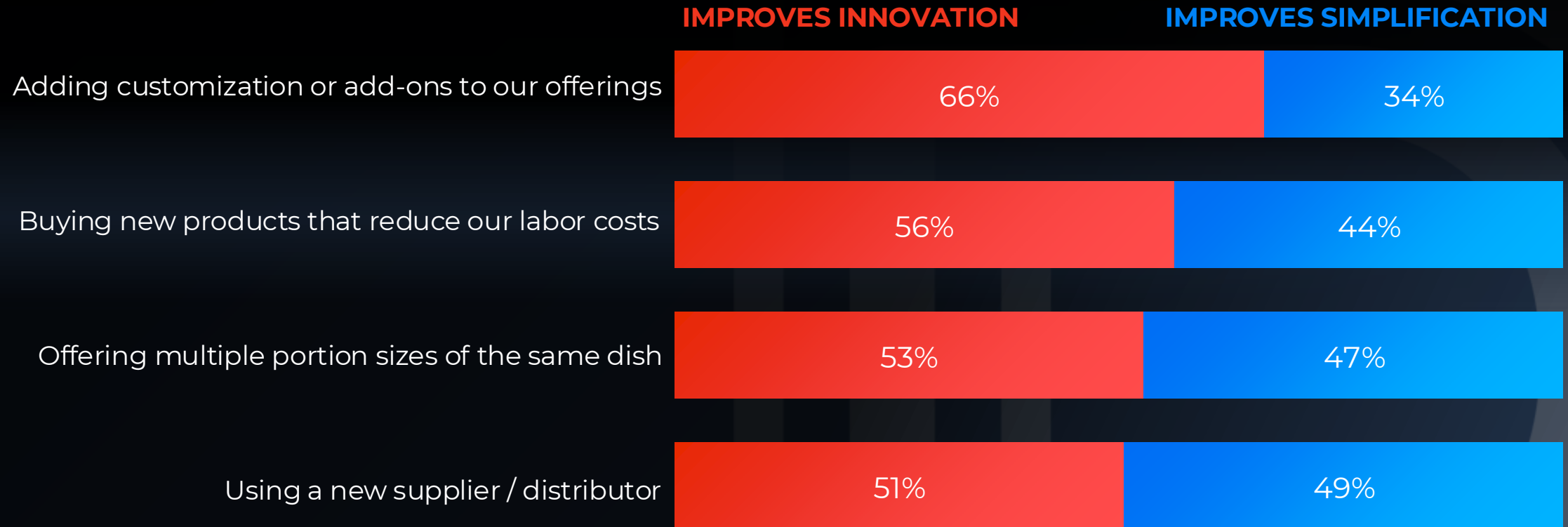
Menu Change Success Markers



Q: How important are the following in determining if you SUCCESSFULLY INNOVATED your menu? (top-2, 5 pt. scale; n=220)
Q: How important are the following in determining if you SUCCESSFULLY SIMPLIFIED your menu? (top-2, 5 pt. scale; n=243)

AMONG OPERATORS WHO THINK YOU MUST PICK BETWEEN INNOVATING AND SIMPLIFYING

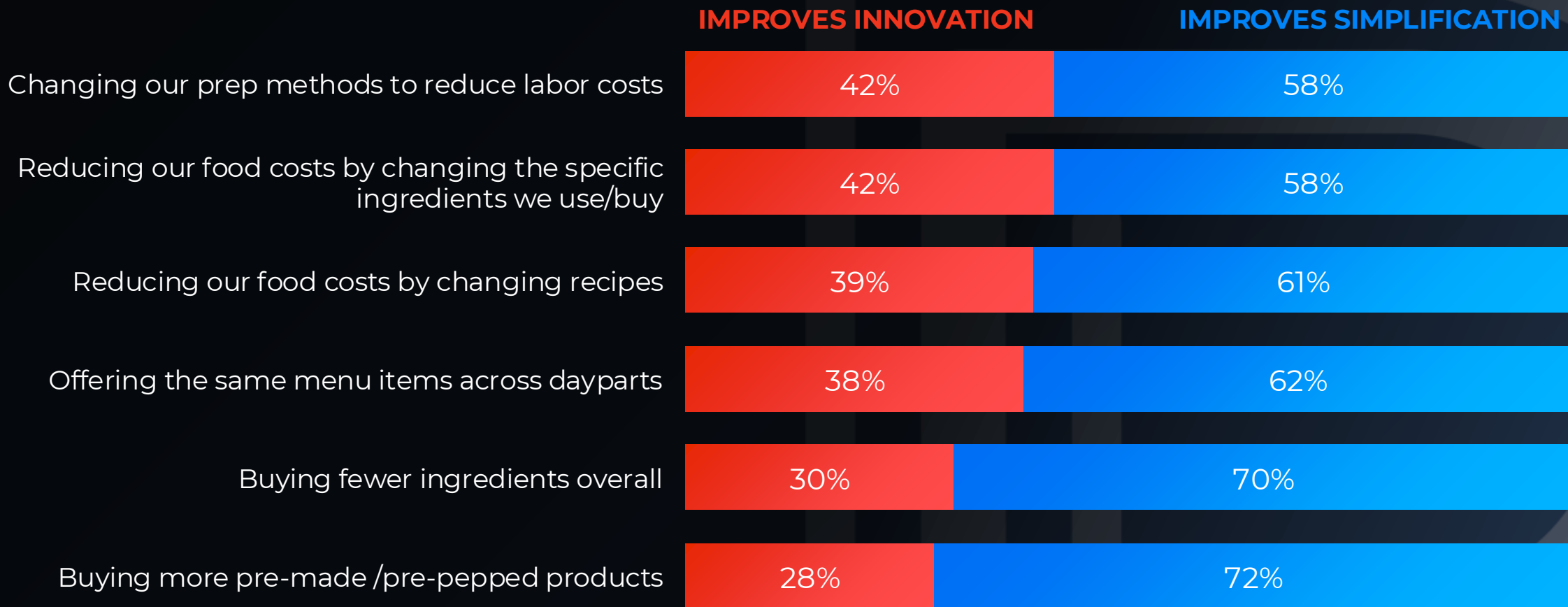
What helps more with innovation?



Q: For the following changes you could make at your operation, would you say they are more likely to help you...
(among those who think you must pick between the two; n=89)

AMONG OPERATORS WHO THINK YOU MUST PICK BETWEEN INNOVATING AND SIMPLIFYING

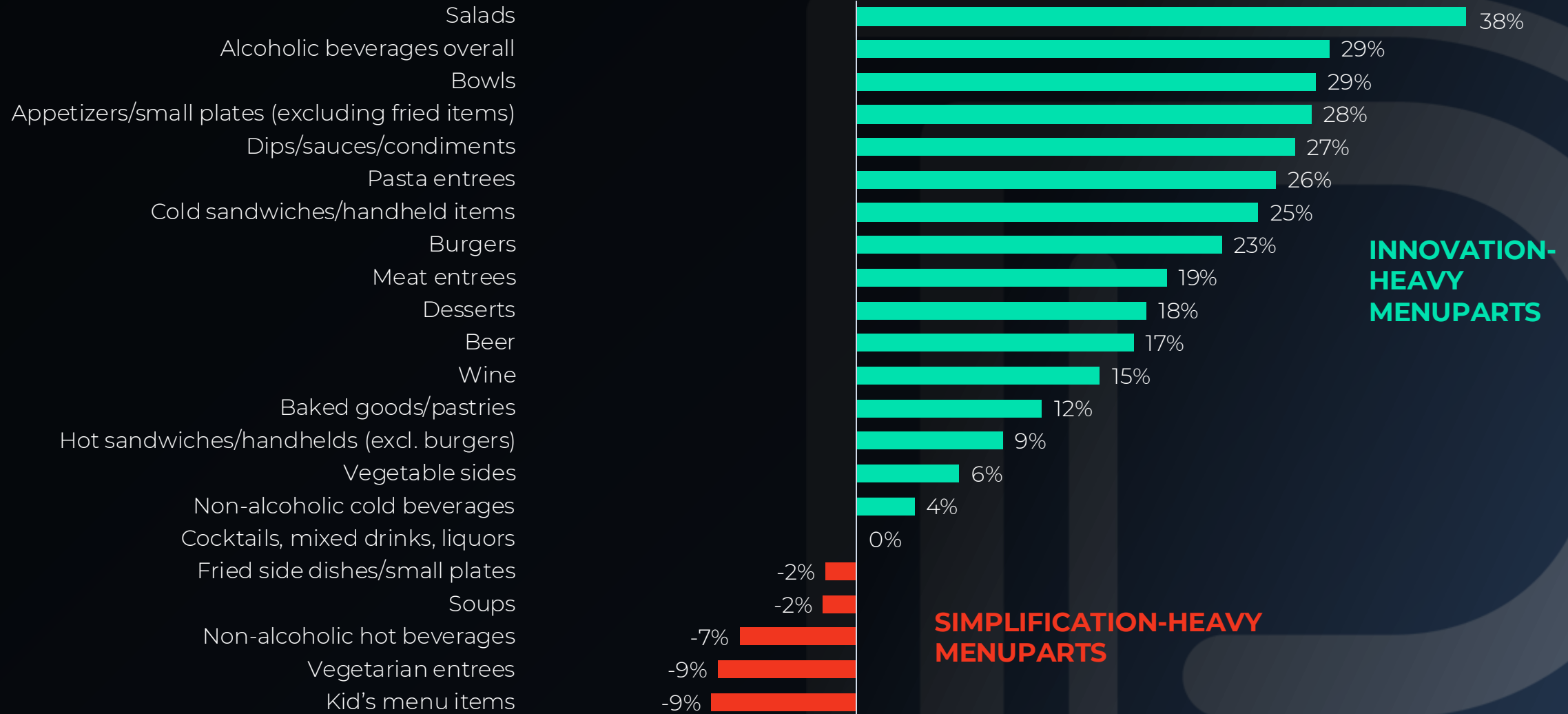
What helps with simplification?



Q: For the following changes you could make at your operation, would you say they are more likely to help you...
(among those who think you must pick between the two; n=89)

AMONG THOSE WHO OFFER EACH MENUPART AND EITHER INNOVATED OR SIMPLIFIED; % WHO INNOVATED - % WHO SIMPLIFIED

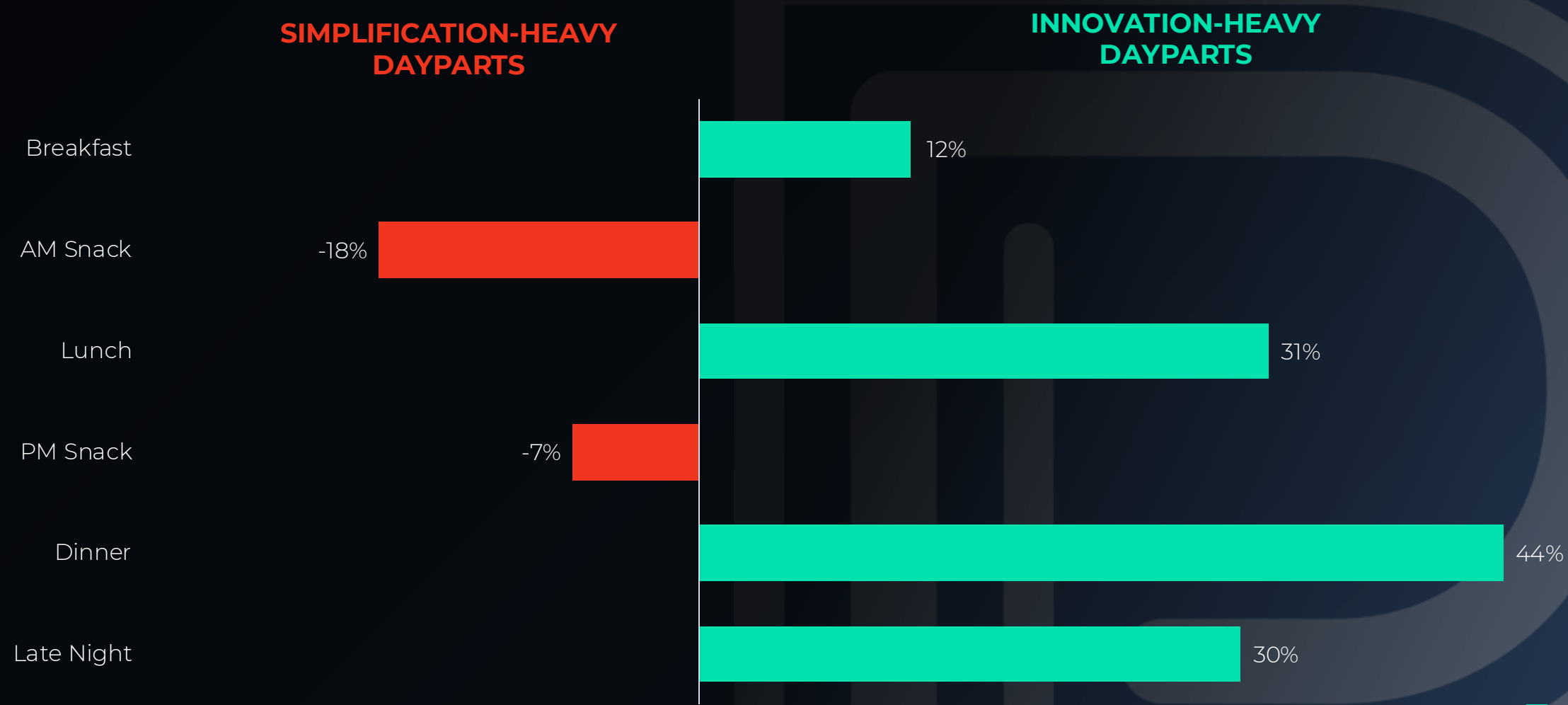
Menupart Shifts Last Year



Q: For the following parts of the menu you offer, in the last year have you... (n=varies)

AMONG THOSE WHO OFFER EACH DAYPART AND EITHER INNOVATED OR SIMPLIFIED; % WHO INNOVATED - % WHO SIMPLIFIED

Daypart Shifts Last Year



Q: For the following dayparts you offer, in the last year have you... (n=varies)

SIMPLIFICATION

A silver fork is lifting a portion of spaghetti from a white plate. The spaghetti is yellow and appears to be coated in a light sauce. The background is a solid light blue. The word 'SIMPLIFICATION' is written in large, bold, black capital letters across the top of the image, with the fork and spaghetti partially obscuring it.

**2x as many operators
plan to focus on
simplification (20%) as
on innovation (10%)**

Q: In the NEXT year, are you more likely to... (among those who think you must pick between the two; n=89)



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