

When Unit Economics Erase the Customer: A Menu-Innovation Lesson from *A Modest Proposal*

A proposal can look cheap, scalable, and stakeholder-positive-and still be a failure if its economics require treating people as inventory.

Slide 1 - When Unit Economics Erase the Customer

The menu-innovation lesson in *A Modest Proposal*

- Jonathan Swift's proposal sounds like a practical operating plan.
- Its calculations, supply logic, customer segments, and stakeholder benefits are deliberately grotesque.
- The business lesson: economic efficiency cannot compensate for a dehumanizing premise.

Slide 2 - The Apparent Business Problem

The speaker frames poverty as an urgent capacity and cost problem:

- Poor mothers and children crowd streets and doorways, dependent on begging.
- Families cannot reliably provide food, clothing, work, or shelter.
- Children may become thieves, leave the country, or enter servitude.
- Existing remedies are presented as unable to support children before they can work.

Read the setup as a business case: high visible need, constrained resources, and pressure for an inexpensive solution.

Slide 3 - The Proposed Product-Market Fit

The proposal converts infants into a supposed food and materials category.

- A healthy one-year-old is described as "nourishing and wholesome Food."

- The product is positioned for wealthy consumers, public entertainments, taverns, and household meals.
- The skin is assigned a secondary use in gloves and boots.
- The speaker claims the scheme could relieve poor families while supplying luxury demand.

The satire exposes the danger of designing around consumption before asking whether the underlying product should exist.

Slide 4 - The Pseudo-Unit Economics

The speaker uses precision to make an indefensible premise feel investable:

- 120,000 children are estimated after subtracting secure families, miscarriages, and infant deaths.
- 20,000 are retained for breeding; 100,000 are sold at one year old.
- Weight, feeding cost, resale value, portions, and annual national income are calculated.
- A mother is promised an eight-shilling profit and freedom to return to work.

Diagnostic: precise numbers can clarify a decision-or camouflage a moral and strategic failure.

Slide 5 - The Operating Model Looks "Scalable"

The fictional proposal anticipates execution details:

- Mothers are advised to nourish children so they become more valuable.
- Wealthy buyers are assigned predictable use cases: dinners, weddings, civic feasts, and other entertainments.
- Dublin is assigned annual demand, with the rest of Ireland treated as additional market capacity.
- Public slaughterhouses are proposed to handle preparation immediately after purchase.

This is operational completeness without operational legitimacy. A fully specified process is not automatically an acceptable process.

Slide 6 - Stakeholder Value Is Not the Same as Public Value

The speaker claims nearly every participant benefits:

- Mothers receive profit and relief from child-rearing costs.
- Landlords gain a way to recover rent.
- Taverns, cooks, and domestic commerce gain new business.
- Wealthy diners receive food and entertainment.
- The nation supposedly reduces maintenance costs and increases its stock of wealth.

The flaw is aggregation: counting transactions while ignoring who bears the harm.

Slide 7 - The Red Flags a Menu Business Case Must Surface

1. Commodification

Children are treated as inventory, inputs, and resale units rather than people.

2. Biased customer logic

The proposal is "for" wealthy consumers while the poor supply the resource.

3. False credibility

The speaker invokes years of study, merchant opinions, calculations, and personal disinterest.

4. PR exposure

The product's public meaning is inseparable from exploitation, class power, religious hostility, and organized violence.

A favorable margin cannot neutralize a category-defining reputational risk.

Slide 8 - The Objection Test

Swift's speaker appears to consider alternatives, but only after setting an impossible standard: they must be equally cheap, easy, innocent, and effective.

He rejects or dismisses reforms such as:

- Taxing absentee interests.
- Buying domestic goods.
- Reducing luxury and waste.

- Improving thrift and fair commerce.
- Ending faction and showing mercy to tenants.

Business-case implication: do not compare an innovation only with "do nothing."
Compare it with credible operational, supply, pricing, and sourcing alternatives.

Slide 9 - What the Satire Says About Demand

The proposal's most disturbing feature is not only what it sells, but who is expected to want it.

- Infant flesh is imagined at elite feasts, weddings, christenings, and public celebrations.
- A child becomes a portion, a dish, a market forecast, and a byproduct.
- Consumer pleasure is placed above the humanity of the supply base.

For menu innovation, customer appeal must include the meaning consumers attach to the product-not merely whether they can be persuaded to purchase it.

Slide 10 - A Better Innovation-Gate Checklist

Before advancing a new menu concept, ask:

- Customer: Does the proposition create legitimate consumer value, or merely exploit appetite?
- Supply: Are suppliers and source communities treated as partners rather than inputs?
- Economics: Are savings real, or dependent on externalizing harm and hidden costs?
- Execution: Can hundreds of locations deliver consistently without creating unacceptable complexity?
- Positioning: Does the product reinforce the brand promise or expose a contradiction?
- Downside: What would customers, employees, communities, and the press say if the full operating model were public?
- Alternatives: Have humane, practical options been rejected because they are difficult rather than because they are ineffective?

Slide 11 - The Decision Rule

Do not approve a concept simply because it is:

- Cheap.
- Scalable.
- Easy to explain in a spreadsheet.
- Attractive to a high-margin customer segment.
- Supported by precise forecasts.

Approve it only when the economics, operating model, customer meaning, and stakeholder consequences reinforce one another.

Slide 12 - Final Takeaway

Swift's fictional proposal succeeds as satire because it makes exploitation sound like innovation.

The warning for menu strategy is direct:

If the business case requires turning vulnerable people into commodities, the problem is not execution. The premise is the risk.