

## **BRANDING THROUGH DESIGN**

Throughout my hospitality education, I was taught that a guest's dining experience begins in the parking lot, meaning that the impression left on the guest included the events leading up to the experience, and not just the experience itself. Well, this theory is close ... but no cigar! More often than not, the guest's experience begins well before they ever decide to dine in your facility. Advertising, reviews, word of mouth, and a variety of other factors can affect the customer's expectations before they even see that parking lot.

Once a patron has been attracted to your dining establishment, a number of factors have already influenced their decision. The end result of this decision is that the customer has decided to give you an opportunity to prove that the risk they took in dining with you was a worthwhile decision. In order to create or maintain a loyal customer, you must do everything right to create a welcomed experience. Conversely, one wrong move and your patron is lost ... not to mention the secondary damage that can occur when news of the dining event is shared with others. Branding through the design of your facility can help compliment the image that attracted your customer in the first place.

### Branding: A Closer Look

Establishing a *brand*. *Branding*. It all sounds like a bunch of marketing mumbo jumbo ... but it's not. In laymen's terms, your brand is who you are, what you are, and why you are. The objective of this month's column is to impress upon you the importance of an integrated marketing approach that includes every aspect of your operation with which the patron comes in contact. This includes your mailers, radio and/or television commercials, parking lot, menu, service style, server uniforms, food presentation, and of course the design of your establishment (yes, I am biased).

The design of your facility is one of the best opportunities you have to drive home your branding message. This is the environment in which the dining experience occurs, and the design of this space significantly impacts the impression left

upon the customer. The diners should know at all times that they are in *your* dining establishment. You have the unique opportunity to control the environment in which the experience occurs and, subsequently, influence that experience.

### Branding Through Design Applied

Assume for a moment that you operate a seafood concept located in the center of a downtown area, in a city that is at least 400 miles from the closest body of water. Despite your location, your branding efforts can help your customer overlook the fact that they are ordering fresh seafood miles from the nearest fishing boat. For example, consider the exterior of the building ... the proverbial parking lot. Does the exterior façade look like a dock or sea-side location? Are there sounds of boats, fisherman, and circling seagulls playing over speakers at the main entry?

There are an infinite number of subtle tactics that you can take throughout the guest experience to enhance your brand. The branding elements, however, must be genuine and authentic to fully engage the guest. Continuing with the above example, wouldn't it be appropriate to have a real boat in the waiting or bar area retrofitted with car tires and a sign that reads "Fresh Fish or Bust!" This would reinforce your market position, subliminally reminding your customer that despite your distance from water, you will make every effort to provide a quality product.

### Six Places to Enhance Your Brand

Listed below are six design-related elements that can directly convey your brand message to the patron. Sure, there are others ... but these are a great place to start.

- **Exterior:** You never have a second chance to make a first impression. While I have argued that the guest experience starts before the parking lot, the approach to the facility is your first chance to truly influence the guest, and the pending dining experience.

- **Entrance Sequence:** Think of this not as your front door, but the transition by the guest from the outside world to your world. That's right, inside your facility is a world that you can control in order to create the experience that *you* want the guest to have.
- **Bar or Waiting Area:** What do you have planned for your guests' wait? Do you hand them a coaster and tell them to come back when it flashes? Do you send them away, politely asking them to leave and return in 20, 30, or 90 minutes? Whether through props, entertainment, or merchandising, the design of this area is a great place to drive home your brand.
- **Seating:** Due to the quantity of seating in any dining room, the impact of these fixtures on the feel of your space should not be overlooked. Furthermore, this is where your patron spends most of the dining experience. Specialty seating, customization, and the incorporation of logos or key elements provide great opportunities to support your branding efforts.
- **Presentation of Product:** Endless possibilities. One fantastic example I saw recently was a restaurant in the lobby of a large hotel with an "outside" dining deck that was actually inside the lobby. The "outside" tables were set with dome shaped fly covers that were removed at the beginning of service. Now that's branding.
- **Restrooms:** Too often the restrooms are overlooked as a marketing opportunity, and they are treated merely as a place to "take care of business." We have all heard that the cleanliness of the bathroom is an indicator of how clean the kitchen is. Consider then that the bathroom is a tremendous opportunity to follow through on your branding message.

## Conclusion

Take some time, get creative, and consider how you can use the design elements within your facility to convey your branding message. You can start by focusing on the six areas listed above. Don't blow this opportunity to make a clear, lasting impression on your patrons.