

TIME FOR DESIGN?

A few months back, I received a phone call from a potential client that was calling to inquire about design services for his new restaurant. As is the norm for these types of calls, I tried to dig for information about this gentleman's concept, goals, and objectives. He proceeded to tell me that he had just signed the lease for a place on the beach, and was looking to create the new "hot spot" for his area of the shore line. He wanted a full kitchen, a full bar with 20 seats, a 185 seat dining room, a dance floor, and all other required facilities, such as restrooms.

As the conversation continued, we began to discuss the facility for which he had just signed a lease. During this part of the conversation, I inquired about the size and configuration of his building. Without hesitation, he told me that the building was just shy of 2000 square feet (186 square meters) ... 2000 SQUARE FEET? Consider the size of your house, your apartment, or current place of residence as a reference. Can you fathom trying to fit all of this gentleman's desires into 2000 square feet? Me neither!

A Common Mistake

Like it or not, foodservice establishments have one of the highest failure rates of any industry. The reason can be summed up in a statement used by one of my colleagues that I have since adopted ... there is a difference between those who are in the *Restaurant Business* and those who are in the *Business of Restaurants*. For some reason, numerous members of our industry operate as if standard business practices do not apply to their restaurant or foodservice *business*.

In the scenario above, the gentleman on the phone had committed to a space prior to confirming whether or not his concept was viable for the location that he had selected. Believe it or not, this is quite common. Most often, we will hear from a new client *after* he or she has committed to a location for their establishment, despite never having had a professional evaluate the space. Not surprisingly, the news they receive is not what they want to hear. When I was

forced to explain to this gentleman that it would be difficult to fit all that he wanted into the space that he had obtained, he was less than thrilled, to say the least.

Just a Suggestion

Fortunately, the scenario that was described above is preventable. What if we, as an industry, were willing to look at our current practices in a new way and with the objective to improve upon our current methods? A lease is a long-term commitment that can significantly impact the success or failure of a foodservice *business* (yes, I am emphasizing *business* again). Wouldn't it make sense to have a design professional review the facility and discuss the objectives of the tenant to determine if the location is viable ... prior to signing the lease? If the space is in fact viable, then this process would prove to be a relatively inexpensive confirmation of the proposed business model. If the space proves to be insufficient, then this is an even less expensive effort, as it can prevent major financial loss.

The method used to determine the viability of a concept in a particular location can be achieved in different ways, depending on the amount of detail desired. A professional can evaluate a potential site, focusing solely on square footage (or square meter) estimates. In other words, various rules of thumb would be used to determine if the kitchen, dining, and support areas are sufficient in size. This generalized approach typically requires minimal time to execute, and therefore should not be extremely expensive. The accuracy of this approach, however, is limited as well.

Another option is to obtain design services for conceptual or schematic drawings to be developed for the desired location. This would enable you to see how your particular concept might fit into the desired location. While the first proposed approach would enable the potential owner or operator to determine whether or not a space is viable, this second proposed approach would result in one or more actual layouts of the space. This is an important distinction, as the physical layout might not be desirable despite the fact that the space is sufficient in size. Because this approach would require a larger time commitment, the costs

associated with obtaining this information would be greater than those for the square footage analysis. The accuracy of the information obtained, however, could be invaluable.

Risk and Reward for the Design Community

As previously stated, this is not a typical approach. In fact, some designers may find this approach down-right odd and resist adopting such work. I will concur that it involves significant risk, but there are potential rewards for the designer as well. With the first approach (area only), the designer is given an opportunity to introduce his or her company and capabilities ... a terrific marketing opportunity. With the second approach (conceptual design), there is an even greater marketing opportunity as the potential client will be able to evaluate the designer's talents and approach. The risk with this second approach is that the designer will give away the concept at an inexpensive price ... and that risk is real. Nevertheless, only a short-sighted client would pull the conceptual design away from the original designer hoping that a cheaper imitation can implement it. The conceptual design is just that ... conceptual, a beginning. A talented designer will be able to generate equally impressive design solutions throughout the remainder of the design and construction process.

Conclusion

Could this simple approach reduce the failure rate within the restaurant and commercial foodservice industry? It certainly wouldn't hurt. Like any business venture, it is wise to evaluate the current scenario to the greatest extent possible before moving forward. The gentleman who called me with 2000 square feet (186 square meters) had committed to a space that didn't meet his needs. I don't know about you ... but if my money were involved I would rather be sure that a site worked before making a commitment.