



Restaurant designer Nigel Witham explains just what he can realistically achieve for clients - and what is beyond the abilities of the design consultant

Avoid pitfalls of restaurant design

During the last few years I've been fortunate enough to be hired by a quite a few independent restaurateurs hoping to improve their businesses by the use of design.

Everyone knows the 'eating out' trend has been strong in recent years. Many one-off ideas have grown into small chains, expanded again and a number of the best performing formats have sold out to major operators.

The result is that it is easy to find good, reliable food in almost any high street - offered by the likes of Café Uno, Café Rouge, ASK, Pizza Express, Costa, Starbucks and many brands.

All this is very good news for the eating public and for the multiple operators, but it is forcing independents to make larger investments in an attempt to compete on level playing field

In many cases brave people sink large sums into new projects only to see them fail against the impossibly large sums invested by their corporate competitors.

Live up to reputation

So what's the answer for the smaller operator struggling against such overwhelming competition? I'm sure you'd expect me to say that restaurant design is often the key, but you'd be wrong because although it is a vital part of the solution it is not the full answer.

There is no point in creating a high profile restaurant or bar unless the product and service behind it live up to the reputation promised by clever new names, logos and colourful interiors.

As a designer I can't help anyone that isn't confident about their staff, location, menus or other aspects of their format. However, once all of these aspects are resolved, design can make a big difference. That's why the invest so much capital on identity, refurbishment and fitting out.

I'm not saying that you can't succeed without good design but if you want instant recognition to either launch a new project or reinvigorate an old business then a strong identity and interior design are vital.

To change customer perceptions and attract new business you will have to sack the chef, change the culture, modernise the menu, refurbish well and then re-open with a big splash.

Whenever I have seen this done the amount of instant customer confidence that has resulted has been breathtaking. Whenever I have seen half measures the results have been indifferent at best and often the business folds, or worse, becomes what I refer to as living dead. Making enough to survive but no more and becoming an emotional drain on its proprietors until they sell up or try again with conviction.

Imagine now that you want to launch a new concept in a greenfield location. The multiples think nothing of spending a couple of million on a few pilots and then pulling out if customer response is not what they require.

As an independent you may have only one chance, in your entire lifetime, to make this work. Again half measures won't work, it's a cliché but there is only one chance to make a first impression.

If you get any aspect wrong then the market is unlikely to forgive you. The biggest mistakes I see here are easy to pin down. First most newcomers severely underestimate the amount of money required. Secondly, they underestimate the amount of time required and thirdly they do not do enough research and are unwilling to spend any money doing so. In a nutshell they fail to plan professionally.

Independent restaurateurs can succeed against the multiples and without spending as much.

They can do so by managing their businesses more carefully by being on the spot and by not having to delegate to branch managers.

A clever designer can make a moderate amount of money go quite a long way but they cannot work with one hand tied behind their back.

Briefing a designer is a skill few acquire and so most designers end up being told to copy someone else's idea - almost invariably with poor results.

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Without them you will have to rely on a top product and accept slow growth obtained through a combination of word of mouth and expensive advertising.

Let's think about a couple of hypothetical examples. For instance, pretend you have just purchased a long established business in a good location where there is plenty of custom but which has been run badly and gained a poor reputation.

To overcome this a business needs to demonstrate a complete change of direction. Putting up 'under new management' signs is unlikely to be convincing.

The true key to making your investment in design work is do your market research professionally, choose design consultants with care, let them help you write a proper design brief, let them have free creative control within set boundaries and pay them to prepare a fully detailed cost analysis.

Money spent in this way may save you a lifetime. Going ahead without enough money may cost you one, and I have seen many people try to cut corners only to end up too deep into a project to back out but without enough money to see it through.