

design decisions

IN A MARKETPLACE WHICH IS CURRENTLY WITNESSING THE COMPETING LAUNCH OF MORE INNOVATIVE NEW FOOD RETAILING, DELIVERY AND TAKE-AWAY CONCEPTS THAN EVER BEFORE, HERE WE GET BACK TO BASICS. CHARTERED DESIGNER, NIGEL WITHAM, OFFERS SOME CLEAR THINKING AND GUIDANCE ON WHAT'S REQUIRED WHEN IT COMES TO MAKING THOSE ALL IMPORTANT DECISIONS ABOUT THE DESIGN AND IMAGE OF YOUR CHOSEN OUTLET.



The truth

Not so long ago I was in a meeting discussing a new major restaurant project with a client and agreeing my design fees. I was quite open, and I said to them that design is always a tough sell - "I can't tell you what your restaurant will look like, what it will cost, when it will be finished or how much I will charge you. All I can say is that I will want a large sum in design fees every month for about a year and if you manage me correctly I will give you what you want".

My client, being rather taken aback at my frankness, thought for a moment and then said, "I understand it all comes down to trust, doesn't it?"

This is the truth and here is some more. If you are an independent operator and want to get the best from your pizzeria or delivery outlet, you have to compete on level terms with the multiples that have marched across every high street in the country. This means you have to use every skill and resource they have, and more again to beat them. It's for these reasons that you simply can't cut corners, or compete without adequate investment, professional guidance and, of course, hard work.

Identify your aims

I live near Sevenoaks, a prosperous commuter-belt town with no shortage of money. And where do the people of Sevenoaks go for a meal when they want to celebrate? Zizzis. Now, I've nothing against Zizzi's since, like most hungry designers, I'm especially partial to fresh pizza and Zizzis' pizzas are very nice indeed. But my point is that there are no, smart independent restaurants - Italian or otherwise - left in the town. In that particular area, Zizzis has become the most upmarket restaurant option.

So, let's imagine that you have found an empty unit in your area, and are considering turning it into a new pizzeria or pizza delivery outlet. You may already be running a successful outlet elsewhere, but there is no harm in getting back to the basics when considering a new location.

What factors should you be assessing? For one thing, how will you go about fitting out your new venue to take trade from the multiples? What will be the future trends? Well, this is what I think.

The first thing you might do is have a long hard look at your ideas and assess the strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Restaurant concepts, including pizza delivery-type operations, as we know, suffer from a high failure rate. Many people start outlets because they like to cook, or to eat or to hold dinner parties for their friends, or even because they like to design kitchens and dining rooms! They do not look at the cold, hard facts of business, they get carried away with the glamour and the parts of the job they like and want to do instead. They forget the long hours, hard work and grit.

Do you think that when a major chain opens an outlet they think about what the kitchen will look like, or how much they would enjoy cooking for their friends? Do you think they do it because they saw a restaurant on a holiday to Italy and said 'I know, let's copy that'?

No. What they do is analyse the numbers. They look carefully and they ask themselves, how many customers will we fit in this unit? What will it cost to fit-out? Is there enough nearby parking? Are there big doors at both ends so we can keep the production line running smooth and turn the covers over fast enough? How many people can we serve? What can we charge? What ingredients can we buy at a competitive price, add value to and sell high? Is the labour market good so we can find staff?



Nigel Witham is a chartered designer who has run his own design practice for nearly twenty years. He designed his first restaurant in 1990 and has since worked for many independent retailers and restaurateurs. He has offices near London, as well as in India, New Zealand and Australia (Nigel also has a detailed web site from where you can download free instant help and advice at www.nigelw.com).



Get some artist's impressions done.

Lead, don't follow

When I tell potential new clients that to succeed they need to lead the market and not follow it, and that they need to have an original well-contained design idea and present it clearly to create impact and awareness, and when I tell them that it will cost at least £1500 per square metre to build even a simple pizzeria or take-out that can challenge the competition they usually start to lose enthusiasm.

Original thought takes time, experience, practice and training. Inspiration can't be forced or rushed. Great designs are never instant ideas and they are most certainly never copied. Trained designers know this but untrained ones rarely have any inkling about how to think laterally enough about design. Often they just build the first thing they think of.

Any designer worth engaging will have made plenty of mistakes in the past - as I say original thought is never easy. The multiples hire the designers that make the fewest mistakes and take the most care. These are the designers that charge the most but have the brightest new ideas. I can't predict what these ideas will be. I can't say what will be the best new colour or operating formats. New ideas are still 'secrets' on the drawing board, and if you want to be successful you have to empower a designer to work on one for you. If you want a hint, look to America, usually

Can we make a profit?

Recently an American banker friend of mine said to me that he thought he knew why so many restaurants fail. He said that in his opinion, restaurants are every dumb person's entrepreneurial venture of choice, and I am afraid to say I think he is right.

Most people that call me about new eatery concepts - and there are several most weeks - want to know if I can copy a design they have seen elsewhere, and if so, what it will cost. I am rarely, if ever, asked 'what's the best way to design an outlet to maximise return on my capital investment?'

Most would-be operators think that their design tastes are the same as everyone else's so all they need do is get in a builder and tell him to make the place look like their living room or somewhere else they like and then people will flood in. In twenty years I have yet to see this approach work! I am sorry if I cause offence, but my sentiment is genuine, and I know that many of you will know these things already. I am really referring to those who have yet to get off the ground properly, or are struggling to do so.

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Left: A home delivery concept created for Pizza Bella in North London.

we get what they've got 10 years late, but sometimes they look to us and so we should look at ourselves.

Finding a good designer

There are few barriers to entry of the design profession. Pretty well anyone who wants can open a design office. Consequently, there are a lot of low-grade designers who are just the same as

the untrained in that they simply copy the last design they saw and make a few changes. Since this is what anyone can do for themselves and since second-hand ideas rarely work well, a lot of pizzeria owners don't bother with designers, or they will just get in a general practice architect to build a shell for them to decorate and furnish. This is a shame, both for the independent restaurateur and for the large number of good designers who work hard and have their clients' best interests at heart.

You need a designer to understand the needs of your business, and then you need to tell them what you are expert at, recognise their expertise, stand back and let them get on. The difficulty is in finding a designer you can trust in this way. Another difficulty is in finding a way to explain your dream to your designer and for them to convey their interpretation of it back to you. After all, if an idea is truly original no one has seen it before, so no one can show you how it will look beforehand.

GUIDANCE NOTES

1 Only hire a qualified specialist architect, or a chartered designer, that has designed several outlets at least as large as the one you are planning.

2 Design is difficult, which is why there is a gulf of difference in quality between homespun design and professional design, so only hire an experienced designer that demonstrates an understanding of your business.

3 Tell the designer all about your business (don't tell them how you want the design, do tell them why you want it designed)

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4 Prepare to be shocked! Original ideas are often surprising, so give the designer's ideas time to settle in your mind. There are many right designs for most briefs and the nebulous one in the back of your mind may not be the best (remember, it can be dislocating to see your business through another person's eyes for the first time).

5 Never hire a designer who takes sales commissions, but rather hire designers who charge for their time so that you will get honest, impartial advice.

6 Never let a builder or designer-come-supplier produce a free design. They are very likely just trying to sell you something else.

7 Hire the most expensive designer you can afford. The fee will not often be more than 15% of the cost of the whole project. If the design is wrong, the other 85% of the investment will be lost so it is worth getting right.

8 Never try to design yourself unless you are trained and experienced. I am sorry to say, but really you are most unlikely to succeed. Find a good, honest experienced designer and trust them. Let the designer manage the builders, they will know their ways best.

9 Appoint builders that understand the design. Never chose cheap builders to do complex work to a deadline. It is a recipe for failure, disappointment and dispute. All restaurants are complex projects and general builders are not often suitable.

10 Give the designer time. No one does good work in a rush and it is unlikely to save money in the end. The minimum from start to opening should be 6 months; a year is better. You may only get one chance in your career.

11 Get lots of drawings done - you can't navigate without maps. When you see the reams of drawings a designer produces it will amaze you. I have often spent a 1000 hours on a design (at hourly rates designers and architects often get paid less than the plumbers on the job). Also make sure you get some high-quality artist's impression drawings so that you can truly see what is being proposed. These will take time and be expensive, but not nearly as expensive as getting the wrong thing built.

12 Get a detailed specification drafted. You can't hold a builder to a price and deadline otherwise.

13 Get a professional to produce an estimate. Don't guess the cost, you will be way out. Believe me, after hundreds of projects I am still often wrong about cost more than any other aspect.

14 If you are not sure which designer to choose arrange for two or three to do some plans and sketches for you, pay all of them fairly (so that you get proper work not just a cheap rush job) and then engage the one you get on with the best. If the design is not quite right, they will sort it out. Again this will be expensive, but if you think good design is costly try finding out what bad design costs!

15 If you do not like the design, explain why, and if this does not work reject it and pay then hire another designer (the first designer is not at fault for having different tastes from you). Do not fiddle with the design, this never works but do let the designer work out any technical misunderstandings you are concerned about.

16 Once your designer is working get on with planning menus, recruiting staff and publicity. This is where you are the expert and can best invest your time, but let your designer help you with advertising, a web site and graphic design so that it all matches and has consistent, clear impact.

17 Most importantly don't open an outlet just because you want one that is like someone else's. Do your own thing with originality, get it done right, and get it done once.

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