

Comment

Designer column



Nigel Witham

Adapt or die. Middle Eastern outlets must evolve in the downturn or face the threat of extinction.

There are only two ways to react to the credit crunch.

We can either say, 'what a mess all those greedy finance people have got us into — now all our opportunities have gone, so we'd better wait and do nothing'.

Or we can say 'the boom was good while it lasted, but now we have to rely on our imagination to build business, so let's think hard and invent a better future'.

We all know the second reaction is the right one and that, since there is less money about, we have to work harder for it.

This means we have to adapt and change on all levels, from countries to single outlets.

It is human nature not to want change, not only because it's hard work, but also because it often means admitting previous misjudgments were made.

Another human trait is that we are inclined to put off either making difficult decisions or suggesting new ideas, for fear of making a mistake or looking silly. The result is that imaginative decisions get put off and only safe, boring changes are implemented.

Now, however, we are dependent on fast innovation, so we have to shake off our inhibitions, think harder and be more creative.

The proactive approach

Sitting around and waiting for things to go back to normal is simply a waste of time, because 'normal' just changed.

If you look back at UK newspapers from the 1992 recession, you'll see comments

such as: "This time it's different, it could turn into a depression; we haven't seen this situation before and it could get very bad."

The same words are being written again now, with the same sense of blind panic. In fact what followed 1992 was a shift in attitude that led to 16 years of uninterrupted growth.

We may not have seen this recession com-

to be original only in its adaptation to the problem you're working on."

Deep in the fall-out of the last recession, Wagamama invented an original new restaurant format and opened their first noodle bar in London. The fast, cheap, high-quality offer with trademark communal benches sensed the mood of the times perfectly. Now their imaginative idea has spread around the world.

Food and hotel concepts that recognise the economic asteroid that just hit — and sensitively counter the austere mood its



McDonald's award-winning flagship store in London, designed by SHH Architects.

ing, but we can't turn the clock back; we have to move forwards with new ideas.

Thomas Edison, who invented the electric light and had 2097 patents to his name, advised: "Look out for novel ideas that others have used successfully. Your idea has

impact has caused — will also do well.

According to the London *Times* newspaper, McDonald's plans to invest US \$2.1 billion upgrading existing stores and opening a further 1000 outlets, mainly outside the USA — and its sales rose 7.2% last year.

Have you seen the latest award-winning McDonald's and McCafé designs? They are far from the burger shops of old. It's no wonder they keep expanding.

A new landscape

Recessions always have an upside — namely that the foundations for a fertile new landscape of creativity and innovation have been laid. When the market gets tough, brands have to work harder and find more creative ways to engage their customers' emotions.

Consequently, innovation and emotional intelligence have become vital in the design process. It's a case of innovate or risk a likely death, so I predict the birth of true creativity in the Middle East. This new era won't be about big bucks; it will be about ideas and originality.

If you listen to young people — your future market — you'll find environmental sustainability and responsibility are the issues that concern them most. Concepts such as air-conditioned beaches and similar ob-

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scene and irresponsible proposals — which appeal only to the hubristic and vain — represent old, greedy times that have just died a death. They won't help create the right reputation for Dubai and other GCC resorts that seek worldwide tourist recognition. We can do much better.

Try to foster a culture of innovation in your business. You'll kill this at birth if you impose your own pet ideas on your customers or your staff; listen to them instead. They may be giving you free ideas that will grow. Don't assume you have a monopoly on imagination.

Forget the measurable and the glossy hype — think about the meaningful, durable and authentic.

At the end of the day, it's up to you: if you don't make original and creative choices now in order to move forwards, someone else will be way ahead of you in the queue when the good times return to the region's hospitality industry.

Finally, some good news: inventing is fun — so go and work hard at it! ●



Relaxation area in McDonald's flagship store in London.