

Comment

Designer column



Nigel Witham

The art of seduction. Why F&B outlets must focus on seducing customers if they intend to secure a faithful and long-lasting relationship

Last month I was on the UK's BBC radio talking about pub design — and I don't think I gave the glamorous presenter the answers she was expecting.

A famous old pub had re-opened after refurbishment and I expect my role was to say how important design would be in sealing its success.

But I didn't necessarily agree with this.

A recent survey in this very magazine found that only 9% of people regard interior design as the most important element in the success of a restaurant. (To be honest, I'm surprised there were as many as 9%.)

You see every food outlet must have three ingredients to be successful: financial control; technical expertise; and seduction.

You can't hope to be successful without financial control and technical expertise. Without these ingredients you'll go bust or perhaps never open — they are your base sauce. The thing is all your competitors have the same base too, so all the differences between, you and them boil down to how you seduce your customers — and that's where I come in!

Design is part of seduction. This seduction used to be called 'marketing' or 'sales' or 'advertising', but these days, with all the complex tools marketing people use, those words don't really cover it.

For example, Facebook and Twitter can be used to seduce your customers and if you are patient they are powerful busi-

ness-driving tools — but they don't sell or market in any conventional sense.

Instead they seduce slowly, which is the best way if you want a lasting relationship.

For an F&B outlet, seducing your customers does not always entail soft lighting and sweet music; it can also mean finding a way to create a genuine engagement with them that is different from what they are used to.

In my view there are two successful seduction strategies that win customer fidelity: I call them personal and corporate.

Personal

The first restaurant I ever designed was a small tapas bar in London.

It was owned and run by a Spanish family who were amongst the most expert restaurateurs I ever met. They seemed to be all over the outlet at once, pouring a glass of wine here, mopping a spill there and taking orders everywhere.

Most importantly, they made their



Seduction is a powerful tool in building repeat custom, says Nigel Witham.

customers feel not as if they were inviting them into their restaurant, but into their living rooms. They never spoke down to them — but they knew a few tricks too.

For example, if a customer ever ate their whole meal and then complained and refused to pay, the head Spaniard would tear up the bill indignantly in front of them then throw them out.

This always got a round of applause from the other diners, probably because he had made an authentic and genuinely human display of emotion.

My design for them was OK, but to be honest it wasn't the big deal because they were. It's still there today, 20 years on, rather tatty and tired — but my Spaniards are still full of passion and so their tables are always full.

Personal restaurants only need a simple neutral interior design and are almost always one-offs. They only work for dedicated owner-operators and they are not for the lazy.

“It doesn't matter which path you take to seduce your customers so long as you're genuine and authentic”

Corporate

With this strategy, you need to get the designers heavily involved with the whole thing.

Make sure the entire brand, interior and message are clear. Work with your team and find a way to engage with your customers and add value and involvement at every touch-point.

Teach your staff what the brand values are, train them, write down routines and listen hard to everyone from the lowest kitchen porter to the most valuable customer.

Although you may not think so, these two

approaches have much in common: they are both authentic and honest; they don't set out to be anything other than what they are; they don't talk down to their customers but rather focus on them and add value at every opportunity; and they don't need customer satisfaction forms to know how well they are doing, because they can tell.

(Can you imagine asking your date to fill in a satisfaction form after dinner and a movie?)

So back to the BBC interview. The radio presenter asked me, I presume hypothetically, if I'd rather take her to an old fashioned pub or a flash city-centre bar.

My answer (and probably why I'll never get asked back) was that we'd have a good time in either. You see, it doesn't matter which path you take to seduce your customers so long as you're genuine and authentic.

So if you're stuck between being personal or corporate, there's a good chance that, like me, you'll be dining alone!