



# Is there a scheme behind your theme?

Wasabi is building its brand out of simplicity and often the queues are out the door.



Are there now so many themed restaurants in Dubai that it's hard to tell them apart? Could a clearer, simpler communication of brand values help you stand out from the competition? Nigel Witham thinks so

Once again I am in Dubai; it really is a place that continues to pull me back.

All my travelling back and forth between the UK and Dubai means I now know Terminal 3 at London's Heathrow Airport like the back of my hand.

Once you're 'air-side' — as the Americans like to say — it is a good place to shop and eat. There are a lot of food outlets: a French-style bistro, an Italian pizzeria, a modern seafood bar, burger bars — the list goes on. Many are branded, casual dining outlets and most aren't



too heavily themed.

In Dubai, this balance is reversed — most operators and developers I meet on my trips to the UAE seem especially keen on themes and it comes across to me as a "me-too" way of designing restaurants.

I can't help but think that this is an opportunity being missed, because Dubai has a world-

“

There are a lot of concepts that have been around in the rest of the world for a long time, which means there's not much to draw any food tourists back for a return visit

”

beating opportunity to become a truly stylish and modern restaurant-lovers destination. Though there are some notable exceptions, there are still a lot of concepts that have been around in the rest of the world for a long time.

This means that there is not much to draw any food tourists back to the Middle Eastern

destination for a return visit.

#### Why have a theme?

It's imperative to understand the purpose of theming a restaurant. Design should be used to communicate core brand values to customers so they know what to expect among all the marketplace clutter and, 20 years ago, a

theme used to be a good way to communicate those values.

Now, however, it can be just more clutter in an increasingly competitive, attention-grabbing world where clarity of purpose is essential. It seems that everywhere I go, I see pastiche French, Italian, Chinese and Indian themed brands. Most customers look right past all the quaint, fake fittings for something more modern, innovative and imaginative.

I think that more stylish, well-positioned and original formats will now get the most attention, formats perhaps not unlike those pictured here showing sushi and noodle bar chain Wasabi, which is spreading quickly across London.

The Wasabi outlets are clean and crisp, the chain's offer is transparent and obvious. The company is building its brand out of simplicity and often the queues are out the door.

I've no doubt that your marketing people may tell you that you need to find your USPs (unique sales propositions), but in F&B there are very few left. New food USPs can now only be incremental and offer diminishing returns.

What works instead are clear communications and excellent products and services that put customers' experiences first. What's more, it's now so easy for people to publish their experiences online that delivering excellent quality has never been so important. Word spreads faster nowadays and it's only natural that bad word spreads fastest.

Wasabi is a good example of a brand that doesn't offer much that is truly unique but that communicates in a very straightforward manner.

This brand is not dissimilar to a stripped-down Chinese



takeaway; it has less choice but more clarity.

**Consumer preferences**

Something else to think about is what if some customers like your theme but not your food, or the other way around? Why give yourself two hurdles?

I recently saw a manga-themed sushi bar and, given that manga art and sushi are both Japanese in origin, you might think this would work. Then again, sushi is natural and healthy whereas manga art is often violent or sexual, so there

is a clash of brand values. If you like manga and want to sell sushi, why not have a manga gallery and separate sushi bar? That way, those that like manga but not sushi will buy from you, as will those that like sushi but not manga — this is an easier way to get a return.

This is why to my mind communications should always be coordinated by an expert, even in small firms. The issues concerned are not obvious and are sometimes too complex to absorb by osmosis, so are best acquired through training.

**ABOUT NIGEL WITHAM**



Nigel Witham is a chartered designer who has run his own design practice for twenty years. He is a member of the Chartered Society of Designers in both interior and graphic design. He designed his first restaurant in 1990 and has worked for hundreds of independent retailers and restaurateurs. He has

offices in London, India, New Zealand and Australia  
**For more information email: [nigel@nigelw.com](mailto:nigel@nigelw.com)**