

Comment

Designer column



Nigel Witham

Original or bust! Copy-cattng design may seem like a sure-fire recipe for success, but in the long term it will do F&B outlets more harm than good

Here is the content of an email I received recently from a reader in Saudi Arabia:

Dear Nigel,

I am an owner of coffee drive-through and recently I opened a dine-in shop.

I designed my coffee shop to be modern, basing the style on pictures from the net and getting ideas from some famous restaurants — but the final result is not really very attractive, in my opinion!

I have opened the shop, but business is slow and I feel an improvement in the design would go a long way towards attracting more customers.

How would you suggest I do this?

I often receive letters like this, from outlet owners who have copied designs and ended up with unsuccessful outlets.

To be fair, you can find these kinds of short-lived, derivative, copy-cat designs pretty much wherever you go in the world, not just in the Middle East — but it is true that most of the outlets that have sprung up in the hotels and malls of Dubai have been done before elsewhere.

If you'd prefer a new, exciting, successful outlet then you should adopt the MAYA principle: 'Most Advanced Yet Acceptable'.

I don't claim to have invented this ethos; it was first used by famous American industrial designer Raymond Loewy, who made fortunes convincing the corporations



New UK coffee outlet Café Leoni, designed by Witham.

of America to be original by simply asserting that "ugly doesn't sell".

My message is that if you want to create a truly successful, recession-proof concept, you have to break the mould.

Frustratingly, my attempts to convince operators in the region to do anything new and original have nearly always been met with scepticism.

I have come to the reluctant conclusion that this comes down to a cultural division: despite its veneer of modernity, the Middle East remains obstinately conservative.

Businesses operated via the 'command, control and procurement' school of thought are ultimately cost-driven and out-moded, compared with the flexible and imaginative methods seen in Europe and America.

This applies across business generally, but F&B outlets in particular can benefit when creativity is at the centre of their propositions.

The problem is that to originate a truly new MAYA café or restaurant, a lot of 'wrong' ideas have to be discarded, so there's no way of shortcutting with a quick, cheap design pitch. No matter how hard you stamp your feet in front of your designer, an original idea will take time and money.

Here's the nub of the problem: it's all about trust. Designers offering MAYA are in effect saying, 'pay us a lot and we'll deliver something we can't yet picture and we're not sure how long it will take to deliver'.

For most operators with bosses or banks to please, on tight budgets and timescales, this is not a very attractive message! It's far more controllable and comfortable to buy in a well-worn franchise.

And what makes originality even harder to implement is that all operators have a tendency to revert to the emotional safety of what they already know works, even though the idea may be old hat.

This may help your business meet short-term objectives, but is unlikely to be a safe and successful long-term strategy — after all, you can't lead by following.

At the end of the day, a MAYA design will always outperform a boring, tried-and-tested, 'safe' formula.

So if your outlet is quiet, maybe it's time to stop looking outwards to see what new ideas the world can give you.

Instead, why not trust and empower your designer and look inside yourself to see what new ideas you can give to the world?

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