

Returning from a recent trip to the UAE, UK-based chartered designer Nigel Witham put pen to paper about some of the challenges of restaurant design in Dubai

What's new under the sun?

Having just come back from what will be the first of many frequent visits to Dubai, I was delighted to accept the invitation to write a column about restaurant design for *Caterer Middle East*.

However, I am not going to write about how to design restaurants so much as about how to best manage designers to help you launch and build your business.

This is an area I have found to be full of misunderstandings and sometimes conflict.

Designers often complain about clients who want to overrule their ideas and advice. At the same time, you may not understand your designers and may find them difficult or even arrogant.

I am going to explain why this friction happens and how designers and operators can work together in happier, more cooperative and more successful long-term strategic teams that get top results.

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Independent research conducted by the Design Council (www.designcouncil.org.uk) has repeatedly found that good design is one of the most profitable investments any business can make.

In the world's most exciting region for design, we should all be working together to understand each other's needs and take full advantage of one another's strengths, so please send me your comments and reactions as I am keen to create a forum for both designers and operators.

What did I find in Dubai?

Dubai has some of the most magnificent malls and hotels in the world but I wonder if it is making the best of its startling opportunity to strike out and stretch the imagination of its designers and of the public.

There are some fabulous-looking restaurants but some of the styles and formats are what I have already

seen in other cities around the world, and in some cases they are less well resolved.

When working frantically, clients and designers sometimes adapt or copy known designs rather than creating inspiring new ones. Could the rush to make money fast be detrimental to creating original, differentiated designs that make money for longer?

Let me exemplify. One mall restaurant I went to for a typical shopping-trip lunch was very stylish and well-appointed; it appeared from the colours and name that the food would be cosmopolitan, healthy and modern. I took a table and was handed a plastic-covered menu that listed burgers, pizza, grills, fries and cake.

The design style was completely at odds with the offer and hence the brand was weak and unresolved. I went elsewhere because, although the food may have been good and



expertly prepared, it was not what I wanted to eat at the time.

There were many other choices. Eventually, I found an enormous and visually-impressive, modern-looking café.

From the name, colours and branding I expected coffee and snacks such as cake and sandwiches, but I was presented with the cosmopolitan and modern food I expected to find in the first restaurant.

I enjoyed a great mango smoothie and one of the best-presented niçoise salads ever — a pleasant surprise! The service was good too.

Again the style, although beautiful, was at odds with the offer and did not convey a true sense of the menu contents.

In both these examples, the design style did not match the sales offers.

This is a failure to communicate

with new customers; a fundamental issue, which is always critical to an outlet's success or failure.

Enough money had obviously been invested in both restaurants but in both cases they were almost empty at a peak time when the mall, and other F&B outlets in it, were very busy.

Design is all about communicating ideas. When there is no communication, the design has failed.

This can occur when an inexperienced, lazy or rushed designer has not taken time to first understand the client's business strategy so that it can be encapsulated and presented in the executed design.

It can also happen if a client does not share its business plan with the designer.

I have experienced situations where the client appoints several different designers — for example an interior designer, kitchen designer, a graphic designer and a web designer — and then directs their work without them ever meeting one another, let alone forming a coordinated team working to a well-defined and resolved strategic brief and focussed business plan.

Some operators use free designers (who are really just selling products). I presume that this is since they do not see value in paying for professional advice, which is the fault of designers for not making a good case for themselves.

I have heard complaints from other designers that some clients like to determine how they want a new restaurant to appear and so they prescribe to their designers.

Except in the case of a roll-out format, this is like telling the chef how to cook. I know that designing is interesting and that everyone wants to be involved but, when clients don't trust

their designer, they may well be depriving themselves of better knowledge and creative genius.

If you think your designer does not understand your business and can't be trusted to conceive an appropriate solution, I would urge you to either appoint someone else or to discuss this with them rather than to instruct them how to design.

Empowering your designer is vital — if you listen to your designer, your designer will listen to you.

This communication will conclude, in turn, in a design that

differentiates and communicates your offer and business objectives so clearly and successfully that you will have people queuing to pay you higher prices than your competitors can dream of charging.

I don't believe you can easily do that by rushing, copying or buying standardised solutions.

Hopefully, that leads me nicely to the subject of my next column, which will be about how to brief your designer, and how to work with them in stages so that they can deliver effectively.

See you next month!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nigel Witham is a chartered designer who has run his own design practice for twenty years.

He designed his first restaurant in 1990 and has worked for hundreds of independent retailers and restaurateurs.

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