

Why good design is so important for the success of your Coffee Shop

By Nigel Witham

I am very fortunate to have a popular website about restaurant and coffee shop design which has thousands of visitors every week. As a result, very few days go by when my email inbox doesn't contain inquiries from people who want to open their first coffee shop and would like to know more about costs and design ideas. I have been receiving these emails for many years now, and I always take the time to reply. You'd be amazed how many people are in love with the notion of opening a coffee shop.

However, have a look around your local town centre and you're bound to notice that, whilst there will be several coffee shops; there will be very few independent operators. What prevents so many keen people from getting started? Well judging from the hundreds of emails I have received I have to say it's naivety, although perhaps this is better expressed as an underestimation of the task.

If you are an independent operator and want to get the best living from your coffee shop or café, you have to compete with the multiples that have marched across every high street in the country. In order to successfully enter a crowded market you have to displace powerful incumbents. To do this your coffee shop has to create a clear and compelling case for its own existence.

This means you have to match every skill and resource of the chain brands, and



a truly engaging coffee shop can only be created by someone with true passion

more again. It's for these reasons that you simply can't cut corners, or compete without adequate investment, professional guidance and, of course, hard work.

Thankfully as an independent you will have passion. This is your one weapon that no chain can consistently compete with. If you find a way to engage emotionally with your customers and understand their desires, you'll always outperform systematic and faceless organization.

Analyse your business model

Let's imagine that you have found an empty unit in your area, and are considering turning it into your dream coffee shop. You may already be running a successful business elsewhere, but there is no harm in getting back to the basics.

The first thing you might do is take a long hard look at your ideas and assess the strengths and weaknesses,

opportunities and threats. As we know, food and drink-retailing operations suffer many failures. Many people start such a business simply because they like to cook, or to eat, or to hold coffee mornings for their friends, or even because they just like to design kitchens and dining rooms. They then expect a magic ingredient called "word of mouth" to do all their marketing for them Overnight! I am sure I sound cynical but I've got this notion in the same mental filing drawer as the tooth fairy.

What I'd suggest is that you look at the hard facts of business. By all means let yourself be carried away with the glamorous parts of the job you are looking forwards too but from time to time you will need to come down to earth. I see part of my role as keeping my clients grounded. You must not forget that there will be long hours, hard work

and grit. Thomas Edison, who invented electric light and had well over 2000 patents to his name said:

"Genius is one per cent inspiration, ninety-nine per cent perspiration".

When a major coffee chain opens an outlet they think about how the kitchen will operate and not how much they would enjoy serving up vanilla lattes to their friends. They analyse the numbers. They look carefully and they ask themselves: how many customers will we fit in this unit? What is the footfall for take out trade? What will it cost to fit-out? (About £2,000 per square meter if done professionally.) Is there enough nearby parking? How many people can we serve? What can we charge? What ingredients can we buy at a competitive price, add value to and sell high? Is the labour market good so we can find staff? How are we going to engage with our customers and get them to tell their friends? Can we make a profit?

An American banker friend of mine (I know these days it is brave to admit to such friends) once said to me that he thought he knew why so many food-retailing businesses fail. He said that in his opinion, restaurants and their like are every dumb person's entrepreneurial venture of choice, and I am afraid to say I think he's right.

Most people that contact me about new concepts want to know if I can copy a design they have seen elsewhere, and if so, what it will cost. I am rarely, if ever, asked:

"what's the next new way to design an outlet that people will enjoy more than those already out there?"

My current answer to this question is to ask a young person what's most important to them. You may find, as I have, that they are very concerned about the mess we oldies have made of the world and are looking for ethical, genuinely sustainable businesses to engage with.

A lot of people that contact me think that their design tastes are the best and so all they need do is get in a builder and tell him to make the place look like somewhere else they like, and then people will flood in. The big thing to remember here is that just because you know what you like, and you may have strong convictions about this, does not mean that you know what other people, your customers, like.

Lead - don't follow

To enter the market successfully you'll need to lead the market and not follow it. This requires an original well-contained design idea presented clearly to create genuine, sincere engagement. Creativity needs to be at the core of your business thinking. This is even more vital in the current economy. I believe now is a time of great opportunity when creativity will force new and exciting ideas to emerge from distress.

Already this year McDonalds announced a £2.2 billion investment programme, mostly outside the US. They rightly see the current recession as a time to grow when others are weak. They have implemented some amazing forward-looking designs around the world already.

On February 24th, in a speech that may save the capitalism, Barak Obama said:

"the costs of action may be great but the costs of inaction will be greater".

I find it hard not to agree with this,

waiting for things to change is probably wasting time and costing money, we need leaders with good new ideas now.

Think about how many Starbucks there are now, because they are all vulnerable to the next big idea. It could be yours. Have you seen the latest McCafe designs? In my estimation they are at least one generation beyond Starbucks now but they are still corporate and impersonal.



McCafé sets a high standard and is enormously successful, this

Henry Ford famously said:

"if we'd asked the people what they wanted they'd have said faster horses."

By 1918 half the cars in America were Model T Fords.

Of course for every good idea that works there will be a lot of junk to wade through and this is where there's nothing like an impartial, experienced designer to help you work through your whole strategy dispassionately and then look for ways to create that genuine emotional engagement with your customers. All you need do is set aside enough time to do it. The task will be much easier if you do. Planning your inspiration beforehand is the key to looking like

you came up with an instantaneous flash of creative genius. If you've already found the site it may be too late.

Finding a good designer

There are few barriers to entry of the design profession. Pretty well anyone who wants can open a design office. Consequently, there are some designers who simply copy the last design they saw and make a few changes. Since this is what anyone can do for themselves and since second-hand ideas rarely work well, a lot of aspiring coffee chain owners will not bother with designers, or they will just get in a general practice architect or shop fitting firm to build a shell for them to decorate and furnish. This is a shame, both for the independent operator and for the large number of good design firms who work hard and have their clients' best interests at heart. A good designer will learn to understand the needs of your business and find out at what you an expert. You should then recognise your designer's expertise stand back and let them get on. The difficulty is in finding a designer you can trust in this way. Another difficulty is in finding a way to explain your dream to your designer and for them to convey their interpretation and ideas back to you. After all, if an idea is truly original no one has seen it before, so no one can show you how it will look beforehand.

Allow yourself time to build trust and remember, if the design is wrong you'll be a long time paying for it but if it is

right it will be the best investment you ever made.

About Nigel Witham

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. He has

offices in London, India, New Zealand and Australia.

For more visit www.nigelw.com.

Nigel Witham MCSD MIOD writer, designer and photographer Member of the Chartered Society of Designers (interior and graphic design disciplines)



for every good idea that works there will be a lot of junk to wade through – this café tries to sell everything and fails to stand out as a result – you can't get famous for doing lots of things averagely, you can get famous for doing one thing excellently

Starbucks opens first Bulgarian coffee shop

Starbucks opened its first coffee shop in Sofia, Bulgaria in November 2008. The chain gained access to the Bulgarian market via its franchiser, the Greek firm Marinopoulos Bos. The Starbucks chain is operated by Marinopoulos Coffee Company Bulgaria.

The shop is located on the corner of Vassil Levski Boulevard and Gurko

Street, near the Soviet Army monument.

It is envisaged the chain will expand to other large Bulgarian cities. Starbucks follows Onda Coffee Break and Costa Coffee into Bulgaria.

Bulgaria is following the example of its neighbour, Romania. Starbucks arrived in Romania in 2007, and now has six stores up and running.

The Bulgarian market is dynamic so I am not surprised it is attractive to a chain like Starbucks," said Angel Balabanov, who runs Costa Coffee in Bulgaria, Starbucks' biggest competitor in Europe. In a report into the coffee industry in Bulgaria, coffee was found to be the most popular hot beverage in the country, accounting for 90 per cent of all volume and value sales