

Food Management

Ideas for Colleges, Healthcare, Schools and Business Dining

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Misuse of counter top, display case and fixture space can be as detrimental to your success as poor buying, careless hiring or bad food. On the other hand, better use of space—especially with well thought out merchandising strategies—can help you turn style into profit and passive lookers into active buyers.

This article reviews merchandising basics to help you and your staff execute better countertop landscaping, improve visual communication and achieve more effective food presentations with better use of fixtures, décor, lighting, color and texture...

Making \$\$\$ by Making Sense

You can have the most unique and creative facility on the planet, but if it doesn't match your customers' expectations it's useless. Retail has always been—and will always be—about the customer.

"Merchandising is more than a communication tool," says Arlene Spiegel, president of Arlene Spiegel & Associates. "It has to say something about who you are and what your brand is about. It needs to sell something. And it needs to be updated frequently."

According to Spiegel, the first concern of any merchandising strategy is first establish some guiding principles for your operation. What does your operation stand for? How does this reflect your customer base? Once you've established those basic principles, the merchandising needs to match.

Consider Hearst Corporation's Café 57 in New York City, one of Spiegel's recent clients [It also won one of FM's Best Concept Awards this year—Ed.].

The new Hearst Tower enables the company to bring together 2,000 New York-based employees into one of the most architecturally advanced and environmentally friendly buildings ever constructed in New York City. The café inside emphasizes seasonal, organic choices and sustainability. Onsite service is on china while takeout containers are made of biodegradable polymers. A farmer's market takes place onsite once a week during the summer.

"Hearst developed its guiding principles long before they met with our team," says Spiegel "The foodservice had to fit the philosophy of the company. It had to make sense within the guidelines. Everything we

the art of BETTER MERCHANDISING

Influence your customer's buying decisions with appealing presentations and an attractive atmosphere.

By Joanna Lefebvre



did and do has to be environmentally sound, from the chef coats to the counter tops to the food and even the lighting."

The eco-minded Café 57 exhibits a sense of space with a white-marble-floored atrium that is flooded with natural light from high glass windows and a glass ceiling. "With all that light, it feels like you are dining outside. It's truly a beautiful space that boasts a sense of style, class and harmony with the earth," adds Spiegel. "It's very 'Hearst.'"

Cross-selling displays are used throughout the servery as an effective merchandising technique that generates impulse sales. This also provides customers with a broad impression of the variety of items available and subtly tempts them to cross over from one product to another.

"Think about each station as a self-sustaining mini-restaurant," says Spiegel. "Effective retailing involves giving customers a choice at each point of purchase. One of the best ways to do that is to utilize cross merchandising displays."

For instance, at Café 57's hearth-baked pizza station there are fresh, pre-packaged salads and home-baked rolls positioned in what Spiegel calls the 'prime rent district.' Placing these impulse items in the customer's direct line of vision helps Café 57 to capture add-on sales it might otherwise miss.

Shed Some Light

It isn't always the quality of the food that draws customers. More often than you'd guess, it's the lighting. Lighting can be a powerful tool, used to set the mood and put the food in the spotlight—literally. "You need to know what specifically you're going to light and how it will look under that light," says Spiegel. "Customers eat with their eyes. Your food not only needs to taste delicious, it also needs to look delicious. A big part of that is going to be the lighting."

Lighting can create, enhance, or destroy a visual environment. It can even determine whether a customer leaves satisfied with a meal or never wants to return. Careful lighting design is an important part of any food

service business, and it pays to learn a few essentials:

Brightness. Bright light from the "cool" end of the spectrum signifies an establishment bustling with activity. Brightness and glare are used to attract customers. It's also an effective lighting option for the mid-day rush. Bright light, similar to natural light, gets customers moving fast without making them feel rushed.

Fixtures. Decorative fixtures convey a homey, more personalized atmosphere. While some fixtures will make the overall ambient light level lower, it must still be bright enough for customers to relax without feeling rushed.

Dramatic lighting. Very low levels of light indicate an intimate setting, and imply a high quality meal. Candlelight and fixture-generated "soft" light are "warm," unlike "cool" fast paced lighting.

Decorative lighting can help create a mood or establish a theme. Themed operations like diners often use specialty lighting to enhance the sense of fun and excitement the theme is meant to generate.

Experts say that whatever tack you take, you should match your merchandising strategy to your operation's basic design theme, whether it is organic, contemporary, country or quirky. This will convey a consistent message so the customer won't be confused by multiple thematic messages as to what the basic operation is all about.

Another universal piece of advice: it is often the smallest details that that have the greatest impact. Pay attention to those details, ensure that they consistently support your brand, concept and guiding principles, and you will have a strong foundation upon which to execute your merchandising efforts. **FM**

Setting the Scene

The right accents make all the difference.

Is it any surprise that fake flowers and plastic fruit won't work in an all-organic retail concept?

"You've got to walk your talk," says Arlene Spiegel, president of Arlene Spiegel & Associates. "Props and décor have to say something about your branded, core values. They should further communicate your message to your customer. If they don't align with your message, they will only confuse the customer."

When choosing props for a display, think of obvious relationships between the food, concept and customer. Make a variety of compositional notes or sketches of the intended display and choose one. Then edit the concept by eliminating superfluous items.

You want to select only those props that look as if they belong without detracting from your subject. More importantly, some props are difficult to find and install. Don't waste time trying to make the impossible, possible.

At Bon Appétit Management Company props and décor, such as large baskets of fresh vegetables or close-up framed photos of fruit are used to complement the theme and reel the customer's focus back to the food.

"As a customer walks into one of our operations, he or she will first see the raw product on display, next the chef preparing the product, and then the final presentation," says David Rothwell, director of image and décor for BAMCO.

For the raw product, Rothwell and his counterpart Carrie Buckley choose ingredients that are highly visible and easy to display. For instance, if a chef is preparing Caramelized Organic Red Apples and Shallots on a Bed of Organic Baby

Spinach with Crispy Pancetta, the display will likely be rounded out with the organic red apples in brushed metal bowl.

"We want to stimulate the senses," says Rothwell. "The props and décor can't overwhelm the other parts of that experience. Instead they should point the customer to the food. Our philosophy is: 'Clean. Simple. Elegant.'"

Avoiding "Devolution"

Depending on your café's configuration, you may have areas of empty counter at the end of a station, or on a corner. It's tempting to just fill those spaces with colorful flowers, napkins, statues of pigs dressed as chefs and other odds and ends. Filling the space with clutter makes for a missed opportunity. Instead, use it to display and sell something to the customer or to further communicate your guiding principles.

Oftentimes, props and decor are overused or arranged in a manner best described as 'attractive clutter.' This is most commonly a problem some time after an initial opening and set-up if the use or organization of decor degrades over time. How do you avoid this "devolution?"

"When we merchandise a new account we take photos for the operators to use as a cheat sheet," Rothwell says. "This helps set up a display even if front line staff doesn't have an eye for décor."

"Many operators think that white space at the end of a counter should be filled with knick-knacks," adds Allyson Murphy, senior manager of market development for Sodexo. "That's a mistake. Customers don't want to see a bunch of junk collecting dust. They want to see clean space with synergistic products. The best advice we give our clients is to keep it simple."

Ups and Downs of Visual Merchandising

Short on real estate? Make the most of your vertical space.

Landscape can be one of the most influential parts of a merchandising strategy. Think of it as the "ups and downs" of your operation's physical space. **A well designed landscape allows you, the operator, to call attention to the items you want your customers to see—and purchase—the most.**

"The best way to drive sales is to first identify what I refer to as the 'prime rent district' (PRD)," says Arlene Spiegel, president of Arlene Spiegel & Associates, a leading restaurant concept development company. "That's the space that is at eye level, about 4- to 6-feet from the floor."

"You want to put items here that are either for sale, will draw the customer's eye to products that are for sale or are complementary to the guiding principles of your operation. Secondary items do not belong here."

She says this is particularly effective if it's near a spot where customers have a momentary wait, "for example, while they wait for slices of pizza to be warmed in an oven. At that spot, you want a bewy of yummy impulse foods staring them right in the face."

Follow the Eye's Line

Horizontal merchandising limits visibility and makes the shopper walk to buy. Vertical merchandising groups items for maximum visual impact and lets the customer "see" more of an entire assortment from one spot. Customers "read" left to right when scanning the length of an aisle, not top to bottom. So, think of every display as a series of vertical display modules of varying widths. If there is

no vertical merchandising in an operation, the customer's eye has no point on which to focus. And when the customer cannot easily see all of his or her options, he or she will have a more difficult time understanding what choices are available and in making choices themselves. This inevitably leads to frustration and can also slow down server lines.

"A flat landscape leads to hundreds of missed opportunities," Spiegel says.

Good merchandising of the PRD will lead a customer's eye to a specific point once it has scanned the peaks and valleys you've constructed. Fast selling and high margin items should be the easiest to see, reach and buy. Put slow moving and lower margin items farthest from the customer's reach. Slow movers do not warrant good display space!

Give Vertical Space Depth

Concentrate merchandising efforts on the most visible areas first.

"The entry point to an operation is your first opportunity to give your customer's eyes a path to follow. If you've developed the landscape, your customer's eye will move through the display and stop on the focal points you've designed," says Nancy Lane, education account development manager for the Hubert Company. Products should be displayed at varying heights to increase their visual appeal. Because real estate in many operations comes at a premium, careful use of elevation tools like risers or shelving to merchandise products is essential. Your goal should always be to maximize the use and impact of vertical space within a given footprint. Encourage staff to take pictures of good merchandising displays they see elsewhere and make time to critique them in staff meetings. Spiegel suggests that you walk through your café, critically looking for non-performing space. "Continually ask yourself, 'what does this space, empty or not, communicate to my customer,'" she concludes.

Hues You Can Use

Color and texture are critical merchandising tools.

The palette of your farm-to-table café boasts vivid tomato reds, bronzed yellows, earthy browns and leafy greens. The tactile qualities of the surfaces, like the earthen platter holding fresh asparagus with roasted almonds or the smooth granite countertops with baskets of bright, crisp apples, add visual interest and contrast to the space. Together, these elements convey a sound message: earthy, farm-focused, fresh, natural.

"Everything the customer sees must support and enhance the basic value proposition of your operation," says Arlene Spiegel, president of Arlene Spiegel & Associates. "If you're a fresh, natural, organic concept, you can't have pink walls, plastic plates and fluorescent lighting."

Colors and textures play vital roles in merchandising strategies.

An Environmental Focus

"Much consumer reaction to color is subliminal and they are often unaware of its pervasive and persuasive influence," says Margaret Walch, director of the U.S. Color Association, a leading color forecasting group.

While everyone has a favorite color, it is important to understand the rationale behind color choices. The right color choice can create a mood, set a tone or reflect a brand image or message.

"In hospitality, more lavish colors are used generally," adds Walch. "This year, we're seeing a full spectrum approach with dramatic harmonies that convey a sense of well-being."

While such observations may sound philosophical rather than practical, color is nitty gritty, according to Walch. It reflects what's on the mind of the general public. Eco-friendly and sensitive designs are the subject du jour, and it's an interest well matched to the two distinct

interior color directions forecast for 2009-2010: a group of 16 cool, ethereal colors called Rock Crystals balances 28 warm mid-tones called Vegetable Garden.

The first, mineral-inspired palette features grays, off-whites and slate blues; the second group presents those vivid tomato reds, bronzed yellows, earthy browns, leafy greens, and reddened purples.

Walch says that interest in metallic finishes will continue in a more refined way, though with lesser metals of greatest interest. Bronze was singled out to be the most influential metal and as likely to exert a strong effect on other hues as a "bronzing effect."

You Say Blue, I say Grey

The human eye can distinguish roughly six million colors, and not all hues are created equal, chromatically speaking. A blue can be nearly black or nearly green and still be blue. Moreover, ambient light changes everything. Color is a moving target under the best of circumstances. Still, basic rules apply.

"In a servery, you need to pick a palette that is flexible," says Spiegel. "The more color you can incorporate into the design, the more flexible it will be in the long run."

Texture is also important. It should be in character with the color and form of merchandise and also relate to the psychological needs of customers. Strong messages are created when all elements in a display support each other. They may be harmonious, or they may contrast.

"Texture can be very suggestive," says Nancy Lane, education account development manager for the Hubert Company. "It can be masculine or feminine, earthy or modern."

"Texture and unusual finishes add complexity to color," says Walch. It's another subtle merchandising tool you can't afford to ignore.

