



Reflecting its location in an “artsy” downtown Manhattan neighborhood, Morrells is an example of a restaurant that has successfully appealed to diners’ tastes through carefully considered touches. One is a menu that incorporates the foods of farmers who sell at a local market. Another is its own in-house boutique.

Filling Tables

The major problem contributing to poor market reception is a failure to achieve clarity with the public regarding a restaurant’s position.

WE ALL KNOW THE PHRASE, “IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY will come.” Unfortunately, for too many restaurateurs and the investors who sink millions of dollars into building the restaurant, they – the customers – don’t come. As the first few disappointing months of operations go by, the owners, managers and chef often sit around and try to guess what went wrong. Because these folks were the “builders,” they convince themselves that they did everything right. In fact, the dialogue is often one of validation and “feel good.”

In an effort to reverse the lack of market acceptance, owners typically overreact and make decisions that result in one mistake after another: Menus are radically changed, prices are raised or lowered, and marketing becomes “shooting from the hip” and reeks of despera-

tion. All the while, business continues to disappoint and the pressure is on to fix the problem.

But what is the problem? The food is great, service is more than attentive, décor is stunning, the location is outstanding and the sophisticated public relations effort whipped up a genuine pre-opening buzz. So what is wrong with this picture? Why aren’t customers beating down the door to get in?

The single-biggest problem contributing to poor market reception is failure to achieve clarity with the public regarding the restaurant’s position. When considering a restaurant, potential customers subliminally or cognitively ask themselves a few questions: Is this place for me? Is it for every day or only special occasions? Is it affordable? Can I have a great lunch and be back at my

desk in time? Will I be able to eat dinner and be out on time to catch the movie or show? Will I feel embarrassed because I don't understand some of the menu items? Is the crowd young or old? Can my entire group find something to eat – my vegetarian cousin and my meat-and-potatoes friends? Is this the place where I can propose to my girlfriend?

Because the customers will ask these and hundreds more questions about your place before they even try it, owners should ask and answer those very questions before developing the concept. If the “builders” want the customers to come, they first need to intimately know the lifestyle and value drivers of the market they intend to serve. Then they can craft a restaurant that fulfills their needs, and quickly convey how it will do so.

LET THEM KNOW

Cues are not just for actors on a stage. In a restaurant, cues, symbols and signs help the customers understand what to expect when he or she enters your space. For example, one client built what he intended as a moderately priced, cozy neighborhood eatery, but it was not well received. At first glance it was clear that his cues were wrong. White linen cloths covered the tables in the window. French phrases, exotic ingredients and complicated preparations peppered the language of the menu posted outside. The manager and hosts wore suits. All of these cues led the potential customers to believe it was a high-priced, formal restaurant. The cues were all wrong.

Another owner built a pricey, fine-dining restaurant that came across as no such thing. Upon looking in the front windows, people saw fluorescent lights shining, a cashier station – usually found in a quick-service eatery – and a manager in a sweater and slacks. These elements, too, sent the wrong message. Those cues resulted in confusion when customers saw the menu offering and pricing.

Here are the cues to use to help the customer understand what they can expect from your establishment:

- Quick-service or fast-food restaurants highlight convenience and speed in the overall experience, and further communicate that through packaging and guest participation in preparing the meal at self-serve salad bars, beverage stations or condiment counters. Affordable pricing, either on an item basis or via value meals, is another important cue. Additional services, such as drive-through windows or delivery, further define the position.
- Quick-casual, also called fast-casual, takes fast food to a new level in terms of quality and also price. The experience elements include dishes made or assembled to order, most involving fresh ingredients in an exhibition prep or cooking area. This allows for a sensory experience for the guest that involves the aromas, sights and sounds of the preparation. The ability to customize each item also creates additional interaction with staff, and sometimes food runners bring the finished meal to the diner's table. The menu itself is more sophisticated than typical fast food, and the particular style of cooking is

often played out throughout the restaurant, with merchandising of to-go or retail items and stylish graphics. This higher level of experience and product quality is reflected in the average ticket, which can be two to three times that of fast-food outlets. These cues help differentiate quick-casual restaurants from quick service.

- Casual dining, of course, is a full-service experience in a relaxed setting conducive to families and groups, as well as single diners. The menu tends to be broad, thus appealing to a range of customers. Servers possess ready knowledge of the menu items and preparation, and deliver service in a way that reflects the overall concept. A full bar is often available, and while the dining experience takes longer than quick-service and quick-casual venues, a party can be in and out in an hour.

- Fine dining delivers the total upscale dining experience. Such restaurants are typically chef-centric, with elaborate plate presentations, extensive wine lists and accoutrements such as fresh flowers, linen, fine glassware and flatware. Servers are well-versed in the menu, ingredients, preparation and even origins of particular items. Wine service may involve a sommelier or a waitperson capable of making recommendations on food and wine pairings. Pricing reflects the high level of quality and care that goes into the preparation, presentation and service provided.

Once those cues are engineered into the concept, the next step is creating a strategy to communicate your market position. For advertising and publicity purposes, investigate the local newspapers, magazines and broadcast media, cross-referencing their audience with your target consumer. Develop communications that convey your market position and your unique offering quickly and succinctly, and place them in the appropriate media.

Quick-service operators, for example, will likely utilize local newspapers, radio and possibly cable television for price- or convenience-oriented advertisements. Fine dining restaurants, on the other hand, may specify the lifestyle or business sections of major newspapers.

Advertising is just the beginning, however. Savvy operators will want to explore local store marketing and promotions. For the quick-service operator, that can mean sponsoring local sports teams or helping to raise funds and awareness for local charities through in-store programs. Fine dining restaurant owners should forge relationships with the concierges at area hotels and network with business and community leaders to create buzz about their restaurant.

We've all heard the statistics about the high rate of restaurant failures. Many of those failures undoubtedly occur because operators did not achieve clarity regarding their market position. A close examination of your market and market position could ensure that if you build it, they will come. 🍷

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