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Industry News
Hospitality Forum
Newswire
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Events Calendar
Executive Profiles
Editorial Board
Media Kit
Subscription
Reprints
Archives
Contact Us
Home
Editorial Calendar
Research Library

Food & Beverage

Restaurant Renaissance



Mr. Jeff Ornstein

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Despite the post 9/11 decline in tourism — especially in business travel — the long term future for full-service hotel restaurants is bright.

For the past half century, meals eaten away from home has been on a steady upward spiral and this trend promises to continue, driving growth for the restaurant industry over the coming years. The National Restaurant Association points out that “Today, the restaurant industry’s share of the consumer’s food dollar is 46.1 percent.”

More importantly, by 2010 “the food dollar spent away from home will reach 53 percent.” This is over double what it was in 1955, when only 25 percent of dollars spent on food went for restaurant meals.

For the hotel segment of the restaurant industry to become winners — gaining an increasing share of this growing and highly competitive market — the National Restaurant Association observes that it will take creativity, flexibility and responsiveness to customer demand.

Perhaps the short-term downturn has alerted us to be more aware of customer demand. Successful restaurants must strive harder to appeal to patrons who expect dining out to be an experience that is memorable and fun — often the highpoint of their evening’s activity. Hotel restaurants that continue to play to a captive audience, targeting only the business traveler who seeks convenience and high quality will not be the leaders over the coming decade. The era of the me-to restaurant that simply duplicates current styles is over. The restaurant is now increasingly the main event of the evening — the show.

And, its décor is the visual marketing tool that uniquely position’s the restaurant in the market and draws customers in. The restaurants we designed for Marriott, in Newport of America’s Cup fame and Springfield, Massachusetts, illustrate the importance of a strong theme that clearly positions the eatery by reflecting what is happening in the locale. At the Newport Marriott, we played upon the fact that we were located in a harbor playground of the rich; employing yachting blue, teak and other oceanic finishes one finds on the “toys” of the elite — all of which appeal to the guest who is used to a luxury. The ocean going theme is reinforced with a life-size sculpture of the Greek God of the Sea Neptune, a humorous high-tech seahorse with a propeller and a mural depicting the birth of clams casino. Even the lobby sets the tone with life-size, three-dimensional sails-as-sculpture. At a Springfield Marriott, which caters to a more modest market, we incorporated themes based on the Connecticut River and its heritage as a ribbon of commercial shipping as important to New England as the Mississippi is to Middle America. At the Marriott’s River Café, we employed water themes everywhere throughout the décor and art.

In larger more cosmopolitan markets it may be possible to be more daring. For example, the Strip House in New York unabashedly displays pictures of strippers from the 1920s. It is daring in a fun way without being distasteful — remember it is not always about the children, every now and then, you can make it about the adults.

Another spot we like is Felix in Hong Kong. At this international spot the patrons are on display making them as much a part of the décor as static elements. Its high ceilings give it a sense of grandeur while exterior and interior views work together to create its total look.

We are also partial to the Indian restaurant we designed in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, which like Hong Kong and New York, is a hub for world commerce and travel. The restaurant, in the Admiral Plaza owned by Sultan Belshalat, specializes in the cuisine of northern Indian. It was true to that region in every detail including columns, mosaics and motifs found on the silk, hand-painted canopies that grace the ceiling. Of course such international cities draw from enormous markets and can push the extremes — after all you can eat out at a different restaurant every night in these towns and never have to go back to the same place as long as you live. In smaller markets, dining-out budgets are more modest and a greater percentage of the customer base may be drawn from the region or may be local regulars. The percentage of leisure travelers is likely to be higher and increase in the coming year or so. This observation is reinforced by recent Travel Industry Association of America (TIA) statistics. According to TIA, in the wake of 9/11, business travel fell 9 percent while leisure travel was actually up 2 percent, but more leisure travelers arrived by car — attributable both to budget constraints and fear of flying. Thus hotel owners wishing to expand during the coming decade can no longer target the upscale, businessperson for whom dining out is less of a novelty, spends more and may be more focused on high quality, consistency and convenience. The leisure traveler, especially those who are less frequent restaurant patrons, crave a unique experience along with a friendly more approachable environment.

Our advice: Don't box in your hotel restaurant by appealing to only one segment of the market. Whether renovating or creating a new property we urge the owner and general manager to assemble his or her full management team at the outset, including the executive chef, food and beverage manager, interior designer and others who will shape and influence the total the restaurant package. Everything from décor to table top to menus all have to work toward creating that unified whole that stands out from the competition.

To achieve individuality — or in marketing parlance a unique selling proposition — visit all the competition in your category and take detailed notes. Come back with a two-column summary. One column should list details on how the décor established the competing restaurant as a unique destination for the travel consumer? In another column, write down whether the restaurant delivered on promise — where did they go right and where did they fail.

You should be able to come up with a one-sentence description for every restaurant in your category and then — in one sentence describe — your restaurant — in a way that clearly underscores what make it different. This exercise will enable you to base your décor on the long-term profile of the property and your market niche, rather than a knee jerk response to what is trendy or hot right now.

A word of caution, while it is tempting to go upscale during a renovation, many successful hotel restaurants wind up pricing themselves out of the market or losing segments of their customer base, such as the lunch crowd.

Getting Started

I'm often asked what is most important in a restaurant design. Lighting more than any other factor can make or break an atmosphere. Beware of backlighting both patrons and décor elements, as they will go black, standing out in unattractive silhouette. Overhead Lighting on booths and banquettes generally does not work either casting downward shadows that make the people look haggard and the food look unappetizing. Instead go for upward lighting as it is always more flattering and avoid hot spots. Where there are columns and other architectural elements soften the edges with light to give dimensionality to the room, overall illuminate the envelope not the space and the restaurant will be softer and more inviting.

While lighting creates ambiance, sound creates energy. If you want a high energy steak house feeling go for hardwoods or terrazzo and other hard surfaces, have lots of food prep open to diners, include an exhibition kitchen, complete the picture with oversize china and rocks glasses. On the other hand, if the mood is to be more relaxed and romantic, incorporate sound absorption acoustical panels that can be decoratively masked and incorporated in such a way as to not announce their presence.

Your restaurant has to work at all times of the day. A buffet looks terrific when it is showcasing a panoply of gourmet food, but make sure it does not look like a black stone slab at other times when not in use. If the number of customers fluctuates greatly, design the restaurant so that areas can be closed off when the room is less busy.

Given today's ever changing smoking laws, incorporating the bar into a restaurant is a challenge. Regardless, better bars mean bigger profits. Too many hotel owners do not invest the resources in the bar necessary to make it a popular gathering spot that maximizes profits and makes diners feel their time waiting for a table is a positive experience. Remember that people go to a bar to see other people and socialize. A hackneyed sea of overstuffed club chairs may appear to be elegant, but this, all-too-common furniture array isolates guests into their own cocoons. One way to make the bar more seem more active and fun is to install a drink rail that keeps patrons closer together. Include a high-quality sound system playing original music, which raises the energy level and makes the experience lively and fun.

Above all make a bold consistent statement and have the confidence to create a theme that positions your hotel restaurant uniquely and asserts independence, make the experience is memorable and fun.

It may be a little risky to stand out from the pack, but it is the risk takers in life that make it big.

In its outlook for travel and tourism The World Tourism Organization, based in Madrid, offers these factors that will shape the future of hotel restaurants. The main characteristics of demand are as follows:

- A clear tendency toward shorter stays when going on holidays.
- Greater fragmentation of holidays, due to a reduction in working hours and an increase in the number of paid leave days.
- Higher demand for customized holidays.
- The relative increase in the demand for conventional non-hotel accommodation.
- The shift from active holidays to holidays as an experience. In this regard, tourism is following in the footsteps of other types of consumption. The point is to achieve a complete participate experience, which provides new knowledge as well as authentic emotions.
- Increase in the number of senior tourists.
- The advent of emerging destinations which are prompting other destinations to rethink the design of their products.
- The increased opportunities of destinations with lower border-entry hurdles.
- The segmentation of demand made more complex by the overlapping of traditional travel purposes (Example Honeymoon trips to destinations with access to sun-and-sand, as well as cultural and theme products).

World Tourism Organization is serves as a global forum for tourism policy issues and a practical source of tourism know-how and statistics. The membership includes 139 countries, seven territories and some 350 Affiliate Members representing regional and local promotion boards, tourism trade associations, educational institutions and private sector companies, including airlines, hotel groups and tour operators.

With its headquarters in Madrid and an international staff of 90 tourism specialists, WTO is an intergovernmental organization vested by the United Nations with a central and decisive role in promoting the development of responsible, sustainable and universally accessible tourism.

Jeff Ornstein is a contributing editor who regularly shares his expertise on interior design for the hospitality industry in National Hotel Executive Magazine. He is founder and president of J/Brice Design International, Inc. in Boston, which became a Certified Interior Design Giant, and Architectural Giant in 1991 — currently ranking 24th out of 100. J/Brice Design is a preferred design group for Hilton Hotels/Doubletree Guest Suites, Marriott International/ Renaissance Hotels, Starwood, TAJ Hotels, Abu Dhabi National Hotels, and Holiday Inn Worldwide. Numerous awards include Most Ambient Hotel Lobby (Canadian Lodging Association) finalist in Luxury Suites Competition by Interior Design Magazine, and the prestigious Citation of Excellence from world class Hotelier W. Dan Reichartz, President and CEO of Caesar's Palace, Las Vegas. Mr. Ornstein graduated with Honors in Fine Arts from Brandeis University, with continued studies at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. For information about J/Brice Design International log on to www.jbricedesign.com

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