

UNDERSTANDING HOW RESTAURANT DESIGN

DRIVES SALES



GRAND RAPIDS
CHAIR COMPANY



WE'VE ALL BEEN THERE BEFORE

We walk into a restaurant, we take one look around and almost immediately we can make a decision whether or not we should walk right back out the door. It might be that it looks too old and dirty, or maybe too tight and stuffy. Depending on the restaurant, it could be any number of things that turn a customer off within just a few seconds. Because even if your food is fantastic, if you don't have a restaurant that works cohesively with it, you could be losing money by the minute.

This guide will highlight the important reasons why this happens and how you can leverage your particular restaurant design for higher sales. We'll do this by highlighting key elements of the research and information from Stephanie K. A. Robson's report published by Cornell University, *Turning The Tables: The Psychology of Design for High-Volume Restaurants*.



HOW CUSTOMERS MAKE RESTAURANT JUDGMENTS

You probably already are aware that growing a restaurant is not just about getting people in and out, but what happens inside the minds of the people sitting and waiting at that table, too. The research proves that the unique design and feel of your establishment plays a major factor in how successful it is. Whether you are a fine dining establishment looking to enhance the customer experience, or if you are a fast food chain looking for quick table turns, the design of your restaurant is one of the powerful tools you can use to accomplish your goals.

“THE USE OF COLORS, SOUNDS, SIGHTS, AND SMELLS CAN BE APPLIED TO RESTAURANT SETTINGS TO ENCOURAGE A HIGH CUSTOMER VOLUME AND FAST TABLE TURNS.”

-STEPHANIE K.A. ROBSON

Robson reports that we take lots of information either consciously or subconsciously about the surrounding we are in, and we’ve gotten so good at evaluating an environment that we require very few elements to make a judgment about it.



To make a quick decision, we gather all the information from our senses; then we reduce it down so we can quickly manage and decode what we've got. Then, we make a pretty quick decision about how we feel about it. For restaurants - that can either have a distinctive positive or negative result. Robson's report tells us that humans are always shifting between three perception modes:

OPERATIONAL - *Focusing only on things that will help us finish a task.*

RESPONSIVE - *Our standard process of noticing the environment that surrounds us.*

INFERENTIAL - *Focusing on elements that support our image of the environment.*

Each mode helps us to concentrate on an environment differently, and most often in restaurants that falls into the inferential category. Restaurants looking to grow their sales must understand and cater to the inferential mode of their customers.



THE INFENTIAL CUSTOMERS

Now that you know that catering to the inferential mode is what leads to pleased customers, you might now ask how you can accomplish that in your restaurant.

TAKE THE FOLLOWING KEY ELEMENTS:

1. COLOR

According to a study by Schaie and Heiss, warmer colors like orange, yellow, and red are somewhat arousing (not to be confused with pleasing) to the eyes of people from a variety of cultures. Whereas colors that are cooler with a longer-wavelength like blues and greens are typically preferred because they are known to be relaxing and calming.

What makes people move faster? When walking down a hallway, people had more pep in their step when surrounded by a highly-saturated brown over a more muted color. If you want faster table turns, a highly-saturated brown just might be the color for you!

Bold colors combined with other stimulants can lead to sensory overload and may reduce the amount of time a customer spends at the restaurant. Also, think about chain fast-food restaurants like McDonald's and Wendy's—they use warm and highly saturated colors to encourage a bright but yet fast-moving environment.

INTERESTING COLOR SIDENOTES:

What are restaurant goers least favorite color? *Yellow, especially when it carries a green tint to it.*



2. LIGHTING

Think about the lighting in your favorite fine dining restaurant and compare it with your favorite casual sit-down establishment. Entirely different, huh? Fast food establishments lean toward high-concept lighting that actually stimulates arousal. That's because bright lights stimulate the mind—drawing people in. That's why so many people like to sit near table lamps and tend to walk toward areas with brighter lights. For fine dining, it's more common to see pools of light, as it helps to define the areas and tables, fostering feelings of comfort, which can extend the time a patron stays.

3. SCENT

Scent provides stimulation that also adds to the arousal level of the patron, encouraging them to stay and enjoy the space. Perhaps the most important place to ensure pleasant smells is in the waiting areas, as this promotes excitement and eagerness to experience more the restaurant has to offer.



PLEASING PATRONS USING DESIGN

From the walls to the floors to the furnishings and the finishes, the restaurant design leads the way when it comes to creating the ambiance or feeling of a restaurant. Not only does it help to create an amazing looking space, but it also serves as a way to differentiate from other competing establishments. Great design immediately communicates to the guest what they can expect from their visit. From the features of the exterior to the configuration of the dining area to the furnishings, all elements together immediately convey a message to the diner. When done correctly, this should make them feel comfortable and welcome.



EXTERIOR

We all know the power of a first impression, and the outside appeal of a restaurant is no different. Providing pleasing cues helps to attract customers and offers a preview of what they can expect to experience. For example, when you see the restaurant On The Border Mexican Cantina, you see the Mexican-inspired decor, finishes, and colors that transcend into the decor of the inside of the business. The exterior creates a clear message of the food and ambiance, so any interested customers can make a quick decision and commitment to eating there or not. All entrances should be easy to identify, and in the case of a full service chain restaurant, there should be large gathering spaces in the front for guests to occupy while they are on the waiting list to be seated. Consider the style, height, and type of windows you select or evaluate if they are even necessary at all. Restaurants without windows create a somewhat surprising environment, so for customers to know more, they must commit to coming in and sitting down. This also allows for more accurate lighting control.



LAYOUT

Active and energized spaces tend to turn tables faster, so for restaurants that want to embody that idea, plans should utilize all areas of the restaurant, to accommodate small and large groups. Using unanchored seating supports faster turnarounds and sudden changes in party sizes. Another way to keep a busy-looking environment is by making sure all guests can see other customers. To envision this more clearly, think of restaurants like Chile's compared to the layout at The Melting Pot. Both places offer different design layout elements based on their food and style, but one is clearly fostering a faster and busier table-turning layout than the other. Other items to consider include the possibility of an open kitchen, where the bar will reside, and an easy-to-access restaurant location.



FURNISHINGS

Although restaurant design should be a cohesive process, the furniture design plays perhaps the most important role in the design. The furnishings go beyond the visual part of the dining experience - serving also as functional spaces for the meals. Furnishings impact many elements of the business including:

SIT TIMES

As mentioned, the more comfortable the environment, the longer customers want to stay there. For casual restaurants like Applebees, they turn tables around 4 times every 5 hours, whereas higher-end local establishments average closer to 3 turns during that same time frame. What do you probably notice about the fine dining experiences? The furnishings are usually selected in a way that makes a customer as comfortable as possible with larger cushions and inviting, touchable elements and fabrics.



MOOD/AMBIANCE

Chairs and tables play a dominant role in the mood and ambiance of a location, quickly establishing for the customer whether the restaurant is rustic, industrial, modern, and beyond. These elements can also identify for the guest what type of food experience they will encounter during their visit.

DURABILITY STANDARDS

For many restaurant designers, the durability plays as important (or perhaps even more important - depending on the type of restaurant) a role as what it looks like. Customers are moving, sitting and leaning on the table's elements, not to mention the hot food and drinks that are continuously being brought to and from the area. Furnishings often must play two very important roles in the restaurant - combining style and functionality.

In conclusion, we hope you now understand that all design elements combined with fantastic food and staff are the pathways to an exciting restaurant that drives sales and customers. Building a design plan for your restaurant could be the critical first step in catapulting your restaurant to success.



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