

What Facades and Exteriors Say About Your Restaurant

(And How to Make Sure They are Saying the Right Thing)

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I like to play a game with my restaurant development students that I call “Guess the Concept.” I show them a picture of an unidentified restaurant’s exterior and they have to decide what the restaurant serves and at what price point. They’ve gotten pretty good at it because what a restaurant looks like from the outside can offer dozens of clues about what is happening on the inside.

Humans are visual creatures. Because we rely so heavily on sight to make sense of the world, we are far more likely to believe what we see with our own eyes than things we find out from other sources. While you may be putting a lot of energy into your restaurant’s Web site or advertising or sponsoring the local Little League team — all of which are worthy efforts that you should certainly continue to do — your customers are likely to make the final decision to walk in your door based on how your operation looks from the outside. What clues does your restaurant provide to prospective customers? And are those the clues you actually want to be giving?

The Three C’s

The most effective restaurant exteriors reflect what I’ll call the Three C’s: clarity, cohesion and cleanliness. The first two are important during the development and design stages of your operation, while the third is something that requires your attention every day.

Each element of your design should have a clear message. Good exteriors have **clarity** — they clearly communicate what kind of experience the guest is likely to have in your restaurant. There is quite a bit of evidence that we transfer attributes of the design to the quality of the experience it represents — a gridlike façade might send a message that your service is equally ordered and formal. A jumble of impressions made by the layout, colors, lighting and signage confuse customers about who you are and what you offer. Unfortunately, we are not the best judges of our own

messages, so your perspective on what your exterior conveys is perhaps not always the most accurate; it’s best to ask a few outsiders to tell you what they think your exterior says by design, and why. If the message these customers get isn’t what you intended, you and your designers will need to do some tweaking.

All elements of your design need to work together. Good exteriors are **cohesive** — all design elements work together to communicate the same idea to your customers. Competing visual clues send mixed messages to your customers and make it harder for them to judge whether your operation is a good fit for their current mood, time frame and pocketbook. For example, let’s say you have a casual dining concept with an eclectic menu and lively décor. You’ll want the exterior of the restaurant to express a similar quirky vibe through bright colors, high contrast color and lighting, and high-energy signage in a “friendly” font. The materials you choose for the exterior should not be too sleek or high-tech, nor should the design be too rigid or linear. The entrance shouldn’t be too imposing, either; here’s a place where a whimsical welcome mat may not be out of place. In short, every part of your design should send the same clear signal about who you are and what you have to offer.

Your exterior design has to look great all day, every day. Lastly, guests most definitely judge the quality of your operation by the **cleanliness** of your exterior. We’ve all heard the stories about Ray Kroc’s emphasis on having a clean parking lot for the early McDonald’s® units, and he was absolutely right. A clean exterior sends the message that you care about your customers’ well-being and that you pay attention to details. Regularly hosing off the sidewalk and cleaning the windows is just the start. Your lighting, signage and awnings should be kept clean and free of leaves, cobwebs and other debris at all times, and window sills and doorjambes should be wiped down at least weekly. If you have planters, they should be kept in excellent

shape. Deadhead those flowers, pick the cigarette butts out of the soil, touch up the paint. Keep windows free of taped-on notices, and limit the number of affiliation stickers you display (or at least make sure these are put on straight and in a regular pattern.) A neat and clean exterior is important at all price points. Just because you may offer cheap wings and beer inside is no reason to let your standards slide outside.

According to this theory, customers make assumptions about the experience they will have with your restaurant by the clues you give them in all your marketing messages, of which the exterior is perhaps your biggest and most expensive.

The Three C's are overall requirements for an effective exterior. To guide you in fine-tuning your façade design, here are some factors to consider about each component of the exterior and some insights into how your customers may interpret your choices.

Seven Physical Factors

Size. If you lease your space, chances are you don't have much control over the overall size of your exterior and how it relates to the streetscape. Nevertheless, the width of

your façade, the height of your roofline and the proportions of the restaurant entrance can send messages to customers that might surprise you. In pilot studies in which we show consumers restaurant exteriors and ask for descriptors that come to mind for these restaurants, we've seen that long and low buildings say "casual" as do entry vestibules that jut out from the façade. Narrower streetfronts suggest "cozy" and "artisanal," while tall entrances suggest "upscale." A large restaurant exterior made some of our study subjects think that the restaurant would be "loud," whereas a low ceiling was perceived as "quiet" and "intimate."

Colors. There is an enormous amount of research on how people respond to color, much of it conflicting. Most people assume that warm colors — reds, oranges, russets and golds — are stimulating, while cool colors — blues and greens — are calming, but this doesn't appear to hold in all circumstances. In fact, when a restaurant with a blue façade was shown in our study of restaurant images, most of the viewers thought the restaurant was "beachy" or "funky," while blue exterior lighting signaled "nightclub." We didn't see any other strong color associations in our study, other than the link between bright and highly saturated colors with casual and "fun" restaurants. Restaurants that didn't have a painted exterior but rather relied on the natural color of the materials used on the exterior (stone, glass, even concrete) were considered more upscale and, in the case of natural wood, more welcoming.

Lighting. Lighting seems to be a really crucial clue regarding the quality level of your restaurant. In general, the dimmer and warmer the lighting, the more upscale the restaurant is perceived to be. Uplighting that shines up from planters or concealed fixtures in sidewalks is likewise seen as making a restaurant

look more upscale, whereas the use of fluorescent or neon lighting in any form tends to make customers think your restaurant is more casual. When planning your lighting, consider how the building will appear in day as well as night; industrial-looking light fixtures that are not cohesive with the rest of your design tend to be looked on less favorably. And make sure that in whatever kind of lighting you choose, you use lamps (i.e., bulbs) of the same color and light quality. Mismatched light color and quality is a sure signal that someone is not paying attention.

Windows. Window placement and size lets you control how much of your interior you show to guests before they enter your restaurant, as well as gives diners inside the option of enjoying views or, if nothing else, taking in some natural light. Most guests like the idea of being able to see into a restaurant before "committing" to come in; they want to see if the environment is a good fit for the kind of experience they are seeking and perhaps even how old they are or how they are dressed. (Admit it: Haven't you peered into a restaurant at some point and thought, "Whoa, this place is not for me"?) However, for some concepts an element of mystery can be desirable, and therefore not providing windows on the façade might make sense. Other concepts like to design something in between — large windows partially screened with translucent sections, curtains or blinds so that customers on the outside can see the warm glow from within but have to come inside to see the action. In our studies, restaurant exteriors with windows that reach the ground are seen as more upscale than windows that start at three feet or more above the ground, but facades that are all-glass tend to be viewed as being "mall-like" and "like a fishbowl." Tinted windows should be used with care, as in our pilot study they were as-

sociated with less welcoming settings (my students call tinted windows “sketchy,” which is their way of saying that they couldn’t be sure if a restaurant that used them was a good restaurant or not).

Architectural details. Exterior features that suggest more traditional architecture tend to represent a more upscale dining experience. If the building you lease has exterior columns, decorative wood or stonework, or other unique features, highlight these with lighting, color or both. My students equate columns and carved exterior details with “elegance” when they are emphasized with light, and “fun” or “quirkiness” when painted in a bright contrasting color.

Signage. Sure, your restaurant’s name is important but how you present that name is almost as key. The type of sign you have and where you put it is perhaps the most significant factor in how customers judge the kind of restaurant you are, based on our pilot studies. Signage size appears to be inversely related to perceived restaurant quality; a small sign is viewed as being more upscale than a large one. Backlit signs that are flush-mounted to the façade tell customers that you are affordable but not particularly glamorous. Take that same shape and size of sign and light it using overhead fixtures, and immediately your restaurant seems more upscale. Write your restaurant’s name on window glass across your storefront to tell your guests that you are unpretentious and old school; write it only on the door glass if you want to signal that yours is a more refined eatery (or to be even more upscale, put only your logo on the door glass and leave off the name altogether). Centering your sign above your door can suggest either formality or simplicity; signage that is off-center — either aligned with one edge of your storefront or the other

— makes your restaurant seem trendier and more upscale.

Even the font you choose for your signage sends a message. Fonts with serifs — those little flourishes that you see at the ends of strokes in fonts like Times Roman — are considered more formal than sans serif fonts like Helvetica or Arial. Fonts with thick strokes and very rounded curves are “meatier” and “more masculine,” according to our sample, whereas thinner, taller fonts are seen as more feminine. Signage that looks like it was created on a word processor is perceived as amateur and low-end, as does mixing too many font styles on the same sign. And stay away from script fonts — ones that look like handwriting. These are hard to read for many people, especially from a distance.

Plants. Planters and landscaping can be enormously influential clues. No matter what, they need to be in tip-top condition and continually weeded or trimmed. Flowers generally say “friendly” and “neighborly” whereas shrubs are seen as more formal, particularly when they are severely clipped. Ground shrubs surrounded by mulch typically said “chain restaurant” to the consumers in our pilot study, and shrubs in planters flanking the doorway were viewed as “professional” and “attractive.” Fake plants are a no-no, unless you have a particularly funky or esoteric concept. If you don’t have the time, energy or money to keep up live plantings, don’t have them at all.

The Disconfirmation Theory

Sometimes when my students play “Guess the Concept,” a particular restaurant exterior will stump them; they will use the clues they see to make their guesses about the dining experience and price, but rather than be pleasantly surprised when they

learn the true identity behind the image, the students are often unhappy that “the exterior lied to them.” What they are tapping into is a well-established theory in marketing called “disconfirmation.” According to this theory, customers make assumptions about the experience they will have with your restaurant by the clues you give them in all your marketing messages, of which the exterior is perhaps your biggest and most expensive. If their assumptions are confirmed, they are likely to have a neutral response toward your operation. If their assumptions are disconfirmed — in other words, not matched with the experience they receive — one of two things can happen: if the disconfirmation is positive, customers will be satisfied and, if you really exceed their expectations, they will be particularly happy and be more likely to tell others of their great experience with you. You’ve heard customers say things like, “It’s not much on the outside, but don’t let that scare you; the fish and chips are to die for!” That’s positive disconfirmation. But if the disconfirmation is negative, well, you can imagine the rest. So having an exterior that “lies” may be setting you up for dissatisfied guests. And using reverse psychology — having a less-than-ideal exterior in the hope of surprising guests with how great your operation is inside — isn’t a good idea if it means that your customers find your exterior so off-putting that they don’t try you at all.

No Right or Wrong ... Just the Three C’s

There are no right or wrong features for the exterior of your restaurant; it all depends on your concept and the message you want to send to your customers. As long as that message is clear, cohesive and looking good at all times, you’ll see a positive return on your design investment. **RS&G**