



By Stephani Robson

Build for Comfort



When we think about restaurant design, most of us think first about how the space looks: what furniture, what materials, what colors, what lighting and what signage. We think about what makes the restaurant feel a certain way, but probably not what makes the restaurant *perform*. And that's a mistake. Restaurants need to view design as a strategic tool, not as merely the pretty wrapping for the food and the service. So your front-of-house design needs to not only be attractive and comfortable for your guests, but it has to work for you as an operator too. And to work well, your dining room has to be designed with guest psychology in mind.

No doubt you've probably read somewhere that design features like colors, music and lighting affect how people feel and behave. It's true, they do, and that's a topic for another article. I'd like to focus on something more rudimentary to the restaurant design process first, which is how you lay out your seating in the dining room. (By the way, in this article, I cite studies — including my own — conducted at Cornell University's Center for Hospitality Research. I am a senior lecturer and Ph.D. candidate at Cornell University School of Hotel Administration.)

Human Nature

First, consider human nature: We're social creatures, but we like our space. We are always striving to keep a balance between contacts with others and keeping to ourselves. Some theorists attribute this to deep biological tendencies. Early in our evolution, we had to interact with others to survive as a group but we also had to be careful to keep our stocks of food and our mates to ourselves if we wanted our genes to be passed on to a robust next generation. Today, you can see this tension between contact and privacy in a lot of our restaurant behaviors. Everyone hates to be the only person eating in a restaurant because that makes us feel exposed and worry that we've made a bad choice. (The evolutionary psychologists would say that we are worried about being the only creature at the watering hole — why is no one else here? Is there danger?) One study even found that when people were shown a picture of a crowded restaurant, they thought that restaurant had better food and offered better value than the very same restaurant shown without occupied seats. So if you have pictures of your dining room on your Web site, make sure those images show busy tables filled with happy customers.

and for Speed

**Designing Your Dining Room
Seating for Maximum Performance**

But on the other side of the coin, most of us dislike being in crowded conditions because a crowd translates to higher demand for scarce resources. But feeling crowded doesn't have to mean that you are surrounded by lots of people. You've probably experienced discomfort when someone stands too close to you, or speaks too loudly at the next table, or constantly brushes by you on the way to and from the kitchen. Instinctively we try to create more space around ourselves whenever our balance between contact and privacy is violated. If we can, we move a bit to widen the space between us and the invader or, better yet, put something inanimate between us and whoever is or could get in our space. Think about the food court guest who plops her shopping bags on the seats of the table next to her to keep others from sitting there, or the party of two that requests a large booth in the corner to be away from the hustle and bustle. Consciously or not, these guests are using the design of the dining room to control their personal space.

We know we want our guests to be comfortable, but do comfortable guests actually spend more money? Apparently, they do. In studies we've performed recently, we have seen that spending in booths is significantly higher than at other kinds of tables, and in at least two restaurants we've examined, seating a party of two at a four-top resulted in a slightly higher average check.

If defining and defending personal space is human nature and makes our guests more comfortable, why should we as restaurateurs mind? Because each time a dining seat goes unfilled, we lose money. That shopping bag on the chair or that two-top in the corner booth prevents us from selling that seat to another paying guest as long as the table is occupied. So how can we make guests feel comfortable about their personal space while maximizing the revenue potential in the dining room? Choosing the right kind of seating and putting it in the right place in the dining room is the key.

Understanding Guest Preferences

If you ask guests of different ages and ethnicities which table is the best seat in the house, their responses will be remarkably similar. It's the table that gives them the most access to a scarce resource. Oh, they probably won't phrase it that way. They'll say, "the big booth in the corner" or the "romantic table for two in the window, overlooking the city lights." What they really mean here is that they want more space or more view, both of which are usually in limited supply in most restaurants.

In a recent study, I asked hundreds of different kinds of people — young and old, in the United States and abroad — to indicate which restaurant table they preferred under different circumstances to see if their demographics or the type of dining event changed their preferences. Interestingly, there was very little difference in table preferences across individuals. Everyone pretty much liked the same seat, whether they were Peruvian college students or American secretaries. But where I saw a difference was in the dining occasion. The more "high stakes" the situation, the more the guests liked tables in the corner. "High stakes" situations were occasions such as being interviewed over a meal or having lunch with your boss. This makes sense when you think back to human nature. When we are under stress, we try to reduce that stress, and one way we can do this is to reduce the potential for even more stress from feeling crowded. This is probably the reason for the strong preference for booths in restaurants that cater to a high-powered business clientele. Sure, these guests like the status and the privacy that booths afford, but at the root of these preferences is really control. Booths let users have more control over their experiences and whatever stress they may be feeling, either consciously or unconsciously.

What we learned from the study is that virtually no one ever chose a table that wasn't against some kind of wall, under any circumstance. Tables that were laid out in the middle of the dining room were selected less than 2 percent of the time, whereas tables around the perimeter of the room were in high demand. Tables that are up against some kind of architectural feature are called "anchored" tables, and what you now know about psychology explains their appeal. These kinds of tables allow us to protect our personal space on one or more sides. No wonder everyone loves booths.

Another interesting finding was that guests who dined alone had distinctly different preferences depending on whether they were in a hurry. When asked to choose where they'd like to sit when eating alone, the vast majority of those polled chose a deuce in the window, which makes sense when you consider that the view gives guests something to occupy their attention when they're alone. Most people don't want to draw attention to themselves when they are alone in a restaurant, so we try to find ways to focus the attention we would normally place on our dining companions. How many times have you pulled out something to read or scrolled through your BlackBerry® when

Should You Put a Clock in the Dining Room?

Restaurants don't sell food, they sell time. To be successful, we need to maximize the revenue from every square foot of our dining rooms, which means managing your guests' length of stay and balancing it with sales. The longer that guests stay at their tables, the fewer turns we can get and the lower our total sales are likely to be. So what can your dining room layout do to encourage table turns?

First and foremost, there is no value in turning tables if there is no one waiting for seats. So during times of the day or days of the week when your demand is low, table turn strategies should be suspended. These are the times when servers should encourage guests to order appetizers or dessert, or seat guests in the tables that most diners seem to prefer and the ones that tend to result in longer stays: booths and window seats. And why not? Guests are happiest at these tables and a happy guest is more likely to come back and to recommend the restaurant to their friends.

But what about when you have a line at the door? That's when managing duration becomes more important. You have to be careful not to rush guests by pushing service times, but you can be creative in how you seat guests and how you design your dining room to encourage faster turns. Try to seat parties at the correctly sized tables, because not only is this good revenue management practice but parties seem to take less time to eat when there are no excess seats at the table. Guests in a hurry prefer to sit closer to exits so plan on some seats near the door, but be sure to put those seats up against a wall or other architectural feature. Diners hate sitting at tables in the middle of a space. And smaller parties tend to turn over faster than larger ones, so during popular dining times you may want to reduce the number of reservations you take for larger parties and emphasize two-tops instead. Just make sure you have enough deuces in the dining room layout so that you aren't wasting capacity by seating twos at larger tables.

And what about putting a clock in the dining room? Go right ahead. Casino designers have long known that having a clock visible makes people more sensitive to the passing of time, which if you are trying to encourage people to stay and gamble is not a good thing. But in restaurants where you want to turn tables, it can't hurt to remind guests that time is fleeting.

you were dining alone as a way of avoiding eye contact with the other diners? But things were very different when the same people were asked to pick a table when they had to eat alone in a hurry. About twice as many people chose a deuce right at the entrance to the restaurant compared with those who stuck with their preference for a window seat. It's important to note that in both cases, single diners wanted an anchored seat; it was just the nature of the kind of anchor that changed. This difference should be noted by your designers and by your host. Make sure your layout includes primarily anchored tables, and if you often cater to guests who have to dine in a hurry, consider seating them closer to the exit but still at well-anchored tables.

Understanding Guest Behaviors

We know we want our guests to be comfortable, but do comfortable guests actually spend more money? Apparently, they do. In studies we've performed recently, we have seen that spending in booths is significantly higher than at other kinds of tables, and in at least two restaurants we've examined, seating a party of two at a four-top resulted in a slightly higher average check. (We don't recommend this practice, however, because this very small increase in spending is not enough to offset the lost revenue from the two seats that you aren't selling when you seat two people at a table that could seat four.) Spending appears to be a bit higher at anchored tables when compared with tables in the middle of the room, although the results we've seen so far aren't consistent. And in general, parties of two have a higher check average per person than do parties of three or four. When party sizes get larger than this, the data is less consistent. In higher-end restaurants, larger parties usually end up spending more, probably because of the multiple-bottle purchases of wine needed for a group larger than six. In less expensive restaurants, larger parties tend to have a lower average check than smaller ones.

The smart restaurateur wants to balance spending per guest with length of stay. You probably know that restaurants are in the business of selling time. We "rent" a guest a seat in our dining room, but they get to choose how much "rent" they'll pay in the form of purchases. In general, the longer guests occupy a seat, the more we need to charge. So in fine dining restaurants with very high check averages, restaurateurs may plan on at most two turns each night, whereas in a casual restaurant with lower prices, getting three to four turns out of a table may be necessary to pay the bills. Our task as hosts is to ensure that guests never feel rushed, so we need to find ways to create the right environment for the length of the dining experience we envision. One way to do this is through the way we lay out the tables.

Our studies indicate that there are some differences in dining duration across table types and across party sizes. As a general rule, the larger the party, the longer they will occupy the table. This makes sense because large parties typically take longer to order, longer to be served and longer to clear. A four-top takes longer to dine than a deuce (two-top), and a six-top

longer than a four. We've also seen that guests stay longer in a booth and that parties of two seated at tables for four take a bit longer to dine. What this means is that you are more likely to turn two-tops faster than larger tables, so it is good planning to include lots of deuces in your floor plan. After all, they can always be combined to make a larger table if you need one, and the potential revenue from having lots of parties of two (assuming your guests typically come in pairs) can often be higher when you consider dining time as well as spending.

Interestingly, our data shows that guests often have the shortest length of stay dining at the bar or in outdoor seating. Guests who sit at the bar appear to have the highest "spend per minute" of all seating types we've looked at, so don't overlook the potential of those bar seats. Make dining at the bar comfortable for your guests by offering ample room for knees, a place to hang a purse or handbag, and bar stools with backs on them. And make those bar seats movable so guests can adjust their personal space how they wish.

However, when we asked guests to tell us how comfortable they felt at a particular table and compared that with their spending, duration and overall satisfaction, we found something interesting. At least at the restaurant we studied, there was no relationship between what guests told us about their comfort and their spending or time at the table. So it may be that the effects of seating on guest behavior are mostly unconscious. Where we did see a relationship was between guest comfort and satisfaction. Guests who felt they had enough room at their tables were much more likely to be pleased with their dining experience, and would more likely be willing to return and spread positive word of mouth. So providing guests with the right kind of table can pay off in multiple ways.

A Few Caveats

So far, our research has been limited to full-service restaurants because those are the ones that have records of who sat where, how much they spent and how long they stayed. The results have come

from a mixture of restaurants: chains and independents, high and low price points. We even studied a fine dining *prix fixe* restaurant to see if guests spent more on beverages and other add-ons if they were seated at desirable tables and, indeed, tables around the perimeter of the room, in general, spent more than tables on the interior. (Booths were the top choice here, too.) But we don't yet have reliable data about how design influences guests at fast-food restaurants or other kinds of operations where food is purchased before being seated. (If you run such an operation and would like to participate in a study of your guests' behaviors, please contact me at skr4@cornell.edu. We'd love to work with you.) At fast-casual and self-service restaurants, seating is very unlikely to influence spending, since the menu choices are made before a table is selected, but duration would be relatively easy to observe via video camera. In fact, most of the major fast-food chains have done these kinds of studies but their findings are not publicly available.

But Don't Discount Server Influence

Let me also be clear that many factors contribute to guest spending and length of stay other than where the guest sits.

The server generally has an even greater influence than the seat does. A good server who understands guest needs and has the support of the kitchen can control the pacing of the meal and, when there's no wait for tables, increase check average with gentle upselling. (Don't encourage your servers to push dessert and coffee when you have patrons waiting — you'll probably make more money by turning the table than you would from that extra flourless chocolate cake or cappuccino.) Even days of the week or weather conditions can affect spending and table turn times. Any restaurateur with a place on the beach can tell you that a sunny Saturday equals slammed. But even though other elements of the dining experience can make a big difference, we are finding that design matters enough that operators should pay close attention to their seating layout.

Guests who say they feel crowded at their tables are more likely to feel rushed, are less likely to want to return and less likely to recommend the restaurant to others. So even if you don't see a lot of an effect of table location on spending or duration at your particular restaurant, chances are that the layout of your dining room and how you choose to seat guests influence your guests' satisfaction.

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