

## “WHAT, ARE YOU NUTS?!”

by michael bonadies & denise korn



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**Designer (calm and cool):** *It's only \$1,950, and . . .*

**Restaurateur (interrupting):** *We're six month's late, the contractor's disappeared, the city is holding us up on permits, my investor is having a nervous breakdown, and you want to talk to me about the sign?!*

**D:** *Hello? This sign is the first thing your customers will see. Remember . . . customers?*

**R:** *Customer? At this rate, we'll never get the doors open!*

**D:** *You're less than two weeks away. The sign is a long term investment: It's right out there sending the message that you're new, hot, and ready to roll.*

**R:** *Yeab, great. But there's no money left for a sign. Zip. Zero.*

**D:** *But I already told the sign guy you would take half in barter and . . .*

Opening a new restaurant is not for anyone who doesn't have the intestinal fortitude for the inevitable uncertainty, chaos, and give-and-take that occurs once construction starts. And today it is also no longer a venture for anyone who believes that offering great food is enough to ensure lasting financial success. The overall design and sensibility of the dining experience and how it impacts the customer's experience is equally or perhaps more important in ensuring a new restaurant's long-term viability. Sure, great food helps, but only a fool would neglect a branding experience that sticks in customer's psyches.

### BRANDING TO REMAIN STANDING

A great sign is only one aspect of a restaurant's branding. Others include graphics (logo, menus, wine lists, business card, check presenters, match boxes, advertising, and so on), artwork, artifacts, flowers, table tops, uniforms, and restrooms, as

well as the various physical elements a customer experiences in the restaurant's space. The goal for all of the above is to create an indelible impression that your customers will take away with them.

Rave reviews and great opening press have increasingly weaker penetration and shorter shelf lives among customers, given today's deluge of information clutter and the number of competition filling every niche. While positive media buzz is key to getting out of the box with a bang and putting customers in your restaurant for the first time, it's clearly not enough to keep most restaurants full long-term.

This is where your restaurant's branding comes in, helping to create a look, a feel, and excitement that deepens and adds to the positives of great food and service. You may be shocked to discover how much new and repeat business can be driven by awesome flowers or unusual restrooms. But it is your flowers, restrooms, eye-catching logo, or uniforms' ability to stick in your customers' consciousness that distinguishes your effort, deepens your 15 minutes of fame, and broadens your positive word of mouth.

### LASTING IMPRESSIONS

Achieving successful branding requires collaboration, trust, and common sense. There is a huge difference between knowing and wanting your branding and ultimately executing it successfully. That's why you assemble a design team, which may require only one or all of the following: an architect, interior designer, and graphic designer. Trust your team and remind yourself occasionally that you can't be an expert in everything. But never relinquish your common sense and intuition in evaluating their recommendations and accompanying costs. Each and every competitive advantage must be considered in planning a new restaurant in a challenging economy with changing demographics and a business environment where national chains increasingly have become direct competition for most independents. Whether you open on time with money in the bank or six months late without a dime to your name, your restaurant's branding (the unique integration of your image, style, and personality), if consistently executed, will make a powerful impression on your customers.

And that will certainly help the next time your customers are thinking of which restaurant to choose for a business dinner or a Saturday night out.