

Talk of the Town

Local Branding and Brand Development as Your Secret Weapon in the Current Market

Leaders in the chain restaurant sector know that every brand succeeds and fails at the unit level. And while the large international brands think globally, they act locally. They have regional and unit managers charged with staying in touch with the communities they serve. Unlike you, however, as an independent operator, they can't be the Mr. Rogers of your neighborhood business, and you need to leverage this advantage aggressively.

By Lindsey Danis

**It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood
A beautiful day for a neighbor
Would you be mine?
Could you be mine?**

— Fred Rogers

Back in the day, every neighborhood burger place that sponsored a little league baseball team understood the power of neighborhood branding. Granted, the art of connecting with your community is different now, of course, primarily due to social and other online media.

That said, people will prefer to keep local restaurants in business if they provide a good experience and remain top of mind when making dining choices. They will also promote them on their own social media out of local pride if they do something brag-worthy. This is particularly true in the wake of the pandemic, when the plight of independent restaurants is regular news and there is particular empathy for our neighbors.

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In this episode of the Corner Booth podcast, we learn how a local independent single-unit concept leveraged its relationship with its community to build a loyal customer base referred to as “egghead nation” and served by an engaged staff known as the “tribe”. Today, it is a successful breakfast/lunch concept that has expanded throughout Nevada and into Idaho and Texas.



You have a great opportunity to win the hearts and minds of your community. This is no longer the 1980s, when guests lined up for fried mozzarella at kitschy themed chain concepts. Authenticity and uniqueness are prized. But if they don’t know you, they can’t love you.

As Carly Spross, managing partner of Flashlight Marketing, explains, “having that buttoned-up brand and value proposition is going to cut through that noise and give people a reason to want to try or stick with you.”

Whatever media you use to attract attention to your concept, your brand is the consistent and compelling message that sets you apart and makes guests want to talk about you, whether on their Twitter feed or standing in the checkout line at the supermarket.

A restaurant brand goes beyond a menu or general concept. It encompasses things like your restaurant’s unique ambience and customer experience. While a brand may be hard to pin down, you know a strong brand when you see one.

The Five Pillars of Brand Development

Purpose. The purpose is the reason for your brand. It might be what got you into the restaurant business in the first place. It’s certainly what keeps you going when there

are setbacks. Without a sense of purpose, the inevitable frustrations of this business can be overwhelming.

To clarify your purpose, ask yourself questions like:

- What is your “why” – your reason for your concept? Are you simply trying to create a source of livelihood, or are you looking to express your values or passion for food or your community in some way?
- What is your concept’s mission?
- What do you hope to accomplish in your business beyond preparing and serving food?

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says Sabrina Canario, founder and CEO of Canario Communications.

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“if you have any sellable product, the business will follow, but it’s not that simple.”

- What ambitions or goals do you have for your business? For example, are you looking to expand the concept to multiple units, win awards, or be the best version of your style of food in the community?
- What motivates you when times get tough?

Personality. Your brand’s personality is your concept’s voice, tone and aesthetic. It is comprised of many elements, from your concept’s menu to how you communicate via social media to the colors, design elements, and atmosphere of your interior and exterior design.

To clarify your personality, ask yourself questions like:

- What is your concept’s “point of view”? For example, do you see your place as a down-home family eatery or something exclusive and for special occasions?
- What keywords or phrases define your brand’s personality?

- What tone of voice, colors and design choices can communicate the personality?
- How would your employees define your business?
- How would your regular customers define your business?

Positioning. Your positioning describes where you fit in the restaurant landscape. How do you differ from other concepts in your area? What is the unique value proposition about your brand?

Clearly identifying and communicating your position may seem like the lynchpin of having a strong brand, but the reality is that you need all of these elements working together to have a clearly designed brand that customers will connect with.

To clarify your positioning, ask yourself questions like:

- What is your target demographic?
- Where are you in the marketplace (e.g., leader, follower, first-in), as compared with the competition?
- What makes you stand out against the competition?
- Why should a customer choose your restaurant?
- What are your long-term goals?

Perception. Perception refers to how your audience perceives you. It's the classic question "what words would your customers use to describe you?"

When you understand how you are perceived, you can tweak your brand to align the perception with your purpose. If your concept is established, you can ask your customers what they think of your brand. This is the sort of question you could throw out in social media to engage your audience, almost like a customer poll. Or it could be an open-ended question you ask on a survey.

If you're still in the startup phase, ask yourself how you'd like your restaurant to be perceived. What adjectives do you want to roll off a customer's tongue after they enjoy a meal at your concept? Make a list of these words or phrases, then consider the ways that you can design the ambience, menu, or style of hospitality to evoke those phrases.

Promotion. Sales, marketing and PR efforts all fall under promotion, but so does cultivating a customer experience. When the customer experience aligns with a guest's expectations (they get exactly what they hoped for, or better), they're likely to return and promote your restaurant via word of mouth and their social media feeds.

To gain clarity around promotion, ask yourself things like:

- What is the customer experience you are seeking and are you successful? For example, relaxing, entertaining, or

transporting to another place or time?

- What do your online reviews say about you?
- What is your elevator pitch?
- Where would your audience or customers go to find you?
- What ways are your customers already interacting with you (online or offline)?

Build It and (Well, Maybe) They Will Come

"Everybody wants to have a brand that's very unique, [but it can be] challenging for a restaurant owner to bring their concept into a brand that grabs the customer's attention and makes them return," says Sabrina Canario, founder and CEO of Canario Communications. Owners tend to think that "if you have any sellable product, the business will follow, but it's not that simple."

Canario recommends that operators think about their ideal demographic and what those customers would want in a concept. "If you want a Michelin star restaurant, ask what they are looking for, where would they dine, what is up to their level?"

Once you know the ideal customer, you can run highly targeted ads that reach those customers. You'll know whether they're likely to get their news from Facebook or national public radio; thus, which advertising channel will deliver the best return on investment. You'll understand the social media channels they gravitate toward and can focus your time on developing a presence there.

Spross recommends you conduct "SWOT" analysis as a brand development tool. Knowing your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats can help refine the brand. It can articulate a path forward, from where you are to where you want to be.

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Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, and Threat (SWOT) Analysis



Understanding your brand is an important first step. Expressing it is the next challenge, and can be fun if you have a creative streak.

This is where colors, fonts, logos, architecture and interior, menu items, special events, and even playlists help set your concept apart. Taken together, stylistic choices like these "portray that image [you] want to set and that expectation" to customers, says Spross.

Tavola, one of Spross's restaurant clients, is located inside

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The Power of Design in Communicating Your Brand

A Corner Booth Podcast

Gin Braverman, principal of Gin Design Group serves restaurant concepts - from single-unit startup independents to established multi-unit operators - with award-winning design. In this episode, we learn more about each step of the restaurant design process from concept to paper. Gin explains what to expect in scheduling and cost, and how a good design team addresses equipment, inspection, permitting and construction to optimize results and avoid problems.

Gin also discusses design considerations driven by the pandemic, including dining room flow, outdoor dining, and seamless curbside pickup. Whether you are in the initial buildout stage or considering a facelift for your existing concept, join us to learn how experienced pros make every visual element in your restaurant - art, color, decor, lighting, and millwork - enhance the guest experience and the aesthetic of your concept.



a country club with an al fresco patio overlooking the golf course. The cuisine is brick oven pizzas, burgers and Italian entrees. Tavola wanted to have a “laid-back atmosphere,” which went a bit against the expectations of a country club, where adjectives like refined or exclusive typically come to mind, Spross explains.

To set expectations, “we are always using relax. We say upscale casual. We have palm trees, there are fun cocktails, there’s acoustic music”, and the walls are painted teal and orange to create a “fun, eye-catching, island vibe,” she adds. These choices communicate the atmosphere and distinguish Tavola from its country club setting. As a result, guests have come to associate the restaurant with escape. The location is close to Philadelphia, so when city dwellers want that laid-back, refreshing change of pace, Tavola comes to mind.

When to DIY and When to get Help

Stephen Bowler, founding partner and the operations director for Nautilus Pier 4, shared his experiences branding Boston area seafood-centered restaurants. Bowler and his partners have two units on Nantucket, The Nautilus and The Gaslight, a live music venue. A third unit, Nautilus Pier 4, opened in Boston earlier this year.

For both Nautilus concepts, Bowler and his partners leaned into branding that was heavily nautical. They suspected this would set the perfect tone for a seafood restaurant on an island with a rich whaling history. The first time around, they did most of the branding themselves and figured it out as they went. “We had never run a business before, so we were learning on the fly” by doing internet research, he explains.

“Let’s come up with a name we like first. Being on Nantucket, the ocean is important,” he says. The cuisine was seafood, but with an experimental twist. The partners found a list of names and Nautilus stuck out. They took inspiration from the marine animal for the logo and kept on brainstorming. As the partners thought more about their brand, they connected to the Jules Verne classic “Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea.”

“The book tied in with our theme, [which was] kind of about exploration, trying new things, thinking in new ways, counterculture,” Bowler explains. It also provided great imagery to bring the concept to life: submarines, divers, octopuses, and other undersea creatures. The Nautilus’s walls are painted seafoam with “abstract wavy lines in the wall” meant to evoke tentacles. The concept keeps things fresh and fun with wordplay, punning around with a play on “ACK NAUTI”, or Nantucket’s airport code (ACK) and an abbreviated form of nautilus to suggest “naughty”.

The Boston location borrows the same imagery, but “with a modern edge,” Bowler explains. There’s a private dining room with a “nautical steampunk” feel inspired by Verne’s submarine. The dining room has tiled walls “with a wavy shape that is supposed to make you feel like you’re in the ocean,” in a subtle way. (Steampunk is an aesthetic inspired by 19th-century industrial steam-powered machinery in a fantasy setting.)

Opening Nautilus Pier 4 was, in a way, growing up. It “felt like a step in the development of the restaurant and us,” Bowler says. So, the team took the opportunity to get a new logo made. They also invested more in promotional things than they’d been able to do when opening their first unit: branded coasters, pens, matchbooks and merchandise.

The three partners leaned on friends who had experience with graphic design and web development to bring their ideas to life. Bowler encourages other operators who want to do their own branding to go for it. “Most of what we do is be true to ourselves,” he explains. They let the branding “speak to the food and drinks we were already creating”

and treated it like fun. If you hit on a good concept that's true to your heart, Bowler believes you'll appeal to customers organically.

While it was all a learning process for Bowler's team, he encourages other operators to think through who they hire and how they communicate in advance. This "lesson learned" came after they hired a company to create graphic art, only to realize after several rounds of emails the company couldn't provide what they were looking for.

It's common for independent operators to bootstrap in the early days. But is this always the best direction to go with branding?

Canario and Spross agree that it depends on a restaurant's stage of development, the budget, and the talents of a given operator. There may be things you're naturally good at that you can and should do. But in other cases, professional help with brand development is money well spent.

In the startup phase, an agency that specializes in restaurant branding can brainstorm with you and put together brand guidelines. "That's always a great resource to have" moving forward, Spross says. The guidelines will help your in-house team and consultants market the restaurant effectively.

Resuscitating Your Brand

When your concept is no longer growing or – forbid – in decline, a marketing professional can help can pump new life into the brand. Canario illustrates this with one of her clients who sought help with a brand "refresh".

Kellari Taverna was a Greek concept with units in New York and Washington, DC, which first opened in 2009. While the restaurant enjoyed a good reputation, new guest traffic slowed. Their business was mostly repeat patrons. While repeat guests are critical to sustainable success, you need to bring in new customers to grow and convert to repeat business. Kellari hired Canario to reposition the brand and connect with new audiences. In their case, having locations in two different cities worked to their advantage.

There was a large Greek community in the DC area. The restaurant was able to capitalize on that built-in audience with Greek Night events, which sought to recreate the ambience of Greece in the nation's capital. This clear vision helped them design fun events. During the pandemic, Greek Nights tapped into the pent-up desire for travel that many people experienced. There was Greek food, live music, and dancing. "It was packed and fun and something we don't do in New York," Canario explained.

In New York, Kellari's owner wanted to connect with a younger demographic. They decided to host a weekly event with artists displaying their art. The artists cross-promoted the event to their communities, and the partnership brought in the new demographic the client wanted to target.

Spross recommends that operators consider refreshing their brand whenever they're making big changes to the

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How To Deliver a Superior Guest Experience

A RestaurantOwner.com Webinar

Many restaurant operations both large and small believe the secret to growing sales and profit is a better or different marketing strategy. But this often ignores the most important part of every restaurant – The guest experience.

While marketing can certainly play a role, there is one common characteristic of legendary, highly successful independent restaurants. They consistently create superior guest experiences that produce loyal, returning guests and positive word of mouth.

This webinar will show you how to evaluate and identify ways to elevate and improve every aspect or guest touchpoint in your guest experience to organically grow your sales and profit in a way no marketing strategy can.



concept. "Every five years is the magic number [for in-house renovations]. If you're investing inside your space, you should make sure the branding is being considered, too," she explains. If there's a new chef or the concept has changed from what you originally envisioned, take the opportunity to realign the brand with the new direction.

When updating a brand, Spross says it's smart to consider how the brand presents digitally, given the digital-first nature of dining these days. "Do you need a logo refresh? Are the colors you're using still relevant to the experience? Or has your experience evolved?" she asks.

Canario agrees: "Nowadays everything is so visual" and more people are turning to social media to make dining decisions. Yelp, Google and Instagram are among the top places people check. Posting your own high-quality photos of your restaurant to these channels helps you control your brand's perception.

"People have high expectations. We're eating with our eyes first," Spross says. For this reason, she recommends



that independent restaurant operators “invest in photography for your own images of your drinks and food and space. Make sure they are going to be doing you a service rather than a disservice when you’re putting them on social media and website. A very good photo of your food is going to be super impactful, but a bad photo of your good food is not going to translate well.”

You can’t control the cell phone photos guests take and share online. But posting your own, high-quality images allows you to set expectations for what guests can eat or drink and the atmosphere they’ll find when they visit your concept.

High-quality images will have good lighting, crisp details, and light staging. The background should tell a story about the atmosphere without looking cluttered. Images should be optimized for the web, so they load quickly and maintain their crispness. If you’re handy with a camera, you can take the photos yourself. If you have a hobbyist photographer on staff, they might be able to help out.

Grand openings and remodels are two times Spross recommends hiring a professional photographer who’s done these kinds of events before. For the one-time expense, you’ll get great photos of your interior, exterior, food and drink. You’ll be able to use the images for website development, marketing, and promotion.

While refreshing a brand is one strategy to attract new customers, some operators go too far in the other direction. Canario says that operators who feel like business is stagnant or their marketing/PR efforts “will become almost desperate and think they need to continue to reinvent themselves,” she explains. This backfires when brands throw everything at the wall and make too many changes at once. “If you change too much you will lose yourself within the market. It’s a bad strategy because you end up not knowing who you are at all.”

She recommends taking a strategic approach when

changing an existing brand: Make a plan for repositioning the brand, then stick with it for one to three months. After this time elapses, you can reevaluate or tweak the approach.

Differentiation Breeds Business

A brand helps differentiate your business and command premium pricing. The product is important, but it alone won’t capture the interest of your community or ensure their repeat patronage. “We’re all selling food and drinks,” says Spross. It’s important to define yourself and your uniqueness through your brand and your branding,” Spross says, when asked why operators should care that a brand is clearly defined. “Branding will help communicate your restaurant’s personality. It gives guests an idea of what they can expect and what the experience will be when they dine with you.”

A strong brand can also attract the right employees, those who are intrinsically drawn toward your style of service, your mission, or your concept’s personality.

When you think about the guest experience, you probably focus on their experience in the dining room. Perhaps you think about their experience grabbing a meal to-go and enjoying it at home, given the rise in takeout business. But the guest experience extends beyond your four walls to other interactions customers have with your brand. Much of it manifests in the way they conceptualize your business between meals. Online interactions, social media, and media coverage all have the potential to change the way a customer perceives your brand or sets their expectations; in some cases, before they’ve even tried your food.

A clear, consistent brand works together to develop and set expectations, so there are “no surprises” during the visit, says Spross. Sending clear and consistent messaging about who you are, then delivering on this promise brings customers in the door and turns them into repeat guests. **RS&G**