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Creating Space: How to Use Design As a Communications Technique

By Wendy Prellwitz



Restaurant, hotel and hospitality customers are more aware than ever of design. For our clients, good design is good business, because it delivers a vital message that communicates the

right tone to customers, and sets their company apart.

I was reminded of the message design communicates while spending a few hours recently in a hospital waiting room. Instead of the usual setting with mismatched furniture and harsh lighting, I was surprised to notice that the space was welcoming, carefully furnished and comfortable in a completely unexpected way.

The hospital's message was clear. "We care about you. We care about your loved one. We consider you a valued customer who we look forward to serving whenever you need us."

Architecture is in fact a branding tool, one that can deliver on the expectations customers have about the places where they choose to dine, vacation, exercise, shop or just sip a cup of morning coffee. When we deliver on a brand's promise, "everyday spaces" are transformed into "memorable places" that are enduring and valued by customers.

Dutch architect and author Aldo Van Eyck expressed it best. He wrote "whatever time and space mean ... place and occasion mean more." Favorite destinations are like that. Whether it's a beach house on the Cape, the



The open kitchen and dining room of Sibling Rivalry Restaurant.

spa at a resort hotel, or a window table at a romantic restaurant, there's something unique about the experience of each visit.

We are in the business of creating that same affection for the places we design. For us, the thrill comes from aligning the experience and message perceived by the customer with the business goals of our client. A message, powerful enough to reach the right customers and bring them back, becomes the ultimate design objective. It's the perfect marriage of concerns: both the poetic and practical.

Message-Based Approach

Before we consider architectural expressions, we look at what a particular place needs to communicate to customers and users. We start by understanding the client's mission and exploring their key message. Every project has its own distinct message

to relate, whether it's a "brand" in the conventional sense, or an owner responding to people's expectations. We ask questions to define the desired message, such as:

- What is the promise behind the company (brand)?
- What is most important to convey to customers and employees?
- How is this company, service or product distinctive?
- How do you create loyal customers and raving fans?

The answers to these questions, combined with an understanding of the client's future business strategy, can be translated into a tangible experience for the customer. We use key words, visual images and color palettes to take the essential brand image into a built form – to support the brand promise.

At Health-works Women's Fitness Center

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Chestnut Hill, the business goal of our client was to create a health club environment for women that could serve as a calm retreat from the chaos of daily life. The promise: Healthworks is a place to nurture both the body and the mind, where every customer detail supports a total wellness philosophy.

The design communicates this brand promise through the use of natural materials, a hotel/spa-like reception area with café, inviting sunlit spaces for Yoga and Pilates classes, and locker rooms designed to calm ... including a glowing onyx stone wall to contemplate while relaxing in the whirlpool spa.

At Sibling Rivalry in Boston's South End, a popular new restaurant is providing a long-desired social anchor for this eclectic urban neighborhood. Creating a welcoming space for all guests, from theater goers and gourmet diners to neighborhood regulars, was the brand challenge for Sibling Rivalry chefs/owners Bob and David Kinkead and the design team.

The response, which helped land awards from both Bon Appetit and Yankee Magazine, was to create not just one but a variety of guest experiences. Three distinct dining areas and a variety of seating types match any mood or special occasion. The warm colors, casual spaces, open kitchen and range of choices allow the Kinkead brothers to offer a welcoming brand message to guests seeking not only an outstanding meal but a 'home away from home' experience in the restaurant.

For Dunkin' Donuts new prototype store, the first of which just opened in Pawtucket, R.I., the brand focus was summed up as fresh, fast and affordable in a welcoming, unpretentious environment.



The entry door for Sibling Rivalry located on Tremont Street in Boston.

The design translates that approach into a new roadside icon that looks back at Dunkin's 1950s roots, with a colorful modern attitude. The interior welcomes customers with visible fresh baking and a new look for familiar graphics. Initial surveys indicate that customers are pleased, with faster drive-through service and a comfortable feel to the new store interior.

Everything Is a Communication

Architecture and building interiors communicate messages on several levels. The way a place is designed, and the accompa-

nying message sent, creates an emotional bond with the people who use it. Restaurants – and by extension - hotels, are homes away from home where guests can relax and recharge while on the road. Health clubs feel like places to stay healthy rather than a gym. Cafes feel like a welcome perch where customers can people watch for a while instead of just a necessary quick stop.

When successful, the design reflects and delivers what people need. If a company's brand is the promise, the customer experience within a designed environment is the delivery on that promise. ■

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