

A guide from FastCasual.com

Interior and Architectural Concepts for the Fast-Casual Chain



INSIDE: When it comes to the creation of a successful fast-casual restaurant, savvy restaurant operators know that every aspect – from concept development to site selection to build-out and design – must work together. That doesn't mean there aren't hurdles on the road to opening day, but the more organized the operator, the better chance they have for success.

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Contents: Interior and Architectural Concepts for the Fast-Casual Chain

Page 3	About the Sponsors	
Page 4	Chapter 1	Building your brand Relating to your customer Build your brand image: from logo to menu development
Page 11	Chapter 2	Site selection Population base Shopping areas and other factors Corner or endcap?
Page 17	Chapter 3	Construction management Regulatory requirements Construction schedules
Page 22	Chapter 4	Exterior design Building design Entrances, signage and landscaping
Page 26	Chapter 5	Interior design Design for function: front and back of house Design elements
Page 32	Chapter 6	Consider the queue Telling your brand's story
Page 34	Appendix	Selected articles from Fast Casual

About the sponsors



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***FastCasual.com**, owned and operated by Louisville, Ky.-based NetWorld Alliance, focuses on the rapidly emerging dining type that exists between quick-serve and casual dining. The online portal keeps the industry apprised of the latest news and trends that are continuing to drive this unique segment.*

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Chapter 1: Building your brand

Fast-casual interior and architectural design is about more than what patterns to choose for the chairs or the type of slate rock needed for the retention wall. This guide covers everything that new or existing restaurateurs need to know in order to build and grow their brands from the ground up. After all, in today's competitive restaurant environment, fast casuals are poised to experience startling success, and the well-designed brand will garner a great amount of consumer interest and sales.

To be successful, the best fast-casual brands have found their niche and stuck with it. Whether an operator is looking to capture the bakery café, Asian, fresh-Mex or burger market, a well-defined brand can mean the difference between one that flourishes and one that flounders.

When looking to expand an existing operation or build one from scratch, it's important for operators to define their brand and what they want it to mean to their guests.



Written by
Valerie Killifer



Chapter 1: Building your brand

“Even the most successful brands must constantly adapt to keep pace with cultural changes and shifting consumer preferences. Owning a powerful brand enables you to capture and retain consumer loyalty, and provides the leverage and credibility to expand your brand into new markets and categories and to introduce new products.”

– Linda Duke, Duke Marketing founder and president

“Even the most successful brands must constantly adapt to keep pace with cultural changes and shifting consumer preferences,” said Duke Marketing founder and president Linda Duke. “Owning a powerful brand enables you to capture and retain consumer loyalty, and provides the leverage and credibility to expand your brand into new markets and categories and to introduce new products.”

Finding the right niche is a key element in establishing a strong and lasting concept.

“In Texas, opening a Mexican restaurant would be hard because of the established chain restaurants and mom and pops. It’s important to know your market – what’s existing, what’s working for the operators already there and what’s a way to differentiate yourself,” said Paul Munsterman, president of Dallas-based Monster Design. “There are ways to spin off

into different directions rather than go straight into the competition.”

Restaurateurs must perform a solid amount of brand analysis and due diligence to identify the specific message they want to convey and the type of niche they want to fill. Part of that

Definitions:

Brand positioning: The specific niche in which the brand defines itself in the competitive environment. Positioning addresses differentiating brand attributes, user benefits and target segments, singularly or in combination.

Positioning statement: A concise, written statement of the positioning concept, conveying the essential features of the brand and its niche.

Messaging: The messages created to target specific markets. What should the brand convey to specific target markets? What does it promise to deliver to that market? What makes it different and better?

Chapter 1: Building your brand

research includes a demographic and psychographic analysis and a competitive breakdown of existing brands in local and regional markets. Part of the research should include income levels for the markets the operator is looking to reach.

Your brand should be derived from who you are, who you want to be, and who people perceive you to be.

“Checking what the average income is in the area will help to dictate how much you should spend in terms of design and architecture,” said Michelle Bushey, creative director and partner with Dallas-based Vision 360 Design. “You don’t want to design yourself out of your neighborhood or surroundings.”

Bushey worked on the concept development of Dallas-based Mooyah Burgers & Fries and said having a good business plan for any concept plays a huge role in its developmental success.

“Creating a plan in which to work from takes time and research,” she said. “Your plan should provide breakdowns of costs and expenses, which will help determine the amount of business you need to generate to both break even and make a profit. Some clients use market research firms, but

if you don’t have that in your budget you can start putting the information together yourself through your local chamber of commerce or commercial real estate brokers.”

Almost every community has a chamber of commerce, which can provide demographic and real estate breakdowns of the region an owner or operator is trying to reach. More research can be done at local libraries and by visiting regional and national restaurant association Web sites.

Relating to your customer

Once you have defined your brand, it’s important to note how your brand will relate to the customer.

“A lot of people are focused on the brand from the outside in as one way to relate to the customer visually, but there’s also the other side, which is looking at the brand from the inside out,” Munsterman said.

Munsterman is referring to the brand message that restaurant employees can relay to the customer and how those staff members project and understand the brand.

“It’s really educating those employees on what the brand message is,” he said. “I think a lot of places don’t

Chapter 1: Building your brand

focus on that enough. If the staff doesn't understand how to portray the brand message to the customer, I think there's a missed opportunity there."

Studying the area's demographics and establishing focus groups are other ways operators can connect with and understand their guests. Comment cards also can be useful.

"It's always a surprise to hear what people have to say. Then you can refine and define your brand based on that information," Munsterman said. "If you're a start-up, there's much more strength in knowing what you're doing from the beginning. Friends and family focus groups work to a degree, but getting people into a room that fit right into your demographic really makes a difference."

Operators also can connect with their

Through the sponsorship of athletic or academic programs, restaurant operators can further integrate their restaurant brand into a community.



Employees have the ability to relay your brand's message to guests and can play an important role in identifying how your brand will relate to the customer.

guests outside the walls of the restaurant. By supporting local fund-raising events or school athletic teams, operators can further bond with the members of their community, build relationships and increase their footprint.

Visually, murals, photos and memorabilia of the community and other artwork can connect with guests on an aesthetic level.

Franchisees with Jacksonville, Fla.-based Firehouse Subs are charged with commissioning a painted mural at each location, representing the local community and its fire department. Restaurant franchisees also are encouraged to hang photos and memorabilia purchased or donated by fire departments in their communities.

Firehouse Subs was founded nearly 14 years ago by firefighting brothers

Chapter 1: Building your brand

Robin and Chris Sorensen. The firehouse theme runs through each of the chain's more than 300 locations.

“It’s a great way to build community rapport,” said Don Fox, Firehouse Subs’ chief operating officer. “Particularly when we go into a new market, it’s a great opportunity for the franchisee and area rep to reach out into the community.”

Part of the chain’s brand touch point is a condiment station filled with bottles of different hot sauces – an idea that was launched by chain guests.

The first restaurant did not offer hot sauces, so customers started bringing in their own and leaving them on the counter for later use.

“They would start to accumulate at the restaurant,” Fox said. “They became conversation pieces and an opportunity to engage with and talk to the guest. Now, we have up to 50 hot sauce bottles.”

The hot sauces are complimentary and serve as another way the brand connects with its guests.

Build your brand image: from logo to menu development

Branding elements can come in a variety of shapes and sizes, but those elements need to extend throughout the entire chain and dining experi-



ence. But before the groundwork for those brand elements is laid out, a restaurant name and logo design must be developed.

“When thinking of names, we approach it very broadly at first. The ones that would appeal to us would be those that lend themselves graphically, but the sound and tone would connect more emotionally” with customers, Munsterman said.

For example, Firehouse Subs easily depicts the brand message, and Daphne’s Greek Café lets consumers know what type of restaurant they are visiting and the type of experience they should expect.

Once a name has been chosen, work can be done on the logo.

A well-designed logo should be simple, compelling, memorable, relevant and versatile, said Bushey.

Firehouse Subs franchisees must have a themed mural painted at each of their locations. The murals are typically tied to the community in some way.

Chapter 1: Building your brand



Having the right kind of signage can lure guests into your restaurant. However, make sure the look and feel matches the quality of your operation.

“What you do with print, menu and logo development needs to relate directly to the food and design of the brand,” she said. “It’s a package deal. Your brand identity should be cohesive from start to finish.”

And from conception through execution, design – logo, signage or otherwise – should create solutions that can actually be implemented.

Munsterman said there are three main areas where the key brand elements should be implemented throughout a fast casual:

1. Signage
2. Interior design
3. Menu boards and the POS

Signage includes any outdoor message that could lead potential customers through the front door. The signage also should fit in with the type of

brand message an operator is trying to convey.

Munsterman said his company worked on the brand development of a restaurant in the Dallas region, “but the sign fell way short. The materials just didn’t match what they could have done.”

One way to take a brand message from the exterior to the interior is to use design elements such as murals, framed artwork or other artifacts.

For example, Denver-based Chipotle Mexican Grill’s clean logo and exterior design lends itself to the urban-style décor used in the restaurants’ interior. Rubio’s Fresh Mexican Grill, based in Carlsbad, Calif., uses a “brand wall” at each of its locations to convey the chain’s 25-year heritage through timeline photos. And Sedona, Ariz.-based Wildflower Bread Company’s use of hand-blown glass



Wildflower Bread Company uses hand-blown glass designs at its Arizona restaurants to differentiate each of the company’s locations.

Chapter 1: Building your brand

designs creates a unique feel at each of the company's locations, without changing the brand image.

Interior visual elements also include the menu board and point-of-sale collateral, along with menu-item names.

The Grand Traverse Pie Company, in Traverse City, Mich., has menu items named after different areas surrounding Michigan lakes. For example, the Grilled Manitou sandwich is named after Michigan's Manitou Islands, and the Old Mission Cherry Pie is named after the Old Mission Peninsula in Northwest Michigan.

Grand Traverse isn't the only fast casual known for its unique names. Moe's Southwest Grill's menu includes pop-culture-named menu items such as Joey Bag of Donuts (from "My Cousin Vinny"); Art Vandalay (from "Seinfeld"); and the Billy Barou (from "Caddyshack"). Firehouse Subs also has menu names such as the Hook & Ladder, the Engineer and the New York Steamer.

"Naming is really important to support whatever that brand may be," Munsterman said. "If you have a Mexican restaurant, menu-item names and descriptions tend to not be so bland. But it depends on how traditional the concept is."

Images also play a major role when it comes to displaying menu items.

"Really, color, texture and fonts all play a big part [on the menu board]. Typically, people think of menu board as very straight and tight, but it doesn't have to be that way," Munsterman said. "Anything with a picture, people are attracted to because it looks good. So pictures can really drive sales to an item."

Images also can direct attention across the menu board so customers can look at all categories of menu items instead of one or two.

Other areas that can be used to incorporate brand elements include the restrooms and possibly a community board, where images of customers or notes from them can be displayed.

"One thing in the bathroom that is easy to do is sound, whether it's music or other acoustics," Munsterman said. "You can also promote items through the audio without being too intrusive."

Chapter 2: Site selection

Just as difficult as finding the right franchisee is finding the right site location.

“In this industry it’s ‘location, location, location.’ When you’re a start-up, ‘A’ locations can be difficult to come by,” said Michelle Bushey, creative director and partner with Dallas-based Vision 360 Design. “A lot of developers and landlords are looking for tenants with a history or track record to fill those leases.”

For most start-ups, “A” locations are ideal for exposure, but the costs of going into the space will be higher. However, Bushey said the amount of exposure and traffic a restaurant receives usually offsets the costs of an “A” location.

“Once you’ve established your brand, you have more opportunity to go into ‘B’ locations and be successful,” she said. “Don’t just jump at the first opportunity – be cautious about your site selection.”

While some fast-casual operators may rely on a broker to help find locations, others rely on companies such as Pitney Bowes, Asterop and Windsor Realty to help with site selection.

Pitney Bowes’ MapInfo is a fully integrated data, software and research-services firm that provides predictive location analytics. Restaurant-practice leader Brian

Hill said restaurant owner/operators are, or should be, driven by four key factors when looking to build or expand their brand:

1. Household populations
2. Worker populations (such as nearby office parks)
3. Shopping areas
4. Other sales drivers

“Real estate, to the informed restaurateur, has always played an important role in the viability of a site,” Hill said. “You could have very good information about who your customer is and demographic, but if you don’t know the dynamics of how worker populations or shopping affects that store or competition,” that also affects real estate viability.

“Once you’ve established your brand, you have more opportunity to go into ‘B’ locations and be successful. Don’t just jump at the first opportunity – be cautious about your site selection.”

– Michelle Bushey, creative director and partner with Dallas-based Vision 360 Design

Population base

For operators seeking a new restaurant location, the restaurant

Chapter 2: Site selection

should sit in an area where their primary customers live and work. That often means tapping into demographic information about an area's average income, population trends and the dining and shopping habits of residents.

“From a site-selection standpoint, a lot of the work emanates from the demographics of the area,” said Houston Jones, president of Louisville, Ky.-based restaurant and design firm The Houston Group, in the special report, “Real Estate in Real Time.”

Jones subscribes to a service offered by the Certified Commercial Investment Member Institute that provides specific demographic information for neighborhoods across the country.

“Say I’m looking for steakhouses,” Jones said. “I can filter my demographic information down to find out how many times people in that neighborhood went out to eat at a steakhouse in the past six months.”

Don Fox, chief operating officer for Jacksonville, Fla.-based Firehouse Subs, said the key for them is population density – areas with a three-mile population base of 20,000 and an average income of \$35,000.

“We’ll be just as successful in a market that is solid blue-collar as in a neighborhood of an \$80,000-plus median income,” Fox said. “In

advance of selling to an area rep, we map a market and an area we believe is viable. It’s all very calculated of how the market is going to look. We’re really looking for those ‘A’ sites and where those attributes are where we think is going to lead to success.”

San Francisco-based Asterop Inc. – creator of business-intelligence technology dedicated to strategic and operational marketing – uses a discreet scoring function designed to evaluate all possible site locations in an area and then categorizes those locations on best to worst.

“What anybody wants to do is find more people of the same type that have led to the success of their stores in the past,” said Bryan Vais, Asterop’s chief operating officer. “Part of our approach to develop the basis to this is to make sure we’re looking for the right sets of attributes about people in the retail landscape that are good indicators of store success.”

The company also uses a consumer-segmentation program that divides the population into one of a set number of clusters. The system follows four subtleties of people’s purchasing behavior in three areas:

1. Personal goods and services
2. Home furnishings and equipment
3. Fast-moving consumer goods such as groceries and food choices

Chapter 2: Site selection

“Clusters let operators know what they spend on food and what type of food. Any offering of a fast-casual restaurant is going to resonate differently with these types of consumers,” Vais said.

Once it has been established that a specific, desirable demographic is present in an area, the restaurant chain can look for other drivers, particular types of businesses that attract traffic.

For Dallas-based Baker Bros, which depends heavily on lunchtime service, daytime drivers such as universities, hospitals and large office buildings are essential. They also look for upscale neighborhoods with a minimum household income of \$50,000.

“Power centers like upscale grocery stores such as Whole Foods drive traffic to us,” Ralph Kinder, Baker Bros. director of franchise development, told FastCasual.com. “Restaurants tend to cluster around these things, because if someone doesn’t have a specific destination in mind, they’ll say, for example, here in Dallas, ‘Let’s just go to the Galleria area and see what’s there.’”

While some fast casuals look to those types of daytime drivers, others prefer shopping areas to drive customer traffic.



Shopping areas and other factors

While traditional shopping malls are alive and thriving in the United States, consumers have seen a proliferation of lifestyle centers in and around urban and suburban regions.

Lifestyle centers may offer the same type of shopping options as traditional indoor malls, but they are typically not enclosed, do not have a large anchor store, and give shoppers drive-by access to each entrance.

“I think there’s pressure on malls these days,” Vais said. “The best ones will always be in demand, but for certain malls of status and size, retailers are looking at their choices made in the past and re-examining them and whether they made the right choices. The lifestyle center

Lifestyle centers are becoming more popular destination areas for American consumers. These centers offer the same type of stores as indoor malls, but are typically not enclosed.

Chapter 2: Site selection

is in demand because it represents a different retail experience, too. It's a different feel about the place and creates a different shopping experience overall."

More fast casuals are looking at lifestyle centers to place their next location. In Louisville, Ky., The Summit lifestyle center is home to Quiznos, Qdoba, Starbucks and J. Gumbo's, in addition to retailers such as Banana Republic, The Gap and J. Crew.

Brian Hill, Pitney Bowes' MapInfo restaurant-practice leader, said he has not seen any brand that uniquely goes after shopping centers. However, those that do should consider parking arrangements and the type and amount of seating a shopping location will provide.

"What are the things that are your 'must haves' and deal killers?" Hill asked. "Look at those markets and formats."

In addition to lifestyle centers, nontraditional locations such as airports, stadiums and college campuses have been more appealing to fast-casual brands.

Penn Station East Coast Subs, Au Bon Pain, Wolfgang Puck Express and Einstein Noah Restaurant Group are just a few that have utilized airport, stadium and college campus locations to expand their brand. Camille's

Sidewalk Café inked a deal with Wal-Mart Stores Inc. to place its eateries in Wal-Mart Supercenters across the United States.

"The greatest benefit is Wal-Mart's draw of millions of people each year. Foot traffic is no longer a concern... neither are hungry customers," said David Rutkauskas, president and CEO of Camille's parent company, Beautiful Brands International.

The type of shopping or other location a fast casual goes into also should depend on the primary daypart it's trying to reach.

"If dinner is a focus of your brand, you will generate more business with a location in a shopping area due to the presence of nighttime traffic as compared to areas populated by office buildings, which historically do better lunch business," Bushey said. "But high traffic doesn't necessarily mean success. It depends on the kind of traffic that you're getting and when you are getting it."

Corner or endcap?

In today's competitive restaurant environment, operators also have to consider the location designed to give them the most visibility. When deciding between a corner or endcap location, there are several things to consider.

Chapter 2: Site selection



Outdoor dining areas are a big draw for today's restaurant guest. In many cases, an operator can add an outdoor dining section to their restaurant without increasing rental and other costs.

“Most of our clients prefer endcaps due to visibility and the opportunity for outdoor seating. Patio space is not typically included in lease space, and therefore the operator pays no rent on it,” Bushey said. “It provides additional seating and revenue without increasing costs.”

Outdoor seating areas continue to be a large customer draw because those areas provide an inexpensive way to seat more people, attract attention and increase the bottom line.

“Particularly in areas with four seasons, people are so happy to be outside when it gets to be springtime,” said Ed Frechette, senior vice president of marketing for Au Bon Pain, in the FastCasual.com article, “Call of the wild.” “In the regions where we are – New York,

Chicago and Boston – people are thrilled to be able to go outside again and enjoy the fresh air, and that means dining outside.”

Au Bon Pain currently has outdoor dining at 50 of its 120 locations, and if they could, they would have it at all of their locations, Frechette said.

The real beauty of outdoor dining is that typically restaurants don't have to pay rent on the space, so they can add square footage without increasing their costs.

“The casual segment of the industry has been hurt more so than others due to rising costs and the economy,” Bushey said. “The fast-casual concept offers the casual-dining experience but with more of the speed of a QSR. Dallas, as in many areas of the country, offers the chance to utilize

Chapter 2: Site selection

patio dining almost year-round. It has become a very important amenity to offer your customers.”

Depending on where the endcap location is, fast-casual operators often have greater access to utilities and other things, such as shopping and office areas. And operators can also take advantage of drive-thru accessibility and parking.

“Parking is critical,” said Fox. “We ideally want to be able to park about 35 cars at our business, but sometimes that depends on covenants. You could be the only restaurant tenant, but that could change, and then you have competitors competing for parking spaces. If you don’t have enough places to put cars, you’re not going to have any business.”

Whether a fast casual succeeds as a stand-alone location depends primarily on the concept.

“There are only so many shopping centers available, and the spaces in those are in demand,” Vais said. “The trade-off between street-front is you have to spend more in marketing because locations in malls are more compelling for operators. But the trade-off is that your space is oftentimes less expensive. The place where that gets blurred is when you’re on a hot street, which also can be difficult to penetrate because of local resistance.”

Chapter 3: Construction management



Finding the right general contractor is imperative to any restaurant construction project. Not only do they ensure the project stays on track, but they also are responsible for regulatory or compliance issues.

Construction management can prove to be one of the hardest aspects of fast-casual design. An operator must worry about staying on schedule as well as regulatory and other issues that could not only seriously impede but even halt the build-out process. Coupled with rising construction and real estate costs, the more time lost during the construction phase, the more money is lost from a delayed opening.

Project coordination is one key element of the fast-casual construction process and construction management, and always includes the role of the general contractor.

If you're working with a design firm, the designer or lead architect will often work with the general contractor on design and regulatory compliance issues.

Michelle Bushey, creative director and

Chapter 3: Construction management

partner with Dallas-based Vision 360 Design, said operators need to bid out their project to three to four general contractors that are experienced in restaurant projects. The design firm should also help review the bids in order to find the right fit for the restaurant project.

“You need a good team and someone who understands restaurants,” she said. “There are things that come into play such as grease traps and codes that don’t necessarily come up with other commercial projects. It’s really about finding the right fit and the right mix that’s going to work for what your project is.”

Kirk Durchholz, vice president of construction for Cincinnati-based Penn Station East Coast Subs, said operators shouldn’t just look at the numbers when determining the best general contractor. Instead, look at who was timely with their method, who was bonded and who gave a concise, organized package.

“If that’s that team that did it, that’s the team you should hire,” he said. “If the cost is outrageous, take it back and go to the low or middle bidder and ask them to look at the bid again. Or, go back to the high bidder. Maybe they had an error in the bid because they didn’t read it correctly. OK, it’s a fair and honest mistake, but then you start to question their abilities. Once you

“Once you find that right team, if you’re as happy with them as they are with you, it makes everything a lot more seamless.”

– Kirk Durchholz, vice president of construction for Penn Station East Coast Subs

find that right team, if you’re as happy with them as they are with you, it makes everything a lot more seamless.”

Once a general contractor has been selected, the task of construction management falls under their scope of work. The designer or architect still plays a role, as it is their responsibility to do site visits and make sure the general contractor is following the plans and specifications set forth in the drawings.

Bushey recalled a build-out project in which a wall was set three feet in the wrong direction, which had a significant impact on the project as a whole.

“There’s so much that comes into play that you don’t even think about,” she said. “It’s important to engage a firm that understands the unique issues that restaurants present and that have resources for general contractors that are reputable, experienced, that have an understanding of the project and can

Chapter 3: Construction management

work together for the benefit of the client.”

Most fast-casual construction projects are running anywhere between \$100 and \$125 per square foot, and that cost isn't expected to decrease any time soon.

“The design and construction process can be very stressful. It is important to have a budget for each aspect of the project up front. Many people are using personal funds, or they have investors they must answer to. Having a budget and staying within it presents its own set of challenges,” Bushey said.

Durchholz said as a franchise system, the company is in the business of selling return-on-investment.

“I try to do as much as possible for as little money as possible,” he said. “It's a challenge and it's fun, but it's difficult to find what is financially responsible and what's not.”

Penn Station does not have its own construction company or team, so area reps must work with a variety of contractors and construction

firms when it comes to their location build-outs. Although Penn Station has preferred suppliers for specific demographic regions, issues still arise when templates aren't followed accordingly.

“With each and every project I have area reps who see the sites once a month, and we have a grade-point evaluation system. I also assign them to be my eyes and ears over that project,” he said. “I have direct communication with the general contractor, site franchisee or project manager.”

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Durchholz said the more structured

and administrative the general contractor, the better, because they have the ability to keep him posted about the progress of a project. “But those types of contractors also cost more money, so it's a fine line.”

Regulatory requirements

One big issue every restaurant operator, design or architectural and construction firm must deal with is regulatory requirements. In many cases, build-out, signage and other

Chapter 3: Construction management

requirements can change on a city, county and state basis.

Typically, the architect or designer will deal up front with local codes, which can include following and understanding planning and zoning codes as well as health department and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) restrictions.

In August 2007, the Department of Justice settled a lawsuit with Doctors Associates Inc. (DAI), a privately held Subway franchise group, for their failure to provide locations accessible to people with disabilities. The suit affected more than 20,000 Subway locations and recognized that DAI would facilitate efforts to ensure compliance, while individual Subway shops would be responsible for removing barriers to access.

According to the ADA, all construction of commercial establishments, including restaurants, had to comply with act guidelines (found in the Code of Federal Regulations) after the effective date of July 1992.

The International Energy Conservation Code (IECC) also must be taken into consideration during the construction phase. The code limits the amount of electrical wattage per square foot in an effort to reduce energy waste.

Bushey said in dealing with regulatory requirements, from the ADA, the IECC and otherwise, it's important to

have a contractor who understands the different codes and their requirements as they pertain to your project.

Additionally, Durchholz said a city or municipality's planning reviewer can help determine the types of requirements needed for a site location.

“Operators and owners need to be involved in the construction process from the beginning. Understanding how it unfolds will help you as you grow your brand and build additional locations.”

– Michelle Bushey, creative director and partner with Dallas-based Vision 360 Design

“Make it as user friendly for the governmental agencies as possible to streamline the process,” he said. “The general contractor or subcontractor can acquire the permits, because most municipalities want permits purchased by licensed or certified personnel.”

Construction schedules

From the time construction begins to opening day, operators should expect an eight- to 10-week window.

Chapter 3: Construction management

Construction schedules are generally handled by the general contractor, but it's up to the general contractor and the owner/operator to keep the project on track.

“Operators and owners need to be involved in the construction process from the beginning,” Bushey said. “Understanding how it unfolds will help you as you grow your brand and build additional locations.”

A reputable general contractor, as well as an organized operator/owner or area representative, will keep things on track.

“I tell my clients, ‘If a general contractor tells you eight weeks, always plan for 10,’” Bushey said. “Give yourself some additional time for unforeseen issues that invariably arise.”

It also might be beneficial to visit the site once a week with the design firm or architect. And as the end draws near, conduct a walk-through with the general contractor, itemizing any last-minute fixes or issues that need to be addressed.

What an operator should not want is a project delayed by more than two or three weeks.

“The stress builds up like a pressure cooker toward the end of every project,” Bushey said.” An operator has based their hiring and training schedules on the construction schedule and completion date. If the project ends up being delayed, opening costs, payroll, etc., rise, and there is no revenue to offset the loss at that point.”

Chapter 4: Exterior design



A restaurant's exterior design can say just as much, if not more, to consumers. The exterior of a restaurant is the guest's first interaction with a fast-casual brand, so the façade should appeal to consumers on a visual as well as an emotional level.

Each generation of consumers has a different idea of the type of restaurant they'd like to visit, and with more than 945,000 restaurants in the United States, their options are almost limitless. According to Orlando, Fla.-based Quantified Marketing Group, baby boomers, Generation X and Generation Y (also the millennials) all carry a wide variety of emotional needs.

While baby boomers are looking for quiet and soothing restaurant environments and have the money to spend on more upscale locations, those in Generation Y go for more fast-food and quick-service establishments. According to Entrepreneur.com, about 25 percent of Generation Y restaurant visits are to burger franchises, followed by pizzerias at 12 percent.

The exterior of a restaurant must play into what these individual groups are looking for inside as well. The urban and industrial feel of Denver-based Chipotle Mexican Grill appeals to an audience of Generation X and Y; however, that design is in sharp contrast

A restaurant's exterior design is the guest's first interaction with the brand, so the façade should appeal to consumers on a visual and emotional level.

Chapter 4: Exterior design

to the softer-focused Panera Bread, which is trying to appeal to a more upscale, sophisticated audience.

Building design

When it comes to exterior building design, earth tones, textures, natural stone and recycled materials are the current trend.

Quick-service chain Taco Bell has incorporated the use of stone in its new building design, and fast-casual Pei Wei Asian Diner has integrated wood and earth tones into its design.

Michelle Bushey, design director and partner with Dallas-based Vision 360 Design, said if a restaurant is going into a strip center, a lot of the exte-



Earth tones, natural stone and recycled materials are the current trends in exterior building design. Exterior designs should relay the brand message and provide instant recognition.

Definitions:

Baby boomers: Born between 1946 and 1964, this group makes up the largest segment of the U.S. population.

Generation X: Born between 1965 and 1977, this group is known for having strong family values.

Generation Y: Born between 1980 and 2000, this generation is ethnically diverse and three times the size of Generation X.

Source: Entrepreneur.com

rior design will be based on the look and feel of the center. A city or municipality also might have design restrictions in place. For example, the city of Murfreesboro, Tenn., requires a specific percentage of the building to be stone, Bushey said.

“If you have a Southwest concept, you’re going to have to relay the brand message through the exterior and interior design,” Bushey said. “When people drive by and see the building, it should provide brand recognition.”

To keep up with fast-casual players, more quick-service restaurants are updating the look and feel of their interior and exterior designs.

Chapter 4: Exterior design

In the QSRWeb.com article, “Sweet sophistication,” McDonald’s spokeswoman Danya Proud said the chain wanted to adapt to the changing lifestyles and tech savviness of customers, and provide a different experience for in-store guests.

To capture those customers, McDonald’s launched a reimagining campaign in 2003.

The company worked with franchisees – who own about 85 percent of the chain’s approximately 13,700 locations – and a team of architects, restaurant developers and designers on the color scheme, design and technological elements of the revamped locations.

The interior and/or exterior design elements of each location vary market to market, but the overall theme remains the same: making McDonald’s more relevant and more contemporary to better serve its customers.

“Fast casual is giving the diner the speed of the QSR but with the design of a casual restaurant. So a lot more thought with regard to finishes and materials are put into the interior and exterior of the space,” Bushey said. “QSR players are changing their look and realizing that if they want to become competitive in this market, they have to step up to the plate.”

Operators are encouraged to work with their design or architectural firm

“A well-designed landscape can enhance the appearance of a restaurant on a year-round basis. A lined parking lot can add a feeling of organization and professionalism to an establishment.”

– Vincent Mischitelli,
author of “Your New Restaurant”

to ensure that each of their desired exterior elements are in place, but an operator should think about what will work and what won’t depending on their brand message and niche.

Entrances, signage and landscaping

Part of having an inviting exterior includes an accessible entrance and exit.

“You need to provide flow both in and out of the space – you don’t want people leaving through the same door they came in if you can avoid it,” Bushey said.

Where the entrance is located should be influenced by how the building is laid out, and it is essential that people know how to enter based on signage, awnings, landscaping, lighting and design.

“Signage is critical, and for us, as a

Chapter 4: Exterior design

growing brand, it is important for us to get our normal Firehouse sign,” said Don Fox, chief operating officer of Jacksonville, Fla.-based Firehouse Subs. “It can be frustrating as a retailer trying to grow and face some of the restrictions that we do on using our usual signage. Some may be government imposed, but then you have the developer who may impose it to keep with the feel of the center they’re designing.”

Fox said that typically, customers want an easily identified retail establishment rather than an unbranded one.

“When you see the golden arches, you know it is McDonald’s,” he said. “You just have to weigh the benefits of the location versus using your signs. If it’s an existing center where all of the other tenants have conformed, it will be more difficult for a developer to change rules. The greatest chance of success is if you’ve gone in from the beginning.”

In the book “Your New Restaurant,” author Vincent Mischitelli suggests that an effective sign is one made by experts. The sign also should be clear and simple, and let customers know what they’re coming into the restaurant for.

Landscaping elements are another big draw into eating establishments, as they can bring in new customers and



Landscaping elements are a big draw into a restaurant, as they can bring in new customers and play into the overall look and feel of the establishment.

play into the overall look and feel of the restaurant.

“If you’re doing a ground-up project, most of the time it is wise to hire a landscape designer or architect. If you go into a strip or lifestyle center, the landscaping has already been dictated since the developer provides it for the site,” Bushey said.

Shrubs have a one-time cost but can last for several years, while flowers add a nice touch of color in the spring and summer months.

“A well-designed landscape can enhance the appearance of a restaurant on a year-round basis,” Mischitelli said in his book. “A lined parking lot can add a feeling of organization and professionalism to an establishment.”

Chapter 5: Interior design

When Robert LaGore was determining the look and feel of his fast-casual restaurant, Marion, Ill.-based Burgers-N-Cream, he started with ideas from more than 10 existing concepts. One of the brands he closely studied was that of Denver-based Chipotle Mexican Grill.

“I think there are a percentage of people that go into Chipotle that are drawn back by the feel,” LaGore said. “I’m a big believer there’s not a person out there that the design is going to draw them into the restaurant, but I’m a big believer it’s going to draw them back.”

LaGore wanted to ensure he had the right look and feel for Burgers-N-Cream, a hamburger and ice cream chain designed around the Americana visions of apple pie, ice cream and grandma.

The restaurant has a professional feel during the lunch daypart and transforms into a casual, family-friendly atmosphere when the evening rush hits.

“Our design has been a little different because we try to promote cooked-to-order freshness, which is what differentiates us,” LaGore said. “Our whole design is to show a fresh, clean product.”

Before LaGore could get into the design phase, he needed to know his demographic and what his concept

stood for. He then needed a design strategy that complemented the brand and met his customers’ expectations.

“The brand has to work with the actual design. It has to look like what they’re selling. It has to be cohesive. I think, just like Robert said, your design is not going to bring people in the door, but it’s going to get them back,” said Tami Stallings, an interior designer for Landmark Design & Engineering Inc., who worked with LaGore on the design of Burgers-N-Cream.

In addition to ensuring that the interior design fit with the brand, Stallings was charged with ensuring an efficient flow of both back- and front-of-house operations.

Design for function: front and back of house

When it comes to any restaurant operation, an efficient, well-designed kitchen is essential.

“In the kitchen, the more efficient the design, the quicker you can provide products and services, which results in more turns on covers in the front of house,” said Michelle Bushey, creative director and partner with Vision 360 Design based in Dallas.

Bushey said it’s important to have a kitchen designer who can help lay out the kitchen so it will flow based

Chapter 5: Interior design

upon the menu and concept. “Certain menus are going to require specific types of equipment,” she said.

In addition, the kitchen and the wait stations should be blocked out at the beginning of the design-development process.

Other items to take into consideration when designing the kitchen include room for storage and expansion, including equipment upgrades.

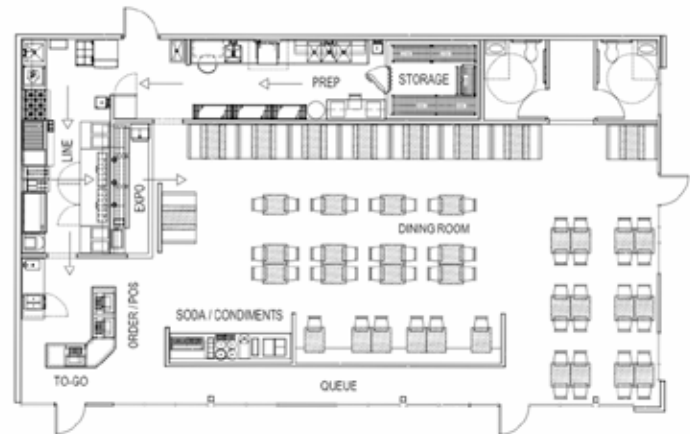
LaGore’s kitchen design is somewhat different from other fast-casual operations.

“One of the things we do that’s unique is we cut our fries up on the line,” he said. “Any minute one of the cooks is not busy, they’re cutting potatoes. So when you pick up the food, you’re seeing fresh-cut potatoes right on the line.”

The kitchen also has an open layout so customers can see their burgers and other items as they are being prepared.

“We’re showing everybody everything is fresh,” he said. “On back side, we’re 95 percent comfortable with the flow in our kitchen.”

When it comes to front-of-house design, the idea is not to crowd customers but enable them to get their food items without hassle, Bushey said. “You don’t want dead ends.”



At Burgers-N-Cream, every area is showcased with a neon sign, drawing customers’ attention to specific regions of the restaurant where they can pick up their drinks, ice cream or food items.

One sign highlights the premium ice cream service area, while another draws attention to the beverage station. And a canopy across the top of the kitchen area reads “Cook to Order,” which also conveys the restaurant’s message of freshness.

“I think we’re about 80 percent to 90 percent where we need to be,” LaGore said. “It will take another five to 10 stores to get it perfect.”

Design elements

Every restaurant environment will be different, and every fast-casual restaurant will fight to differentiate itself from other brands. In the design world, the bold, and sometimes

While a poorly designed kitchen can ruin the flow of food and traffic, a well-designed kitchen can increase efficiency and work flow.

Chapter 5: Interior design



The interior design of a brand should be functional and cost sensitive, and must maintain cohesiveness within the brand.

obnoxious, colors of the 1980s and 1990s paved the way to the use of the earth tones and softer tones found in many restaurants today.

“Depending on the concept, we’re starting to see more designer-oriented finishes coming into the space,” Bushey said. “But you also have to bring in items that are functional and cost sensitive for the brand. I can’t put a \$300 chair in a fast casual, but I can see a \$75 chair. Everyone loves a wood or concrete floor, but I have vinyl that provides the same look at a lower cost that is easier to clean and requires less maintenance.”

Obtaining and maintaining cohesiveness within a brand is a key to design strategy. The logo, interior design,

architecture, menu and graphics all need to work together and relate to one another to produce a successful brand “package.”

“There are times when they don’t, and although most customers can’t necessarily pick out what isn’t working within the package, they can definitely sense it,” Bushey said. “This is where a design professional that specializes in restaurant and hospitality design really makes a difference.”

“Understanding the dynamics of the kitchen design and efficiency, knowing customer and staff traffic patterns, seating options,



For many restaurant operators, a combination of booths and chairs seems to hold something for everyone. Chairs with clean lines and a variety of finishes are growing in popularity.



Chapter 5: Interior design

etc., will optimize your design, increase your productivity in the kitchen, maximize your seating capacity and invariably increase your profits.”

Starbucks made a big impact on the design and restaurant industry when it launched its first coffeehouse in downtown Seattle in 1971.

“Everybody wanted to capture that environment in their space,” Bushey said.

Today, many fast casuals are still trying to appeal to harried consumers by offering laid-back surroundings where guests feel they can linger. Chairs play a large role in that design element, with fabric overtaking vinyl.

“We’re seeing higher-end fabrics, new finish technologies; we’re seeing more modern and comfortable furnishings and a lot more booths,” Bushey said.

For many restaurant operators, a combination of booths and chairs seems to hold something for everyone. Operators also are looking at a variety of chair finishes and items with very clean lines.

“What those customers need to look at is the quality and construction of the product,” said Bill Bongaerts, president of Winston-Salem, N.C.-based Beaufurn LLC. Beaufurn provides commercial furniture in the restaurant and bar space.



“Typically, people in that field look for the cheapest product. If you give up on budget, give up on quality of product as well,” Bongaerts said. “Even in fast-food environments, those people are going upscale. Five or six years ago, that was unheard of.”

A big design push also is taking place with regard to lounge seating. Bongaerts said the push stems from operators trying to create a more relaxed and inviting environment, one where people can sit comfortably for lunch or linger over dinner.

“People can come in and see something that’s comfortable as opposed to in and out. It’s not just the seating; it’s the quality of food as well. Everything is changing,” he said.

Restaurants are moving away from the use of mini blinds, which get dirty easily. Solar shades keep out heat and the sun’s glare, without blocking natural light.

Chapter 5: Interior design

In addition to adding comfortable seating options, lighting, music and acoustics play a significant role in interior design.

Sandra Saft, president and founder of Orlando, Fla.-based Windows Interior, said restaurants are moving away from the use of mini blinds, which get dirty easily and can make the entire restaurant seem unclean.

“But in the last 15 years or so, the industry has moved away from mini blinds into solar-shading ideas,” Saft said.

Solar shades keep out heat and the sun’s glare, without blocking natural light. “The concept is so simple, yet it has so many positive aspects to it,” Saft said.

Chipotle Mexican Grill and Panera Bread are two examples of fast casuals using solar shades in restaurants.

The newer shades are polyester-coated woven materials that also are biodegradable. Further, they can be washed or hosed off without causing damage to the shade.

“It’s a flat shade screen instead of a curtain, so it’s cleaner and allows the light to come in with whatever density the selection may be,” Saft said. “You can also still use a valance or tie-back curtains, which give it a design element. Also, it’s such a nice, clean look all by itself.”

Lights, music, action

While the solar shades control some of the light, more should be done to make guests feel comfortable in the environment.

A person can sit in any number of fast-casual restaurants and notice the sound of music from above, but no acoustical element – unless it’s live music – should get in the way of customers’ conversations.

“It is getting better, but this was almost always the most overlooked, and one of the first things cut from the design budget, and is probably one of the most important aspects of design,” Bushey said. “Lighting can create intimacy or energy depending on how you use it, and it can make your product look better as well. In many ways it brings the concept, architecture and design together to create that emotion or evoke the feeling the owner wishes to convey to the customer.”

Lighting, coupled with the right acoustics, also can enhance the customers’ entire dining experience.

When diners sit at Rubio’s Mexican Grill, they are transported to another time and place through the sounds of

Chapter 5: Interior design

the surf, seagulls and crashing waves.

“When people walk in there, they feel like they’re in Baja,” said marketing expert Linda Duke. “The specifically chosen songs and sounds give guests the feeling that they are sipping their Corona and eating a fish taco with their toes in the sand and the ocean rolling in.”

While it doesn’t provide “beach music,” Chipotle Mexican Grill pipes in music to each of its more than 670 units. The music is designed to create a relaxed environment and fit into the urban, industrial design of its units.

A person can sit in any number of fast-casual restaurants and notice the sound of music from above, but no acoustical element – unless it’s live music – should get in the way of customers’ conversations.

“Everyone loves open ceilings and concrete floors, but you need something to absorb the sound,” Bushey said. “Soft seating such as booths and banquettes, fabrics, acoustical panels, dropped ceilings with tiles, vinyl flooring, etc., will all help to absorb and dampen sound. No one likes to have to yell across the table at each other while trying to enjoy a meal.”

Chapter 6: Consider the queue

In any fast-casual environment, it's important that customers have an easy and clutter-free order experience. It's also important that the collateral surrounding the point-of-sale tells your brand's story.

Fast-casual operators should look at a point of entry between four and five feet, said Michelle Bushey, creative director and partner at Dallas-based Vision 360 Design. "You don't want to make it so they're a herd of cattle, but also so they know where they need to go to place their order."

Whether a customer decides to wait or leave a busy restaurant hinges on the time of day and the quality of the food.

"It depends on what customers are willing to deal with," Bushey said. "If it's 12:30 p.m. and a hot place for lunch, people tend to have more patience since they know what to expect. Some people might be turned off because they don't like waiting in line. If you make the order process uncomfortable and customers are on top of each other all the time, it's definitely going to be an issue."

When it comes to your queue, Bushey offers four recommendations operators can use to make the process as carefree and inviting as possible.

1. Put the location of the queue in an area that eliminates confusion and drives customers to the POS.

2. Provide an order experience that tells your brand's story.
3. Place POP marketing and the menu board within the queue to drive sales and speed up the order process.
4. Make sure flow/traffic patterns allow maneuverability and ease congestion for both customers and staff.

The fresh-Mex segment provides perhaps the best example of moving customers through the line during their order experience. Chipotle, Qdoba and Moe's Southwest Grill each provide an order area for customers

When it comes to your queue, these four recommendations should make the ordering process as carefree and inviting as possible:

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Chapter 6: Consider the queue

that let them pick the ingredients to be used on their menu item as they move through the line. Other fast-casual chains, such as Penn Station East Coast Subs and Firehouse Subs, offers the type of order experience where customers order at one area then move down the line to the POS.

The design shift gives employees the ability to face the customer as their sandwich is being prepared, significantly reducing the order-taking process, said Penn Station president Craig Dunaway.

“We move you down the line instantly,” Dunaway said. “A process that used to take six to eight minutes, we’ve really moved that up between four and six minutes. It has allowed stores to grow sales because it’s expediting the order process. They turn tables faster, and it just snowballs in a positive way.”

Telling your brand’s story

Just as important as driving customers to the POS is educating them about your brand’s story.

When Chris Dahlander worked in marketing for Romano’s Macaroni Grill, he used danglers, table toppers and anything else he could think of to tell the brand’s story. But now that he owns Snappy Salads, a fast-casual restaurant in Dallas, Dahlander has

fine-tuned his approach.

His restaurant features table merchandisers – simple, brown recycled Kraft paper with a printed letter from Dahlander to guests, personally signed by him. Once a month, he changes the merchandisers to discuss a different part of his story: the biodegradable containers he uses, the charities he supports, the evolving soup selection.

“I try to touch every table, but at the same time I know people have busy lives so I can’t tell them a 15-minute story about my life and why I’m doing what I’m doing. Table merchandisers help a lot,” he said in the FastCasual.com article, “Deliver your message with POP.”

The role of point-of-purchase materials is to tell a story, not sell the product, said international sales and marketing expert Bob Phibbs.

A brand’s story can be told through POP materials near the POS, through the menu board and through employees, who will always be the best profit-drivers in any restaurant environment.

“It’s all about the order experience, because after all, the object is to get people in line and back through your door,” Bushey said. “If you’ve done your due diligence, have good staff and a quality product, you should be able to hit those marks.”

Appendix: Selected articles from Fast Casual

Baker Bros American Deli: Striving for service

By Michelle Avery

11 Mar 2008

While the counter-service nature of fast casual doesn't lend itself to much interaction, Baker Bros American Deli seeks ways for its employees to serve customers better. For example, each meal is seen by two managers to ensure accuracy, and cashiers do not upsell, said founder and CEO Ken Reimer.

"We let the guest decide, so they always feel like they're treated fairly," he said. "We're not trying to stuff them with more stuff."

The Dallas-based fast casual believes service is more than doling out sandwiches, salads, gourmet pizzas and baked potatoes.

"Everybody talks service – not many people deliver it to an extreme degree," Reimer said. "From the first person who steps into our door, we tell them, we serve. And what we serve at Baker Bros is the highest-quality product available in the marketplace, with the freshest ingredients, in a manner and at a price that gives our guests a very satisfied feeling when they leave."

That service-based philosophy extends to franchisees and includes a dedication to return on investment and no additional marketing fees.

"We're partners, but we're here to help (franchisees) be successful," Reimer said. "That's what our life is about."

Reimer, former CEO of Tony Roma's who has a history of salvaging and revitalizing companies, came up with the idea for Baker Bros after noticing a hole in the restaurant industry between quick serve and casual dining – the space that now is known as fast casual.

When developing a business plan for a concept to fill consumer demand in that space, Reimer decided it would have to feature high-quality product and environment, moderate prices and speed. "Then do it with product that could work well nationwide, that had lots of legs, that would last for a long time and be appropriate for each and every market," he added.

Unlike many other concepts, Baker Bros was designed as a franchise vehicle from day one. As such, sophisticated systems would be needed for product replication, as well as an economic model that would be beneficial to franchisees. After an investor signed on in Southeast Asia and Tom Dahl – former vice president of operations at Tony

Appendix: Selected articles from Fast Casual

Roma's — stepped in as president and COO, Baker Bros opened the first four company restaurants in 2000.

Those test restaurants have benefited from refined systems and minimized labor, all of which Reimer attributes to Dahl's expertise, and have outperformed the original business plan. Revenues for the past three years have increased 32 percent.

After franchising roughly one-and-a-half years ago, the chain has grown to 15 units, including seven franchises. Mostly concentrated in Texas, locations also are found in Arkansas, Nevada and South Carolina, with at least 26 more in the works across the United States. Reimer expects to sign 40 to 50 more units in 2008, with a total of 200 in the next three years.

The concept is set up to thrive in modest-sized towns to major suburban markets, relying on flavor profiles that will work anywhere in the country, Reimer said. All franchisees are required to open a minimum of three locations, excluding those in Dallas, which already has a number of units.

A concept set apart

Joe Lewis, a franchisee with three units open in West Texas and a commitment for a total of nine, decided to expand with a new concept after saturating the Amarillo and Lubbock markets with fast-food

operations.

When researching potential concepts, Lewis said he was impressed by the total package Baker Bros presented: products, store-level economics and track record.

"They're set in Dallas, which is a very, very competitive restaurant market, and they've grown their sales the last three years consistently," he said. "And that's been done without any advertising; it's been pretty much word of mouth and building customer loyalty."

Lewis, who has 35 years of fast-food experience, said Baker Bros is set apart from other operations by the degree of one-on-one, in-depth training provided.

"They really look at you and your management team and ensure that you have the proper people in place, that you have the necessary tools and skills to really take care of the concept," he said, adding that the company has an honest business approach and maintains high standards.

As a franchisee, Lewis said one issue he watches out for is a corporate office that adds products solely to increase sales to boost royalties. However, if the item hasn't been tested properly or long enough, then franchisees are forced to commit capital to equipment, training and

Appendix: Selected articles from Fast Casual

labor that doesn't generate much excitement.

Baker Bros is sensitive to that issue, as well, Lewis said.

"They don't try to add something just to add something," he said. "They try to keep the operation relatively simple, just taking a common thing and doing it uncommonly well."

A place like home

Customer response is a testament to the chain's ability to rise to take a simple operation to new heights.

When a customer visits Baker Bros for the first time, the response can be described only as "wow," Lewis said.

Sandwiches are served on preservative-free, hand-formed rolls baked fresh daily. Customers can choose from EggSpun, farm bread, whole wheat, rye and special hoagie rolls. Pizzas are made on proprietary focaccia crust with Italian seasoning. What customers often find most impressive are the full-size salads, which Reimer said can be split among four people.

"You can just see their eyes light up and get really big, and they're astounded at the quantity of the product that's presented to them for the price," Lewis said. And that response seems to breed others just like it. Sales at Lewis' units have increased each week with no official

advertising, relying solely on word of mouth and trial.

The average Baker Bros customer visits the chain more than twice each week, and many dine there even more frequently. Reimer said one customer eats nine meals a week at Baker Bros – at least once each day, plus twice a week with his wife.

Fast casuals answer call of the wild: Newly created executive group to focus on industry issues, consumer education.

By Richard Webster

15 Apr 2008

After a record-setting winter of sub-zero temperatures and daily snowfall, the people of Chicago cross off the days on their calendars until the arrival of spring. And when their thermostats rise above 70 degrees, hundreds of thousands of Chicagoans will flood the city streets, and fast-casual restaurants with al fresco dining will reap the financial windfall.

“Particularly in areas with four seasons, people are so happy to be outside when it gets to be springtime,” said Ed Frechette, senior vice president of marketing for Au Bon Pain. “In the regions where we are – New York, Chicago and Boston – people are thrilled to be able to go outside again and enjoy the fresh air, and that means dining outside.”

Au Bon Pain currently has outdoor dining at 50 of its 120 locations, and if it were possible they would have it at all of their locations, Frechette said.

Al fresco seating provides fast casuals with an inexpensive way to seat

more people, attract attention and increase their bottom lines.

“The casual segment of the industry is really hurting, so fast casual is trying to offer that casual-dining experience but with the service and speed of a QSR,” said Michelle Bushey, partner and design director of Dallas-based Vision 360 Design. “And in trying to offer that casual-dining experience they want to offer outdoor dining. Dallas is a ‘see and be seen’ town. Everyone likes to sit outside on a beautiful day, so patio dining has become very important as an amenity to offer your customers.”

The real beauty of outdoor dining is that typically restaurants don’t have to pay rent on the space, so they can add 1,000 square feet for free, Bushey said.

“I can’t tell you when I’ve had a client pay rent for non-air conditioned space,” she said. “You have the initial investment into furniture, but other than that the offset in the turns and revenue you can generate more than pays for itself. You can pay for it in one season.”

It typically costs between \$80 and \$200 per square-foot to build a fast-casual restaurant, but the only costs involved with adding a patio area is the furniture, umbrellas, awning and climate-control devices, said Aaron

Appendix: Selected articles from Fast Casual

Allen, founder and CEO of Quantified Marketing.

“It increases the amount of capacity they can handle without substantially increasing the cost of the physical facility,” Allen said. “And it’s a good fit for fast casual because it’s defined as counter service as opposed to full wait service. It’s advantageous because you don’t have to worry about servers going in and out of the restaurant.”

Tony Palombino, founder and CEO of BoomBozz Famous Gourmet Pizza in Louisville, Ky., has one location with an al fresco area that sits 12 people. It is by far their most popular dining section, so when they began construction on a new location they decided to add a full-size patio.

“When you find a setting where you can utilize outdoor space, you do it,” Palombino said. “People love eating outdoors.”

BoomBozz’s new outdoor patio is cut out of a section of the building with large wood-frame doors that open, creating the patio, and that can be closed during the winter so the outdoor seating is not lost. The total cost of the patio project including the furniture was \$6,000.

“We’re making this area our four-seasons section,” Palombino said. “We can have it enclosed for the winter and open during summer and

spring. We’ll never lose sales, so it’s good throughout the year.”

Being unable to operate patio seating year-round has always been one of the major drawbacks, but that problem can easily be fixed with technology, Allen said.

Cold weather can be combated with electric or gas heaters, and warm weather can be neutralized with misters or by pumping hydrogen gas into the section. “This opens it up for greater distribution around the country,” he said.

Al fresco dining can be found in all corners of the United States and in all sections of the restaurant industry, said Tom Miner, a principal with Technomic Inc.

“You see it from picnic tables in front of a hamburger stand up to white table cloths in front of the \$100 check-average place,” Miner said. “This is not new. I suspect people were eating outside of restaurants before they started eating inside. But the real contribution of an outdoor café is that it’s a real attention getter. It’s advertising. When people see that outdoor café with people in it, they’re saying, ‘There’s really something going on there.’”

Deliver your message with POP: In-store marketing should do more than sell your products.

By Julie Sturgeon, contributing writer

22 Feb 2007

When Chris Dahlander worked in marketing for Romano's Macaroni Grill, he pulled all the stops. "I did all the danglers, table toppers and things you could possibly do," he said. Now that he owns Snappy Salads, a fast-casual restaurant in Dallas, Dahlander has fine-tuned his approach.

His restaurant features table merchandisers – simple, brown recycled Kraft paper with a printed letter from Dahlander to guests, personally signed by him. Once a month, he changes the merchandisers to discuss a different part of his story: the biodegradable containers he uses, the charities he supports, the evolving soup selection.

"It's not intended to upsell anybody like the typical dining materials. It's just to put perspective on the restaurant. I try to touch every table, but at the same time I know people have busy lives so I can't tell them a 15-minute story about my life and why I'm doing what I'm doing. Table merchandisers help a lot," he said.

That's the message international sales and marketing expert Bob Phibbs tries to drive home to his fast-casual clients: The role of point-of-purchase materials is to tell a story, not sell the product. "A \$1,000, beautiful poster can't do that much heavy lifting," he said. "No matter who prints your materials or how great your graphic artist is, putting the weight of a new promotion on POP's shoulders is an awfully tall order."

That's why Phibbs sees in-store marketing materials as merely a sales tool for employees, who are still the best profit drivers in the restaurant. The axiom dovetails nicely with his second mantra: keep it to a dull roar. Too many posters, table toppers, danglers and stand-ups paralyzes the public into resorting to their standard, unprofitable order, he said.

"Just help me. I'm hungry, that's what I know. So point me in a direction with a story; don't overwhelm me with options," Phibbs said.

With these guidelines as your diving board, make sure the resulting materials also avoid these common mistakes:

- Don't settle for substandard materials. If you're going to be in charge, drive the car rather than take a passenger's seat to the business. That is Phibbs' philosophy. When

Appendix: Selected articles from Fast Casual

talking POP, that translates to hiring the best graphic designers for the creative end. Go the extra mile and pay for lamination or UV-coated paper. And make sure it's nearly idiot-proof in its installment process – crooked banners or window decals don't appeal.

- Don't go chintzy on the photography. Phibbs encourages restaurants to hire a top-notch photographer because shots of food items should take up at least 50 percent of the material's space. "That thing should look so yummy that I see it, then the title, then maybe the description," he said.
- Don't overlook the power of good lifestyle photography decorations that happen to include your product, either. Bill Schober, editorial director of the In-Store Marketing Institute in Chicago, suggests checking out how Target approaches its brand messages using this artistry with shelf headers yet still maintains its clean store policy.
- Don't place it in the way. POP is an interrupter – it's designed to make the consumer stop in her tracks and consider a new product. But halting is the last thing most fast-casual restaurant executives want happening to their lines.

Schober knows another dirty secret. "If the signs get in the way during

rush, the restaurant staff will throw them away at the first opportunity. If the tallest kid on the crew hits his head on a hanging mobile, at some point he will get mad and rip it down," he said.

Good retail marketers typically ban POP within the first 10 feet of the store entrance, because customers need this zone for their eyes to adjust to the different lighting, and the brain to orientate the body's position. "Your mind is 100 places other than, 'Wow! Look at this interesting display,'" Schober said.

Phibbs is a fan of outside window decals, which entice diners to enter. The menu board is prime POP real estate, too. "If you can combine it with your menu so they're always looking up there for something new, how great is that?" he pointed out.

Bathrooms are no-nos when it comes to food-driven messages, Schober warns. Floor decals, however, do earn his thumbs up. Studies show that folks don't carry negative connotations about stepping on an image of a sandwich.

But even following these rules can't empower POP beyond its initial job: to tell a story. Even after nine months of faithfully changing out his table merchandisers, Dahlander still talks to guests who haven't a clue about his corn-based carry-out packaging.

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“There are a lot of factors with any restaurant. If you don’t have great food and great service, then all the in-store marketing in the world is not going to make a difference,” he said.