

Refurb, revive, survive

What effect can a refurbishment have on a restaurant business? These days, it's not a matter of revising the business but surviving in an increasingly competitive industry.

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I believe that before embarking on any re-design you must make sure that your food and service offer is of a good standard. No amount of elaborate ambience will compensate for inadequacies in your kitchen.

A newly refurbished restaurant offering lousy food and service will quickly go broke. It is like false advertising – promising one thing but delivering another. Customers will initially flock in, driven by curiosity and the desire to check the new place out because most of them equate a good looking dining room with a pleasurable dining experience. They are likely to leave disappointed, never to come back. The proprietor would have been better off retaining the old decor – at least it didn't raise any false expectations.

However, today's restaurant scene is so competitive that more and more often your food and service alone are not enough. This is where the design can help. In order for it to work successfully,

the design must complement the strengths of your food and service offer.

One of our recent projects - Ummarin Thai restaurant in Sydney's Randwick is a good test case that illustrates the points discussed above. The restaurant was one of the first to open in a busy location near cinemas some 10 years ago. They have always been known for their excellent food and service, but never had to pay much attention to the presentation and branding of their business. Their strength was traditional, home style cooking. The trouble was, as more and more competitive food offers were being introduced into the area, Ummarin's sales kept on dropping.

After the client approached as to re-design the space, we had many discussions about their business. A look at the nearby competitive establishments (there are six other Thai restaurants in the same block) revealed that too many of them had the same purple walls,

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concrete floors and wooden benches. This may well be a current fashion fad, but we believed that this look was too overdone and also that it would do nothing to support our client's strengths.

It was clear that the new Ummarin ambience must be based firmly on Thai food, culture and traditions. At the same time, we wanted to create a modern, vibrant space to reflect contemporary Australia, as opposed to blindly transporting a bit of Thailand into suburban Randwick.

The result is a design that combines the warmth of traditional Thai colours – gold, white and rich brown – with modern shapes,

lighting and surfaces. Ancient artefacts look very much at home placed in contemporary light and dark veneer niches. We designed a patchwork tapestry for the back wall by combining today's graphical style and richly textured Thai style fabrics. We also addressed other critical elements of the environment – a new striking logo, outside signage, business cards and menus.

Was the re-design exercise 'worth the trouble'? You bet it was!

After our strategic re-design programme, this old, tired and uninviting restaurant was transformed into an exciting, sparkling, warm and friendly space. The location remains the same, the size remains the same, the menu selection remains the same, the owners are the same and even the kitchen staff hasn't changed. The only difference is the new design. The result? A consistent 70% increase in their sales! A thoughtful design, combined with a good food and service offer can be a very powerful tool indeed!

