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Design it Right Part Two

Remodeling: Is your café in need of a makeover?
by Dawn Weinberger

After a couple of years in business, a busy coffeehouse looks lived in. By the time two or three more years pass, the age starts to show—a chipped tile here, a carpet stain there, dull paint everywhere. If the process continues, that once bright-and-shiny café starts to look downright shabby. This leaves you with two choices: leave it as is (and risk yielding business to the newer, cleaner place around the corner), or do some sprucing up.



"In general, [I suggest to] refresh no later than between three and five years," says Bruce Goff of Domus Design, a San Francisco-based interior design firm that has worked with coffeehouse owners on remodeling and updating. "If they are doing the kind of business that they should be doing, things wear out." Fortunately, "refresh" doesn't necessarily mean ripping out walls or reconfiguring the plumbing and electrical. While full-scale remodels are sometimes needed, in most cases a few key updates, like lighting, technology, wall color and upholstery, can make a world of difference.

"A lot of [coffee shops] probably aren't out of date as far as physical equipment," says Donna Guerra, an interior designer in Dallas. "[The problems] are more likely in lighting, mood and customer service." Guerra suggests using warm tones on the walls and floors. Furniture should be stable (no wobbly chairs!) with upholstery that at least looks unscathed. For lighting, choose halogen over ultra-bright fluorescents, and go for fixtures that fit the rest of the store's décor; from art deco to ultra-traditional, there are plenty of styles to choose from. And when it comes to materials, go for the best your budget allows. Higher-quality items will probably last longer.

Other updates might include free wireless Internet access, fireplaces and outdoor seating. Also, keep in mind that bare windows encourage would-be customers to drop in and check the place out, so don't budget for blinds. Most importantly, "Be sure the store reflects the personality of the owner and culture of the clientele," says Goff. Showcase favorite local artists on walls, or choose a theme based on the regions of the world where the shop's coffee comes from.

Linda Blaney and her husband, Bob Hines, took much of this to heart two years ago when they gave their downtown San Francisco coffeehouse, Chatz, a makeover. (The couple has since sold their retail locations to focus on the roasting and wholesale arm of their business.) Chatz was looking tired, and customers were starting to notice, Blaney says, so she enlisted

by Phil Busse

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Goff to help her come up with a plan. Walls were changed from mustard yellow to a muted green-and-red combo to match the reddish concrete floors, which were left as is. Chairs were reupholstered with an industrial-strength, spill-and-stain-resistant fabric, and the stainless steel countertops received a new granite surface. She also added new awnings and signage outside.

The verdict? Customers loved the results. "They thought it looked clean, and they liked the color combination," says Blaney. "And that is what they verbalized to us; what they didn't verbalize is when they came in and looked at it, they had big smiles on their faces."

Because the ultimate goal is to keep customers smiling, some experts recommend turning your design makeover into a mini marketing campaign. "It's an opportunity to re-introduce your business to the community," says Chris Lamb, roastmaster and program manager for Crimson Cup, an industry-consulting firm in Columbus, Ohio. "It can also work for coffeehouses that have never quite caught on. It can breathe life into a struggling business."

Lamb gave that advice to client Dave Forman, who along with his business partner and father, Mark Forman, purchased the struggling and aesthetically outdated River Road Coffeehouse in Granville, Ohio, a Columbus suburb, three years ago. Located in a 1,500-square-foot, mid-1800s Victorian farmhouse, River Road had a lot of natural charm, but it lacked the cleanliness and functionality that Forman (who worked for the previous owner prior to his purchase) desired.

Forman went for a home-y vibe throughout the building, starting with burgundy- and espresso-colored walls. He added cherry-wood tables and plenty of new chairs and couches. The original hardwood floors were left alone, as were the walls separating the rooms of the house. In the store's service area, a more modern look was conceived, with laminate countertops and new, custom-built cabinets. A new point-of-sale system was added, as well as free Wi-Fi throughout. "The difference was astounding," says Forman. "We saw a high increase [in traffic] right when we opened. ... And after we opened, it kept growing and growing."

While the idea of an update might sound nice, busy coffeehouse owners are likely wondering when—and how—they'll find time in their schedule to unplug the espresso machine and open a can of paint. Some, like Blaney, decided to work on the project after business hours. She even had the help of some employees who liked to paint and wanted some extra dough. Others, like Forman—whose update was more extensive—simply shut down for a spell.

Either way, Lamb says, be sure to consider the needs of the customer when making this decision. "You don't want to affect your regular customer's routine. Every day you are closed is a day without sales."

Another obvious concern: the budget. Without careful planning, costs can rise quickly, especially when contractors and other experts are hired to perform the labor. According to Guerra, budget estimates are usually based on a price-per-square-foot basis. And depending on the materials you select and the region of the country in which you are based, contractors run \$80 to \$100 per square foot for labor and materials.

Going the DIY route can reduce costs, but it often requires long hours.

Forman did the project himself and spent about \$180 per square foot (\$27,000 for his 1,500-square-foot space). This is well above average, even when hiring contractors, but some of the cost was in consulting services. And given the extent of the remodel and the high-quality materials Forman used, this might have been less than he would have paid contractors.

Forman worked 18-hour days for three straight weeks on River Road, but the cost (in money and time) has paid off in terms of business growth. "Any money you spend on your business should be justified by a return on the investment," Lamb explains, adding that payback on investment in a remodel should be achieved within 24 months.

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