



A QUESTION OF identity

Must corporate branding reign supreme,
or should branch facilities make
room for self-expression?

BY EILEEN WATKINS

a corporation relies on imaginative “branding” elements to stand out from the crowd, appeal to its customers, and foster loyalty and enthusiasm among its employees.

However, if the corporation exerts too much design control, inhabitants may feel stifled. Especially in the modern drive to create a “feel-good, work-hard” environment, companies must distinguish brand assertively without making employees and customers feel like just another number.

In working with its hospitality clients, the Engstrom Design Group (EDG) of San Rafael, Calif., takes a two-pronged approach. “For mid-range dining, it’s not financially feasible to go off brand very much unless an entire new identity is being crafted,” says President Eric Engstrom, IIDA.

But finances aren’t always the overriding factor. Vacationers travel to break out of routines and experience new things. So when attracting diners to the same restaurant in different cities, establishments have to remain grounded and “familiar” while offering a little something different.

EDG has created restaurants for Nordstrom and Wolfgang Puck Express around the country that feature virtually the same graphics, signage and color scheme. However, the higher-end restaurants for Wolfgang Puck vary quite a bit from city to city. “I think it’s important in high-end dining to have the restaurant reflect its location,” Engstrom says. “We hear

this from the customers. If they’re on vacation in Hawaii, they don’t want it to look just like New York.”

While the San Francisco version of Postrio features a ribbon motif and modern art by the likes of Rauschenberg and Rosenquist, the new Las Vegas incarnation differs substantially. Located in the Venetian Hotel, it combines influences from Venice and San Francisco. “There are architectural elements reminiscent of the post-Gold Rush era in the wood trim, heavy draperies, decorative glass and light fixtures,” Engstrom says. “The menu also emphasizes creative seafood dishes.”

Spago in Beverly Hills, Calif., Puck’s flagship restaurant designed by Wolfgang Puck Fine Dining Partner Barbara Lazaroff, features Italian marble, vivid art glass and an olive garden. But for Spago Maui, located at the Four Seasons Resort, EDG dove deeply into a Pacific island theme, adorning the walls with pictures of sea anemone and fish. “It uses the same logo as in L.A., but the restaurant in Maui has a trans-Pacific, Asian feeling,” Engstrom says.

SUBTLE ADAPTATIONS

Companies outside the hospitality arena also need to juggle familiarity with flexibility out in the field, according to Eileen Jones, Principal, Perkins & Will at the Chicago-based Eva Maddox Branded Environments, which

has designed branch facilities for major health institutes and corporate showrooms in 60 locations.

“You need some consistency so people will recognize you – in the logo, colors, patterns and overall design associated with the company,” Jones says. “Also, your customers should have a similar experience in terms of the environment and the people they encounter.”

Beyond that, Jones says, a branch or showroom can adapt to its surroundings. “For instance, the branch may need to coordinate with another group, a co-brand situation, as often happens in healthcare. Sometimes the workplace may require another kind of teaming arrangement, a work style a little different from headquarters.”

More important than colors and designs, Jones says, is how outsiders

MULTIMEDIA assault

New technology can reinforce brand identity and excite the imagination, but designer beware: Overly trendy gadgets may alienate customers.

Television is a familiar technology that has insinuated its way seamlessly into hospitality environs. Designers are using the medium as new, interesting conversation starters. Eric Engstrom hopes to incorporate digital artworks, such as those in the Redwood Room of San Francisco’s Clift Hotel, into future designs. “There’s a series of Art Nouveau posters that slowly transition to more contemporary art,” he says. “You don’t really notice they’re changing unless you take your eye off one for a few minutes.”

Dian Duvall has admired similar light boxes that adapt over time, changing the color and mood of a space. “We have to move from static to dynamic materials in corporate environments,” she says. “That way, the communications stay fresh. They don’t become tired and tedious to either your employees or your clients.”

She also likes technology that provides real-time information as a visitor enters a reception area: “It sends the message that your company is willing to experiment, using new ideas and materials.”

Eva Maddox Associates plans to use HoloPro, a new, lightweight, transparent projection surface embedded with a holographic film, at a university with an active sports program. “The screen will be used in the university’s new athletic/academic facility, to connect the university and sports brand with real-time athletic activities,” Jones says.

Palm technology that allows a visitor to download information on a specific service or project also has captured Jones’ imagination. “It’s better than just taking home a brochure, and it impacts the customer’s experience of your company,” she says.

But too much hi-tech can be off-putting. Engstrom noticed that when restaurant waiters experimented with punching in orders on hand-held keyboards, customers reacted negatively. “They wanted to see the waiter write it by hand,” he says, adding that the higher the restaurant’s prices, the more this was the case.

“Just because some technology exists doesn’t mean it should be used,” says Andy Glidden, Creative Director of Glidden Design Ltd. in Edinburgh, U.K. “It is a serious mistake to allow fashion to lead certain projects and for the current trendy look to be applied blindly. Too many environments are created to satisfy a consultant rather than the client and invariably are ripped out at great expense when they do not perform as required. Good design is taking a problem, understanding the key issues, and making it better for the client, the business or the public.”





Omega Bank's theme of "celebration" is portrayed subtly and overtly throughout the design.

experience the company when they first pass through its doors. "How are you greeted – by a person behind a desk or someone coming out to shake your hand? As a special guest, or someone just passing through?" Any printed information on display also should convey the corporation's values. "Is there a story being told that makes you feel part of the company, or makes you want to do business with them? Is there consistency from built environment to print material to Web site to advertising?" she says. "How are the employees engaged every day, and how do they display the attributes of the work they do?"

KINETIC SENSIBILITY

Andy Glidden, Creative Director of Glidden Design Ltd. in Edinburgh, U.K., agrees that branding goes beyond static choices toward active designs that color consumers' experiences and reflect how occupants will live within the space. "Brand identity is expressed in many ways. In the location and appearance of buildings, the external signage and wayfinding, the landscaping and art forms of the exterior environment – even the tone of voice and language used by the receptionist. These all create impressions in the mind of the consumer, clients and staff."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JON O'BRIEN

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— Andy Glidden, Creative Director, Glidden Design Ltd., Edinburgh, U.K.

Glidden recently created the corporate identity, graphics and interiors for Omega Bank in Greece, a new retail, corporate and private-bank network. "We devised the theme of 'celebration,' inspired by a lower-case omega symbol that looked like a figure with its hands raised in jubilation," Glidden says. "This theme was applied to the corporate signature and extended via a series of photographs showing people with their hands raised, including sports people, business people and babies," Glidden says. "The photos were used in branches on large, graphic panels and window displays, on product literature and annual report and also in live-action form on TV commercials."

"The general idea was, 'Join Omega Bank and you'll want to jump with joy!' We made it clear the bank had to deliver against this promise across all of its operations, since customers would have their expectations raised."

He says that if branch individuality is expected to be an important factor, he plans for it early in the design process. "Areas within the

branch that are interchangeable would be the printed graphics, a color change or the addition of certain physical elements. These things are not design-led. They are strategic business and organizational decisions, which are then expressed through design."

WILL IT TRAVEL?

Regional branch requirements can be influenced by the role of a branch facility – which, although smaller than the home office, may serve as a headquarters for an entire country – as well as by the type of people it employs and the type of customers it serves.

Gensler's design for the headquarters of Allsteel, a contract office furniture manufacturer in Muscatine, Iowa, combines the sleek lines of the company's furniture with a friendly, Midwestern atmosphere. "We looked at their values and culture and aimed for a sense of warmth and informality," says Dian Duvall, Principal for Brand Strategy and Design with Gensler, San Francisco.


A visitor entering the 70,000-square-foot Allsteel headquarters

passes first through a “community room,” a big, glass box with a working fireplace. This experience is replicated in smaller Allsteel facilities in Dallas, Los Angeles, Chicago and Washington with some adaptations. The interior of the Los Angeles facility follows a cool, blue-toned, modern scheme, while the Washington site features leather, damask, mahogany and marble, designed with government clients in mind. The Dallas office and showroom respond to

occupy a historic building looking out on the Bay Bridge. Inside, the cement columns and original brick have been exposed to emphasize their urban grit. It’s not just a question of adapting elements of culture, but more a drive to capture a citizen’s way of thinking. With branches across Europe and Asia, Gensler knows that what plays in California may not work in Japan or Europe.

“In the global marketplace, companies are learning to tailor their local offices to various regions,” Duvall says. “For example, you have to acknowledge the formality of certain cities, such as London or Tokyo.

“In northern Europe – countries such as Belgium and Germany – design is driven by environmental control and comfort. Companies are legally required to provide all staff access to natural light and ventilation. ‘Dilbert’-type cubicles are an alien concept in the United Kingdom, and greater emphasis is placed on staff amenities and balancing work and life.” Duvall says that British companies also promote more face-to-face contact with clients than U.S. firms.

“Once you’ve established a corporate standard, it becomes expensive to go outside the box,” Engstrom says. “But if someone working in the San Francisco office is transferred to Chicago, he doesn’t want the workplace to look exactly the same. Different regions have different climates and histories, and you have to adapt.” 

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their site with elongated “Texas dog-run” architecture and rustic materials such as recycled barn wood used in sophisticated ways.

Each locale displays the Allsteel logo out front in freestanding letters, but the materials change according to the site. The L.A. sign is Lucite, the D.C. version has a copper-penny finish, and the Dallas logo is cut from raw steel.

Duvall pointed out that Gensler’s own branch offices have great autonomy. The San Francisco headquarters

