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Rethinking Redesigns

To position themselves for success in a new business climate, chains are launching prototypes that deliver more than cosmetic changes.

By Allison Perlik, Senior Editor – Restaurants and Institutions, 7/1/2009

Every year, a new crop of restaurant chains rolls out prototypes boasting more-stylish and contemporary designs. But looks aren't everything, especially in a particularly challenging business environment. These days, companies have broader goals in mind when it comes to makeovers.

Some operators are launching prototypes that offer lower construction costs and shorter build times to help get units up and operating more quickly. Others are creating new designs to help them achieve concept-specific goals, such as expanding retail sales, updating the brand's image or better positioning franchisees for success. And whether the companies are **Top 400** brands or emerging chains that already have lessons of their own to share, the overall objective is a shared one: "The main goal is to maximize sales per square foot," says Randy Murphy, president and CEO of Austin, Texas-based fast-casual chain Mama Fu's Asian House.

Here is a look at some of the new prototypes across dining segments and the reasoning behind the renovations.

Culver's Frozen Custard & ButterBurgers, Prairie du Sac, Wis.

Locations: 400

New-prototype stores open: 21

Main goal: "We needed a simpler, more efficient, less expensive building," says Tom Williams, Culver's director of design.

Square footage: now 3,954 vs. 4,538

Seats: 88-89 (slightly fewer than before)

Cost comparison: about \$100,000 less than previous model

Biggest cost-savers: The signature blue-steel roofs were eliminated, and the building framing was simplified to reduce roof and attic space and eliminate overhangs. The smaller footprint allows for the removal of costly steel structural supports and lowers real-estate costs.

Key design elements: Culver's shifted from an open, cafeteria-style floor plan to more-intimate dining spaces divided by half-walls and higher-backed booths. A warmer palette of tans, soft blues and maple wood veneers replaced the former bright blues, whites and oak wood tones.

Other significant changes: Previously, most tables were four-tops. To improve seating efficiency, the new design calls for about half of the tables to be two-tops, reducing seat count but keeping the number of tables the same.

Barnie's Coffee & Tea, Orlando

Locations: 30 U.S., 20 international

New-prototype stores open: 2

Main goal: President and CEO Phil Jones wanted to emphasize the concept's extensive retail component, which he feels distinguishes Barnie's from competitors such as Seattle-based Starbucks; Canton, Mass.-based Dunkin' Donuts; and Oak Brook, Ill.-based McDonald's. At Barnie's, purchases of whole-bean coffees by the pound, loose-leaf teas by the ounce, packaged coffees and teas, and brewing and drinking accessories and appliances account for close to 50% of sales.

Square footage: now 1,200-1,500 for shopping-center spaces and 1,400-2,000 for freestanding units vs. 800-1,200

Seats: 12-24 (no change)

Cost comparison: no change

Notable new equipment: Walk-in coolers and freezers were replaced with double-door units to save space. Products that need to be refrigerated now are delivered more often and in smaller quantities.

Key design elements: Photos of coffee blossoms and of bean harvesting and drying decorate the space; on one wall, an acrylic world map with photos behind it tells the story of coffee from seed to cup.

Other significant changes: New-prototype stores have more than double the display space, with eight 4-by-8-foot shelved units instead of three for showcasing retail products.



Culver's warmer, more-contemporary space (above) also saves a cool \$100,000 in costs compared with the old design (below).



J. Christopher's, Atlanta

Locations: 22

New-prototype stores open: 1

Main goal: Significant changes hadn't been made since the full-service breakfast-and-lunch concept made its debut in 1996, says CEO Dick Holbrook. He and President Sam Haddock wanted to refresh the concept in preparation for franchising, which began last August.

Square footage: 3,500 (no change)

Seats: 100-130 (enclosed, heated patios offer room for about 30 seats where available)

Cost comparison: between \$500,000-\$600,000, about \$50,000 more than before

J. Christopher's next-generation stores feature energy-saving induction cooktops.

Key design elements: The brighter palette includes yellow, orange, blue and green. Dining areas are sectioned off into more-private spaces and include carpeted areas in addition to tile floors. Booth seating is covered in fabric instead of vinyl, and wood chair seats now are covered (also in fabric). A laminated wood wall separates the coffee bar from the main service aisle.

Notable new equipment: Induction cooktops, which use 25% to 30% less electricity and produce less ambient heat, replaced gas-fired hot-top ranges. Upgraded griddles feature electronic thermostats that regulate temperatures within 4 degrees.

Other significant changes: The special-function room now is outfitted with sliding doors on two sides so the space can seamlessly become part of the dining room on weekends. Monday through Friday, it's offered free to large groups for breakfast or lunch meetings.

Manchu Wok, Toronto

Locations: 170+

New-prototype stores open: 12

Main goal: President and CEO Kelvin Chen and his team wanted to update the food-court concept's brand image and create a model that would be more successful for franchisees.

Square footage: 370-600 (no change)

Cost comparison: \$270,000-\$400,000, about 15% higher than previous costs

Notable new equipment: The steam table includes new display woks that call attention to items the chain wants to promote and display racks that better showcase and preserve the quality of premade items such as egg rolls.

Key design elements: Red-and-black wall panels branded with the company's name incorporate water features to create a "feel of zen in the hustle-bustle of the food court," Chen says. The front counters are faced with woven bamboo.

Other significant changes: A larger, easier-to-read menu board promotes faster ordering and allots the most space to top-selling items and more-healthy choices.

Church's Chicken, Atlanta

New-prototype stores open: 1

Main goal: The quick-service chain wanted to develop a factory-built modular building that cut development costs, reduced construction time and simplified the opening process for new franchisees, says Doug Pendergast, executive vice president and chief franchise officer.

Square footage: 1,750 (no change)

Seats: 26-28 (no change)

Cost comparison: now \$450,000 vs. \$680,000

Biggest cost-savers: Besides significantly reducing building and equipment costs, the modular design also gets better financing rates (the banks' view: if they must repossess the property, they can easily move it somewhere else, Pendergast says). Insurance rates also are 15% to 20% lower because the building materials are mostly steel rather than wood. In addition, because the building is movable, its value can be depreciated like equipment, which can mean significant tax savings.

Key design elements: Stained concrete flooring in the front and back of the house costs less than tile and is easier to maintain.

Other significant changes: The building arrives on site complete with all fixtures, equipment, wiring and plumbing (connections need to be set up), so stores are ready to open about 10 days after delivery.

Locations: 1,250 U.S.; about 450 international



New menu boards promote signature items and encourage faster ordering at food-court chain Manchu Wok (above). Older design (below).



Mama Fu's Asian House, Austin, Texas

Locations: 12

New-prototype stores open: 1

Main goal: Cost reduction, a shorter construction timeline and the creation of a design that would better reflect the brand were the top priorities for President and CEO Randy Murphy, whose Murphy Adams Restaurant Group purchased the fast-casual-by-day, full-service-by-night chain last year.

Square feet: 2,800-3,200 (no change)

Seats: 98, up from 84-90

Cost comparison: now about \$600,000 vs. \$730,000

Biggest cost-savers: Replacing custom casework with prebuilt units, achieving a faux finish on the walls with wallpaper and

using faux wood for tables and wainscoting.

Key design elements: The space is divided into two visual planes, with the section above eye level decorated in vibrant colors such as orange, blue and green and the area below in warm browns and woods with splashes of orange. Higher-backed, Asian-inspired booths and sheer panels help separate dining spaces to create privacy.

Other significant changes: The old 8-by-4 menu-board panels were replaced with 30-inch-by-30-inch squares that are less expensive to make and ship and that accommodate menu changes easily via the swapping out of plastic-coated papers in the cases.

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