

Lighting, color-scheme, cabinetry, tile work, and food displays at Virginia Tech's D2 dining facility set the modern, on-the-cutting-edge mood and tone.

LA PÂTISSERIE



Photo courtesy of Lee McKee

101 MERCHANDISING

By: Donna Boss

Creating the “look” and “feel” of an operation is both a science and an art. How you make a dining hall or retail restaurant come alive is a life-long study requiring research, methodology, intuition, and creativity. Reviewing the basics helps to spark new ideas and inspiration. Let the adventure begin...

No matter how many dining operations you've opened or how long you've been in the foodservice business, the time is always right to enter into the magical and potentially adventurous world of merchandising. It's through this facet of marketing that a dining space can be turned into an exciting, remarkable playground where customers' senses can be taken to new heights and their expectations exceeded. If done well, merchandising can win customer loyalty and satisfaction, as well as create a lucrative bottom line.

In his book, *Purple Cow: Transform Your Business by Being Remarkable*, Seth Godin puts the challenge simply: “Something remarkable is worth talking about. Worth noticing. Exceptional. New. Interesting. It's a Purple Cow. Boring stuff is invisible. It's a brown cow.”

As magical as the process of merchandising may be, creating sensory excitement and memorable experiences isn't out of reach. In fact, by following basic principles and heed-

ing the advice of successful colleagues, transformation of a dining space isn't just possible—it's nearly guaranteed.

“We know that much of our success in the new, \$6.5 million Dietrick 2 (D2) all-you-care-to-eat (AYCTE) dining hall is all about merchandising,” says Kimberle Badinelli, associate director of student programs for public relations and information technology at Virginia Tech. “We want dining centers to be as inviting as any restaurant. Merchandising is all about making the vision come alive.”

Because merchandising falls within the overall umbrella of marketing, the basic principles of marketing should be addressed before the merchandising process begins in order to bring a sense of focus to the merchandising approach. As veteran marketing executive Lisa Larsen Hill, senior vice president of marketing and creative services, Sodexo USA, reminds us, “The basic principles of marketing are the five Ps: product, placement, price, promotion, and packaging. By applying these principles to your operation, you will bring value to your business.”

What Message to Convey— What Products to Offer

Before deciding on merchandising, several decisions must be answered in strategic planning meetings. Selecting merchandising items before determining what you are trying to communicate about an operation, who you are appealing to, what products are appropriate, and what style of service will be offered is like putting the cart before the horse. It is also important to determine from the onset what level of “value” pricing is appropriate to customers and the operation.

Once the overall strategic decisions have been made, the merchandising adventure can begin. Seasoned operators interviewed for this article offered the following advice, which is based on many years of career experience. As you can see in the photographs, the application of their advice has resulted in remarkable success.

A–Z Planning

“You must have a plan before you begin to merchandise,” says Paul Bahan, regional marketing director for Sodexho Campus Services at the University of Vermont. “You need to maximize your real estate by having the right products in the right place. Well-planned displays and store layout not only benefit customers, but they also drive sales.” The most recent marketing venture for Bahan is Smart Market, a grab-and-go store developed by Sodexho Campus Services, which he describes as a comprehensive, convenient meal solution program for students in a hurry. It features a menu of grab-and-go sandwiches, salads, desserts, and microwaveable meals.

“Everything is made in-house and prepared fresh daily,” explains Paul Bahan. “The message of Smart Market is simple—fresh food fast. All merchandising is intentionally selected to convey that message.” A colorful, retail look is created by a primary color logo on a black background with a simple and direct message: SMART MARKET/Fresh*Food*Fast. Product labels are brightly colored discs: vibrant green for salads, sunshine yellow for sandwiches, and blue for desserts. A red band is wrapped around microwave meals. Printing is black so information “pops” off the colored field and is easy to read. The program collateral is all integrated and easily recognizable.

This approach results in a healthy return on investment because it not only generates customer approval, but it earns popularity among managers and employees in unit production. “It looks great, but at the same time the product specs, recipes, build charts, consistent packaging, and labeling allow for cost control,” Bahan says.

At the University of Colorado, Janice Torkildsen, manager of the Village Market C-store and Piazanos Grab and Go, also made sure all facets of merchandising were coordinated to create Piazanos, a grab-and-go market available to students on meal plans and pay-as-you-go customers. A Tuscan theme is carried through in the colors, fresh foods, props, signage, and uniforms. The message of environmental friendliness is found in some of the products themselves and in the biodegradable bags, which are used at all grab-and-go units and C-stores.

At Boston College, a chocolate theme is carried out in every nook and cranny of the Chocolate Bar. “The appeal of a cozy atmosphere to meet and study combined with a limited but unique menu was exactly what the students had



Photo courtesy of Boston College

Merchandising is enhanced at Boston College's Chocolate Bar with sophisticated window design that invites customers to look inside to the cozy atmosphere and sample the many treats.

been asking for,” says Helen Wechsler, director of dining services. Driven by what Wechsler says is “the almost universal appeal of chocolate” and the demand for small and distinctive dining spaces on campus, she and her team found a location to develop the concept and apply their sophisticated marketing know-how. The bright, comfortable space also serves as a place to meet, a venue for small performances, and a restaurant concept that features food and drinks unique to the campus.

Follow-Through and Consistency

Developing a plan was also a top priority at Virginia Tech's D2. Intended to be different than another recently renovated dining hall, D2 was designed with a modern ambience. “I love modern and abstract art, so I was very interested in bringing something new to this dining space,” notes Brian Grove, training and project coordinator for housing and dining services at Virginia Tech, whose architecture and art history background has contributed to both his enthusiasm and ability to turn concepts into reality. “Brian is the one who makes the vision come alive here,” explains Badinelli.

Grove spent countless hours researching appropriate materials. “I knew this would require merchandising with modern art,” he recalls. “This meant coordinating everything from the serviceware and chef's ware to the graphics and props. The biggest mistake people make is starting and then, partway through, losing their courage to complete what they started out to do.” The result is either blurring the image of the facility by bringing in inappropriate merchandising or not finishing the job completely. Grove admits that the Internet has helped him to source and price products much more quickly and thoroughly.

“When we display a singular entrée from a station with multiple choices, we find the plate displays will directly affect sales at a station. The items on display will always sell better that day, even if they are a daily offering.”

One Chance to Make a First Impression

The mood can be set long before a customer actually steps foot in a facility. Entranceways and windows offer prime space for signage, retail-style merchandising, food displays, and other intriguing objects. The presentation can compel customers who have never been inside to come in. Or, it can alert customers to new merchandise and give them a reason to return. In essence, this is often where products are previewed.

Outside Virginia Tech’s D2, a commissioned sculpture tells customers to expect not only a modern ambiance when they walk into the dining facility, but also one that will surprise and be unquestionably out of the ordinary. Titled *I missed dinner with Picasso*, the sculpture is a table-like form with abstract lips and surfaces that mesh in a space all its own. “Customers say, ‘Wow! If they have cool artwork, they must have cool things inside,’” says Grove. Customers aren’t disappointed. When they enter D2 they see multiple stations, each of which is themed and merchandised with its own color palette, props, signage, and equipment to look and feel authentic and unique.

Customers at University of Colorado are also dazzled when they see the signage on the entrance to Piazanos. “They definitely know that what’s coming is pizza, fresh veggies, and all their favorite foods served fresh and quick,” says Torkildsen. Another attraction is the sound of Italian music inside, where Chef Billy Kardys and Chef Paul Houle

entertain students with their singing and dancing. Another attraction: the scent of fresh garlic in the lobby.

Another effective tool is a display cart placed at an entrance to a dining facility, particularly if the unit is in a high-traffic area. At University of Wisconsin–Stout, a display station is placed at the entrance of each of the cafeteria locations, the food court, and the quick casual restaurant. At each display station, customers can “see” at a glance as they pass by what’s for lunch and know at which station to get the displayed item by indicator cards positioned near each display plate. “Customer lines form quicker and thus enhance service speed,” says Ann Thies, director of dining service. “Customers know what they want when they get to the service point, which also speeds service.”

Thies reports that the use of display plates positively affects sales. “When we display a singular entrée from a station with multiple choices, we find the plate displays will directly affect sales at a station. The items on display will always sell better that day, even if they are a daily offering.”

One display cart is positioned at their Terrace Café in a high-traffic area within the student center. “I need to change the decor frequently to keep our customers interested,” says Kristi Kirby, service manager, Memorial Student Center. “This can bring an added expense, but it is worth it. People passing by stop and take a good look at the food displayed.” Kirby notes that special lighting calls attention to the cart, as well as surrounding seasonal décor. Great care must be taken so food doesn’t sit more than two hours. “If we let it sit too long, we defeat our purpose of merchandising,” Kirby says.

At Boston College’s Chocolate Bar, windows are decorated with packaged products, including the now famous Chocolate Bar Chunk Cookie that, since its introduction, has shown up on catering requests, in magazine and newspaper articles, and in requests from an alumna who wanted the cookie recipe in exchange for her secret cheesecake formula. The window’s merchandise is arranged to tell customers that the bar offers retail gifts and also offers a peek into the intimate coffee bar environment, where customers can take a break while sipping chocolate or an iced caramel latte, or eating a chocolate Belgian waffle or an individual fruit tart with seasonal berries (yes, some items don’t have chocolate).

The zone between the outside and the inside of a new grill/C-store unit—a place in the retail trade known as the “decompression zone”—is where Director of Dining Services David Davidson and his staff at Phillips Exeter Academy have placed a new bakery case. Staff and students peruse the daily offerings, taking a moment to admire the creations of the in-house bake shop. “They’ll stop to just look or buy one of the items on display,” says Davidson. “They also then have a moment to decide if they want to come into the grill.”

Moment of Truth

Whether or not customers have received messages from the outside merchandising, the entrance offers myriad possibilities to convince them they’ve made a good decision by walking in the door. Kim LaPeau, marketing coordinator at



Spotlighting attracts attention to a colorful, eye-catching display cart placed in the high-traffic entrance to the University of Wisconsin–Stout’s Terrace Café.

Photo courtesy of Kristi Kirby, University of Wisconsin–Stout Dining Service

the University of California–Berkeley, recognizes the significance of this entry moment. “We have a very short time to get our message across,” she says. “At a recent meeting, consultant Ken Wasco said that customers now make decisions about your operation in seven seconds. In the past, he said, they’d take at least two minutes to make up their minds. In that short time, we must get customers’ attention with everything from eye-catching signage and hanging objects to bright colors and sound. We want to engage all the senses. At campus retail units, particularly where space is minimal, staff is challenged to keep customers’ attention while they make their way to the product offerings.”

Let Signage, Graphics, and Brochures Be Your Voice

Customers’ attention and eventually where they move within the facility can be directed visually with strategically placed signage, graphics, and brochures. Selecting the right signage is imperative, which is why literally hundreds of books and articles have been written about the use of fonts, colors, size, and shape to achieve maximum message effectiveness. “Basically, signage must be clear, be easy to read,

and give information customers need to make decisions. It also should be designed to help the speed of service,” says Larsen Hill.

Signage and flyers, Larsen Hill adds, also provide a means to convey priorities such as “healthy,” “convenient,” “value,” “organic,” “shade-grown,” “local produce,” and other health-related information such as allergen information.

At Virginia Tech’s D2, Grove and his team offer direction to customers unfamiliar with how to navigate their way through the large space in “road maps,” which they can pick up at cashiers’ stations on the way into the marketplace. Since the stations are color-coded and have distinct overhead signage, customers can easily find what they’re looking for.

Placing signs is tricky business, especially when the customers are students. “We have to be creative about sign placement, because students don’t often see overhead signage or other signs unless they are very large and positioned just right,” says LaPean. “We place signage where the products are, or where students can see them while waiting in line.”

Greg Hopkins, director of auxiliary services and dining services at Connecticut College, agrees with LaPean. “Over the years, I have come to believe menu boards, signs, or



Every square inch of the University of Colorado’s new grab-n-go unit, Piazanos, is an opportunity for merchandising a Tuscan theme, complete with natural/organic foods, sunflowers, and a warm, intriguing atmosphere.

Photo courtesy of the University of Colorado Dining Services



Photo courtesy of Sodexo Campus Services at the University of Vermont

Fresh food, vibrant signage, color-coordinated product labels, and easy-access display units send a simple and direct message at Sodexo Dining Services' Smart Market, a grab-and-go location at the University of Vermont.

promotions placed overhead go largely unnoticed by repeat customers. Generally, only first-time patrons look at the overhead objects long enough to read them. This is especially true (and probably true for signs at any level) if the signage does not change frequently. You know the old advertising saw: 'If it ain't alive, it's dead.' I like to hand a menu to the customer, even in a food court, and let that person stand there and hold the living thing while making a selection."

At Connecticut College, signage is used to generate interest in a newly created image for the AYCTE deli station that features a new line-up of sandwiches and wraps. Working with a meat product manufacturer, Hopkins and his staff developed recipes, as well as signage and a logo with a wheat mill to help customers identify ingredients in the product offerings, which are named after various residence houses.

At the University of Colorado, slate boards and other signs with colorful, hand-written chalk lettering contribute to the overall ambiance and are designed to inform customers about the menu offerings as well as educate them about the Piazanos philosophy. Signs are also used to promote specific manufacturers' natural products and other products that fit in with the healthy, environmentally friendly theme.

Use Equipment for Display

At the heart of foodservice is product presentation. "We constantly ask ourselves, 'How are we serving the food?'" says LaPean. "Can customers see staff cooking? Can we bring the cooking out front so students feel the food preparation is just for them?"

When food preparation and cooking are brought out front, every facet of that operation becomes part of the mer-

chandising, from the utensils used for stirring pots to the Mongolian grill that brings about the sizzle.

In the grab-and-go locations, Thies says that open-air display merchandisers are much better for showing off salads and sandwiches than traditional door-style coolers. "Products placed in these cases sell better and sell first," she says. "Packaging that enhances the product and lets the customers see exactly what they will get has improved sales. We know that higher-cost packaging that is convenient and good-looking will be worth the extra cost, as sales will go up when products are put in them."

An open-air display case for 25 different varieties of bottled beverages and fresh fruit also catches customers' attention at Phillips Exeter Academy's new grill/C-store. "It is easy to access and adds vibrant color to one part of the unit," says Davidson.

Setting up beverage stations where customers can see equipment for making fresh-brewed coffee, tea, and other beverages is yet another way to convey value and generate interest. Davidson displays cans of tea, which he says generates interest in tea as well as take-home sales.

Areas near and around equipment also provide valuable merchandising opportunities. "We focus on end caps and registers," says LaPean.



Photo courtesy of Phillips Exeter Academy

At Phillips Exeter Academy's new grill/C-store, 25 different brands of high-tier beverages are displayed alongside of produce.

Stock Those Shelves

Keeping shelves neatly and fully stocked at all times is another essential component of merchandising and maintaining a desirable image, says LaPean. This approach to stocking shelves is a metaphor for approaching every facet of an operation and maintaining brand integrity. "Pay as much attention to detail as you do to the overall strategy and operations," she advises. "Everything in an operation must present a consistent, uniform level of quality."

Ultimately, merchandising is all about convincing customers that the food and service are of value. Paying attention to both the science and the art of merchandising will help convey the message that you intend. ■