

Out of the Box

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Finding success in designing for limited service is about being creative behind the scenes

To some designers, the term limited service seems truly fitting. In many cases, designing hotels in the segment is characterized by financial constraints, stringent brand standards and a reputation for being way behind the design curve. But some designers consider the segment a welcome challenge—like a puzzle—and find creative ways to construct an environment that is distinctive and welcoming.

“In this segment, there’s a lot of sameness going on, and not a whole lot of storytelling,” says Tracey Barker, principal for Back Lot Productions, a “marketecture” firm based in Atlanta. Barker and her business partner, Bart Mills, recently developed the new look for Super 8 Motels, which was unveiled in February at an owners meeting in Las Vegas. Barker and Mills weren’t scared off by the financial constraints or limited service’s traditional position as low man on the design totem pole. “[The idea that you can’t design a beautiful hotel for the limited-service segment] is a huge excuse that’s hurt the industry,” Barker says. “There’s a great deal of potential customers who wouldn’t even consider economy lodging because of the crunchy carpet and floral bedspread and wallpaper. Would you want to stay there or somewhere that’s fresh and fun?”



John Valletta, president of the Super 8 brand, says the goal in redesigning the hotel was to appeal to a younger guest while still maintaining its customer base. “In 2006, we set out to create a revolutionary room design. It would appeal to a younger guest to create a sustainable future for the brand. The second goal was to create product that had an equal appeal to our core customers. [Barker’s] theme worked so well for this: What’s old is new again. Things that are hip because they’re retro.”

The new design prototype for Super 8 is a colorful, retro-modern concept, designed to please the core customer—baby boomers—and attract Generation Next. “Super 8 has strong roadside history, but research was showing that it was perceived as being dated. We had to capitalize on its history,” Barker says. “That brought us to talking about road trips and the things you see along the way. We started looking at things we’ve seen along the way that have transcended generations.”

Although Valletta says the goal was to revolutionize the look of the brand, attracting franchisees was always a consideration. Barker and Mills had to stay within the existing cost per key in their new designs. In designing for limited service, selecting materials carefully and with some inventiveness is paramount, Barker says. “Limited budget restrictions don’t have to scare you,” Barker says. “The floor we used is a vinyl plank. It’s cheaper than a laminate wood floor would be, and it’s bullet proof—it lasts forever. Where you’d have to refresh a carpet pretty often, you won’t have to replace this vinyl plank for 15 years.”

Handy By-Products

Since Back Lot, the company behind the design for InterContinental Hotel Group’s Indigo concept, “couldn’t afford comforters or duvet covers at that price point, instead of using standard, awful quilt things [that you see in most economy hotels], we used a two-sided bed blanket that you turn down, which exposes the contrasting color and gives the impression of a comforter turned down,” Barker says. “It allows your pillows

to be touching just the sheets, not the bedspread, which is a consideration in the higher tiers, not typically in the economy segment.”

The creativity in sourcing and materials can open doors to investing in other guest amenities that have become increasingly important for limited-service guests. Kent Dahlen, senior director of Architecture & Development for Carlson Hotels Worldwide, says technology has become more important, which often means making trade-offs in other areas. “In the limited-service segment, there is more emphasis on technology and providing the technology services that Generation X and Generation Y like to see. That creates higher electrical costs, which we have to balance against something else we might have done in the building,” he says. “We have to figure out ‘How do we provide something our guests will value but still provide something the guests and franchisees will value?’”

“Sometimes we focus on the external building materials. There’s a material called thin brick—about half an inch thick—but it looks like real brick. There’s no way you could tell it’s not real brick if it’s detailed correctly.”

Exploring the Options

Although many limited-service brands want their franchisees to buy the package out of the box to ensure as much consistency from one hotel to another as possible, Barker and Mills created some options that would be better suited for urban hotels, as opposed to the roadside properties that are the majority among the Super 8 brand. This allows the designer to incorporate some regional concepts and a sense of place, which is unique for limited service, Valletta says.

Barker and Mills created a more urban look by simply tweaking the Super 8 prototype, so it would still be consistent with the rest of the brand. “We came up with this design that had a couple of different color waves. We just amped up the volume by using darker woods and a not-so-casual look in the soft goods,” Barker says. “It’s now a room that can be very soothing. The orange and pink scheme, that’s the energy scheme we put in there.”

Holiday Inn Express has a similar philosophy on giving designers, franchisees and owners the ability to customize for their particular market, says Verchele Wiggins, vice president of brand management for Holiday Inn Express, Americas. "We prefer for owners to use the Holiday Inn Express prototype, since it has been well received by the customers. However, owners can get creative on the interior and exterior of the hotel as they customize it to express the design tastes of their market," says Wiggins. "For example, if they need their hotel to blend in with an existing development or are building an urban market high-rise, they certainly have the flexibility they need. It is a case-by-case assessment based on the owner's needs."

And, ultimately, the owner's buy-in is crucial to the hotel's success. While the Super 8 prototype has tested very well among Generation Next and baby boomers (the two target demographics), it's the franchisees who were initially unsure about the new designs. Valletta says when the franchisees saw the prototype at the meeting in Las Vegas, some of them had questions.

But Barker says she wasn't surprised by that reaction. "The franchisees are not used to designing for the customer. They are reacting to it, but they are not the target. They are in the age group between Generation Next and the aging baby boomer," she explains. "We design for the customer. If the owner wants to survive and be relevant 10 years from now, they need to embrace what the customer is looking for."

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