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## A Boutique Feel

BRAND DEVELOPMENT AND DESIGN FIRM  
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EYE OF THE FOODSERVICE INDUSTRY USING  
A PHILOSOPHY IT CALLS MARKITECTURE.



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**PLUS** SAVING MONEY – AND THE ENVIRONMENT – IN THE KITCHEN.



# A Boutique Feel

Brand development and design firm Back Lot Productions has caught the eye of the foodservice industry using a philosophy it calls markitecture. **By Brooke Infusino**



## company profile

### Back Lot Productions

**Headquarters:** Atlanta

**Services:** Brand development and design

**Bart Mills, partner:** "This is the smartest time to rework a company's brand concept."

**A**sk Tracey Barker and Bart Mills about their professional backgrounds, and you might guess they have worked in the interior design field. By trade, Mills is an architect and Barker is a graphic designer. But the two have created anything but a traditional branding/marketing business.

In 2000, the duo broke away from managing the branding and design for Hollywood Entertainment to launch Back Lot Productions – a boutique brand development and design firm based in Atlanta. The name comes from the idea that, like the sets on the back lots of Hollywood studios, retail design is the same as creating a set for a retailer to showcase its brand.

Initially, the firm specialized in retail design and brand development; but as years passed, its unique design philosophy caught the eye of both the hospitality and foodservice industries. Many of its current clients are national foodservice chains. Today, the firm's food and beverage clients include Focus Brands, owner of the Cinnabon, Moe's Southwest Grill and Schlotzky's Deli brands and Murphy Adams Restaurant Group, owner of the Mama Fu's Asian House brand.

The major differentiation between Back Lot and traditional marketing or

>> Back Lot Productions uses "markitecture" to market its clients' brands through the built environment.

architecture firms is the combination of the two into one business, and its philosophy of “markitecture” – a term Back Lot defines as marketing a brand through the built environment to evoke the desired emotional response from the customer. Essentially, everything that touches the customer and employee must speak back to the brand.

### The ‘Ah-ha’ Moment

Back Lot uses a hands-on process of discovery to research and develop new and relevant store and brand concepts for its clientele. Its approach to design is unique in that it learns everything possible about the brand and the customer before commencing the creative process. “We’ve gone to makeup school, learned to make world famous cinnamon rolls and worked in stores,” Barker notes. “Our work is never design for design’s sake; it is about operations and the customer, and it is always to enhance the brand while maximizing revenues per square foot.”

Typically, Barker and Mills spend time with the store’s operations teams working in the store’s environment, interviewing customers and talking to employees about what would make them more effective. “If we are working on a new brand, we also work on the corporate culture, beliefs, mission and values,” Barker says. “We will coach them through the process, which becomes part of our research and development stage.”

“We spend time understanding who the customer is and how we can differentiate the brand experience for them,” Mills adds. “And, we help the client get to that ‘Ah-ha’ moment when they understand how they can strategically and effectively differentiate their brand in the marketplace.”

### Case in Point

The economic recession has done little to deter some firms from investing in their brands. “This is the smartest time to rework a company’s brand concept,”



>> Back Lot created a new prototype for Mama Fu's restaurants that incorporated a more contemporary feel, with Asian influences in architecture and décor. “Their mission was to maximize revenue and cost per square foot without compromising aesthetic appeal and functional use,” says Randy Murphy, president and CEO of Mama Fu's.

Mills says. “That’s what Focus Brands is doing. They are rethinking how they are doing things and reaching out to the customer. If you have the resources right now, you are in a great position. Every company should be out there re-evaluating their brand. The guys that are doing this are smart, because when the economy turns, they are going to be the ones positioned to pull ahead.”

But with the recession, Back Lot’s clients are demanding competitive prices and a knack for value engineering. “Everybody asks us to bring their build-out costs in lower than what they are currently spending and that is something we pride ourselves on,” Mills notes. “We are giving them equal or better quality for less money, and we have our vendors that work with us to do that.”

Back Lot has been hard at work helping reposition several of the Focus

Brands’ brands within the past year, including Schlotzsky’s Deli, Cinnabon and Moe’s. “As part of our decision to rebrand ourselves as being ‘Lotz Better,’ we knew we needed to modernize our store design to better reflect our unique position in the foodservice industry,” Schlotzsky President Kelly Roddy explains.

Not only did the new prototype need to reflect the new brand positioning, it also needed to be cost-effective. “We gave them guidelines for what the cost should be, and they were able to adhere to our parameters,” Roddy notes.

The redesign is intended to allow Schlotzsky’s to maintain its long-term guests, as well as attract new ones. “Back Lot has helped us create a unique design that is extremely specific to Schlotzsky’s and is, thus, a look only we can pull off,” Roddy says. “Bart and Tracey are truly





>> Back Lot uses a hands-on process of discovery to research and develop new and relevant store and brand concepts for its clientele. Back Lot Productions created the brand for The Golden Bean restaurant and bar at the Hotel Indigo Atlanta Midtown Hotel.

experts in their field. They have managed the process in a way that has made it seamless.”

Cinnabon President Geoff Hill agrees. This year, Back Lot helped bring a new branding concept for its stores to fruition. “Our current design is 10 years old, which, in my opinion, is a long time for a brand to feature one look,” Hill says. “The purpose of our brand redesign was not to create a new brand position, but to accomplish brand clarification.”

Again, cost played a huge factor in what the redesign would look like, and price limitations were implemented early on in the collaboration process. “From the beginning of our redesign project, we made it clear that one of their most significant barometers of success was that the store retrofit package could not cost more than \$30,000 per bakery,” Hill explains. “One of the qualities that has impressed me most is that Back Lot never lost sight of our budgetary goal.”

One of the concerns Cinnabon faced with its branding message was an inconsistent look among its locations, where Mills says, “there were so many messages and displays that there was not a clearly defined hierarchy of offerings.”

Back Lot clarified the brand through the redesign, making Cinnabon’s food the focal point at its bakeries, as well as placing more emphasis on its specialty beverages. “The new built environment has distinct areas that emphasize the most important items,” Mills says.

Back Lot also worked with Mama Fu’s Asian House to develop a new, con-

temporary restaurant prototype that streamlines the construction process, enables franchisees to better serve customers and reduces build-out costs.

The new Mama Fu’s prototype includes more Asian-inspired colors, architectural elements and décor. According to Randy Murphy, president and CEO of Mama Fu’s Franchise Group, the group purchased Mama Fu’s last year from Raving Brands and needed to incorporate its experience into the brand, which had had no real brand development since its inception six years ago. “We wanted our interior to better resonate with our customers with regards to the quality of food, freshness of product and increase the overall level of sophistication,” Murphy says.

Mama Fu’s incorporated its hybrid dining model called flex casual. This has the benefits associated with the quick fast-casual lunch and counter ordering, and also the higher ticket averages and overall atmosphere of the casual dining full-service dinner. From a financial perspective, the more than 20 percent reduction in startup costs and overall reduction of ongoing repair and maintenance cost makes the brand more relevant today for franchise operators and future corporate locations.

Murphy says Back Lot’s “mission was to maximize revenue and cost per square foot without compromising aesthetic appeal and functional use. They helped us establish and design a component-based casework system to better handle rollouts of new stores and get away from custom orders each time that drive cost and lead time. Our overall timeline was reduced because of the materials and processes we selected. All of these efforts led to a 10-week build-out vs. 14 weeks previously.”

The design was completed in February with the first location opening in Georgetown, Texas, in April. The remodels to all other existing Austin locations start in June/July. “The new prototype store is No. 1 in sales in the national system and 28 percent higher than our No. 2 location,” Murphy says. **FD**