

Turn Your Insight Out!

Success recipe for restaurants offers tips for all brand stewards

By JULIE CUCCHI and NIN GLAISTER

FORUM

TO THE AVERAGE Gourmet Magazine reader it was a behind-the-scenes article about a beloved restaurant. To someone trawling for brand morality tales it was pay dirt!

The subject was Danny Meyer, New York restaurateur, and his Union Square Café. In 1994, to extend the success of his Union Square, Meyer opened a new restaurant, Gramercy Tavern. When it failed to live up to expectations, Meyer hired a 'business therapist' to dissect the magic of Union Square in order to replicate its winning formula. What emerged was an insight that was injected into the veins of his current and future restaurants.

Meyer's quest for an insight and how he used it as a guide, is a lesson for brand stewards everywhere—CEOs, brand managers or consultants. His story illustrates the power of the one-two punch: inspired consumer/brand insight and rigorous, 360° follow-through.

Many brands suffer the consequences of hefty media spending in the absence of a guiding, deep consumer understanding. But simply having an insight isn't the answer either; it's just conference room banter if not driven tirelessly into the heart of the brand and the organization behind it.

Danny Meyer's revelation emerged when he realized that though Union Square was ranked 10th in Zagat's for food, 11th for service and not in the top 50 for decor, it was rated the city's 3rd most popular restaurant. Working with his 'therapist' he determined that what drove this popularity was something they called 'hospitality.'

Defining hospitality in all its forms, Meyer developed a list of core values to support the hospitality vision. This then informed staff behavior (every guest greeted within one minute), hiring criteria (emotional skills), house rules (free umbrellas if it's raining), new CRM technology (software encoding customer information such as birthdays, favorite dishes, allergies etc.), menu design and physical space.



NOT ALL INSIGHTS COUNT

You've surely walked out of focus groups with a legal pad full of exciting new ideas about your brand and consumers. But in the light of day how many are really brand-changing? The only insights that count are those that get to the heart of the consumer/brand relationship. The ones you can act upon. These are harder to come by. Focus groups—home of the bright-lights-direct-questions and a new species of seasoned 'focus-groupies'—are not their natural breeding ground.

This is a subject for a future article, but it's worth pointing out that you're more likely to uncover these gems with ethnographic research, such as in-home video and self-reportage diaries, than by sitting behind a one-way glass. For example, we strategically cast experts from various fields and conduct 'right brain' exercises to unlock insights and crack brand problems. (For a skin-care client we include a touch therapist and a tattoo artist to get at what skin meant to different target groups.)

Here's a good way to test if yours is a valuable, useful insight or just an interesting finding: ask yourself what your brand could actually do as a result of your revelation? What does it tell you to stop doing? Or start? How will your brand's voice, design or physical nature be altered as a result of this knowledge? If you can imagine tangible ways to act on your inspiration you've probably got a winner.

"Ok, now what?"

If your marketing department's idea of putting an insight to work is creating a new ad campaign, you might want to get a new marketing department.

Embedding a valuable insight into the soul of your brand requires a hard look at your full brand expression: naming, product design, package design, pack copy, web site architecture and physical space.

Consider the case of The American Association of Retired Persons. Their recognition of the differences between Baby Boomers and the previous generation of 'seniors' led to a new brand design, voice and name (now officially AARP).

Ethnographic research delivered a powerful new perspective to Coleman, (camping and outdoor products,) which made them change their grills. It seems the consumer's attachment to the grill has more to do with the nostalgia for family camping than with widgets or hardware. The new models are designed to reflect this finding and evoke a nostalgic, communal camping experience.

INSIGHT-DRIVEN IDEAS

Our work for a brand of lactose-free products included discussions with lactose intolerant consumers. These revealed a longing for the 'normalcy' of their carefree, milk-drinking, ice cream-eating youth. Packaging now reflects this finding with more dairy cues than lactose-free ones.

Apple, the poster-brand for insight application, used its consumer insights to inform everything from advertising to user manuals. You can feel it in the details of the friendly typeface, the logo, the design of their new stores and even in the T-shirt-and-khaki-clad store employees.

Name a brand you admire. Chances are, behind it you'll find both an inspired insight and the institutional will to make it salient through broad, tangible brand expression.

The next time the hairs on the back of your neck say you're on to something, think about Danny Meyer and his thriving restaurant empire. Make sure your brand expresses your insight in every way possible. If you've got it, flaunt it! Remember, an insight is a terrible thing to waste. ■

Julie Cuchi and Nin Glaister are co-founders of 98pt6, New York, a brand expression agency (julie@98pt6.com).