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It's More Than Just Window Dressing

How to Select Curtains and Blinds for Your Restaurant

BY PATRICIA LUEBKE

You may think that selecting window treatments for your restaurant is simply a design decision. You breezily check out fabrics for curtains or look at samples of blinds or shades and make a choice based on aesthetics. Find something that complements your décor, choose just the right color, make a decision and move on to the next task on your list.

But just like any aspect of creating your new restaurant (or refurbishing your current one), nothing is easy. The ripple effect is at work with window treatments, meaning that one decision you make affects lots of other areas of your restaurant. It may surprise you that the window treatments you select directly affect your profitability. Here's one example: Summer sun flooding your restaurant may make your air conditioner work overtime. Result? Higher utility bills. Month after month. The right window treatment can keep your electric bill at bay.

In fact, there's a new design trend called "daylighting" that is popular with ecologically minded (and utility bill-minded) restaurateurs. That means there are no overhead lights during the day, and you depend on natural light in your dining areas. You can (rightfully) claim to your guests you're going green, and your utility bill will be many dollars less.

As you think of window treatments as *functional* and not just aesthetic, you can make the best choices for your restaurant, combining both form and function. So what are some of the considerations in selecting window treatments that are right for you?

The Last Thing on Their Minds

Deb Barrett has specialized in windows for the past 30 years in a variety of positions, and today her company Window Dressings helps both commercial and residential clients select the best window treatments for their particular situation. She's worked with many restaurants in her career, and has sympathy for the harried startup restaurateur. "So often, there are so many other aspects to starting the restaurant that the last thing they think about are the windows," Barrett says.

But think about them you must, and Barrett says that you should start addressing your windows six to eight weeks out from the opening because, according to Barrett, even the simplest blinds and shades usually need to be custom-fabricated. She adds a note of optimism, though: "With the slow economy, lead times are a bit shorter these days."

And guess what? There are local ordinances about window coverings in commercial environments. The last thing you need is to pay a fine or have your opening delayed over illegal curtains. There may be fire department regulations too. That's why Barrett says, "Don't forget to check local ordinances with the fire marshal as you might be replacing your brand-new portieres [a curtain hung in a doorway] because they don't meet local codes."

Barrett warns that these codes apply to even the smallest café. "A small place has the same responsibilities as a large one. An owner might think they can just buy some ready-made curtains at a local store, only to find out that the fabric is not flame retardant," she says. That standard applies to linings, too, and right down to the thread that's used to sew the fabric. Even the mounting hardware is affected. "The same chemicals that make fabric flame retardant can corrode regular metals," Barrett says.

Liability and Safety Issues

And then there's the matter of cords, identified as a choking hazard for children. Esther Steinfeld, speaking on behalf of Blinds.com, says, "It is recommended that whenever possible, window treatments be purchased cordless or with other safety options, especially at family-friendly restaurants. This will put parents at ease and make them feel better about choosing you over the competition."

If you do have cords, though, they must be "tensioned down" meaning they aren't hanging loosely. But even if the cords are tensioned down, you're not out of the woods yet. Anything a customer can tamper with will be tampered with — experienced operators know this. Barrett works with the local operators of a national fast-food chain where lots of teenagers gather. It seems that as the teens sit by the windows, they play with the cords, some-

times dismantling them. She is called in regularly to inspect and repair the cords. This is not an isolated example, but rather the sort of thing you must come to expect when serving the general public.

Steinfeld agrees with this sentiment when it comes to discussing the durability of what you pick for your windows. She says that new restaurateurs don't really understand wear and tear, and says, "Window treatments seem like decoration, but people touch them, spill on them, kick them, hit them, kids play with them so the more durable the product you choose, the better."

Keep durability on the front of your mind, along with maintenance. For example, mini-blinds may look great as you're examining a sample, but may not be a good choice for a restaurant — especially if you serve fried food. Dust collects easily on them and oils in the air can attract more dust and grime. Guests may be seated next to a window, and you don't want them to see blinds, curtains or shades full of dust or bits of food.

And even if you have the world's most economical cleaning service at your beck and call, you don't want to have frequent cleanings of curtains. That may sound counterintuitive, but Moses Mitchell, president of Aero/Pacific Drapery, says that if you have your curtains cleaned every six months, the fabric will break down much too quickly. He estimates that fabric curtains in a commercial environment should have an estimated life span of 12-15 years.

There are a lot of variables there, however, like the care you've taken and the sun exposure, but Barrett agrees with Mitchell about going easy on the cleaning of fabric curtains. "Vacuum them, shake them, air-fluff them, but see how long you can go without having them commercially cleaned," she says. Her bottom line about window treatment maintenance? "Don't make a design decision that is a maintenance nightmare," she says.

Window of Security

Another functional issue concerning your windows is the presence of a security system. How will window dressings affect a security system, if at all? Will the hardware used to mount the window dressings interfere with the security system? Similarly, if you mount the window dressings first, followed by the security system, will the shades or blinds accommodate a box or other component of an alarm system? When choosing your window dressings, you must think holistically and always have in mind what else is affected by hanging a set of blinds, for example.

"It's not up to code," is the phrase that sends fear through the hearts (and wallets) of startup restaurateurs, so be smart and check out existing regulations before you make any decisions about your windows. Maybe you think you can save the trouble and just leave your windows "naked," especially if the views from your windows are good ones. Barrett may be a bit prejudiced, but she says, "Every window should be dressed."

Let's say you have a big picture window that looks out to a lovely lake, surrounded by lush foliage, where swans glide by and turtles sun themselves. Sounds great, but what happens at night? "I don't like black holes," Barrett says. By that she means, the same window that offers a great view by day is going to be a black hole at night — a big-framed picture of nothing but dark. "Window dressing is essential, and one of the foundation elements in any room."

Let's talk about views. You may be lucky and have spectacular views — day and night — out of your restaurant windows. Of course, you want to make the most of that city skyline or ocean beach. But what if your dining room looks out over a parking lot? You certainly want to take that into consideration when selecting your window treatments, but a view of a parking lot doesn't automatically mean you cover the windows.

Take the example of a small restaurant in a strip mall. You have to consider what

view you want for your customers and what view you want passers-by to have of your restaurant. A quick-serve pizza place will typically have a fully clear storefront window. Your guests aren't there for the view, but what's more, you want people walking by to see your food on display, to see the pizzas going in and out of the oven, and to observe your happy customers digging into your pizza.

But ratchet that same quick-service pizza place up several notches to a family-style Italian restaurant, and you deliver a whole other experience to your guests. You attract passers-by with other means — the attractive look of your place, your menu in the window — so that your guests inside have a cozy feeling of being in an environment, far away from a strip mall parking lot. You'd cover your windows to help create that new environment and that pleasant feeling of being instantly transported from a hot, sun-baked parking lot to a cool, dim dining room.

Looking in and out of a window may be a marketing issue about how visible (or not) the interior of your restaurant is, but it's also a privacy issue for your guests. Let's say your event room looks out into a public area. Do your guests who have rented your room for a wedding, for example, want peering pedestrians with their noses pressed against your window eyeing the goings on? Similarly, if your restaurant is an intimate bar and lounge, you will want to provide the privacy that your concept requires by making it impossible for outsiders to see in.

Think Seasons, Think Weather

On a January day in a cold climate, sitting at a table next to a sunny window can be a pleasure, but that same seat six months later may feel more like an oven. When determining how much sun protection you need, you have to remember the changing seasons. "You want your window dressings to work seasonally. Remember, the sun is lower in the sky in the winter and you want more prolonged light and warmth," Barrett says.

Since there's nothing worse than squinting into the sun while you're trying to enjoy your lunch, you will want to consider the position of the sun during the day. You may need blinds or shades on a window only from 1 o'clock to 2 o'clock in the afternoon, for example, so one window may have to be adaptable not just to the changing seasons, but to the changing times of day.

Fire codes. Changing seasons. Privacy. Security. The list goes on and on, but Esther Steinfeld of Blinds.com sums it up. "The main thing is you want patrons to be comfortable," she says. "If they're not comfortable, they're not coming back. I don't want to be squinting and hot and uncomfortable while I'm eating. If I am, I'd rather eat at home."

Now, Can I Look at the Sample Books?

Rather than being overwhelmed by all the choices you have for window dressings, you can approach the selection process armed with what "jobs" you want your window dressing to perform (sun shield, privacy, retain heat and cool, for example), but of course, another job your window dressing performs is the aesthetic one. But Mitchell Moses sums it up: "Be concerned with functionality — we can make the aesthetics happen."

When you can articulate the tasks at hand for your window treatments, your interior designer or window dressing vendor can make intelligent suggestions as to what type of window covering will work best for you. And you don't have to speak in absolutes. You might want sun protection while retaining a view. That's not unusual for a restaurant and why Blind.com's Steinfeld suggests restaurateurs look at solar shades, which block light and glare, but not the view outside.

According to Steinfeld, solar shades reduce heat and ultraviolet rays from pouring in through large picture windows or walls of glass. "They don't collect dust the way slatted blinds and

fabric shades tend to do," she says. "They are most often made from very sturdy, wear-and-tear-resistant vinyl that will hold up against children who might pull on them. They can be easily cleaned with a damp cloth if food happens to splatter on them."

But there's more. "Another benefit of solar shades is that they're very in style right now," Steinfeld says. "They're sleek and modern. Solar shades tend to be inexpensive as well, making them a great choice for someone covering lots of large windows."

Whatever you choose, bear in mind the tremendous effect your window treatments make in your restaurant — "as much as your tables and chairs," Steinfeld says. Be realistic in your budget. Barrett says, "Everyone thinks window treatments cost less than they do. They'll spend money on upholstery and then windows are an afterthought." But your windows influence your entire restaurant and can transform a room. Barrett says the typical restaurant has lots of hard surfaces — floors, tables, walls — so the window treatments can soften up a room and make it more welcoming.

One Last Tip

When ordering custom window coverings, Barrett says she will never work off blueprints, and suggests you do the same. That's because in a typical buildout, the original blueprints might be changed a lot. Entire windows could be added, moved or removed. Precise measuring is key to custom window treatments, so much so that Blinds.com offers its customers free field measurers who will come to your restaurant and measure for you.

When you're in the selection process for your window dressings, your dining room's size, location, exposure, light and maintenance are all important elements. With the guidance of an interior decorator or designer, you can combine form with function and have beautiful window treatments that are as hard-working as they are attractive.

Strategy Checklist for Window Treatments

As you plan whether you have curtains, blinds or shades for your restaurant's windows, consider whether the window is an individual unit or part of a series of windows. Consider the room's style and design and how the window is seen from the outside. Then answer these questions:

- ✓ Do you need to alter the window?
- ✓ Are there issues with proportion? Scale?
- ✓ Consider the light and direction the windows face. Is sun control needed? Glare? Heat?
- ✓ What is the room used for? Does it affect your design decisions?
- ✓ Is privacy required? Minimal? Maximum?
- ✓ Focus on the view: Is it good? Awful?
- ✓ Do you want to see out? Do your customers mind being visible during the day? At night?
- ✓ Will the window treatment style reflect the period/style of the room? Or is it a counterpoint?
- ✓ What window treatment styles will accommodate all the diverse elements discussed above?
- ✓ Does the treatment visually fit the window and the room?
- ✓ What hardware and mounting considerations are there?
- ✓ What are the budget considerations?

This checklist was adapted from one provided by Deb Barrett, Window Dressings, Kaneville, Illinois.

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