



On the profits and pitfalls of retailing signature products.

Interface

Barbara Lang

Barbara Lang is a speaker's dream. Her fire-engine red blazer shouts against the balance of her black ensemble, arms moving like a symphony conductor's. The podium is her anchor as she strides before the projector screen. Her energy commands attention.

So does her work. Currently a lecturer at Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration (B.S., 1978), her ongoing research on restaurateurs who have branded their products for retail will be spun into a book geared for operators.

Invited to the National Restaurant Association Restaurant, Hotel-Motel Show in May to present her research and comments on the practices and pitfalls of retailing restaurant products, Lang crafted a 90-minute presentation, "From Plate to Retail," with visuals, handouts of Web sources, bibliography, e-mail addresses, names and telephone numbers.

"I'm not the expert," she told the audience, asking for a show of hands of how many in the room were toying with the idea of marketing a product. She liked the composition. Half were operators thinking of branding a product. Others already had a product but didn't have a game plan of how and where to go for research, reformulation, testing, packaging, placement and marketing.

The nuts and bolts of her talk came from interviews conducted at more than 150 operations, from independents to international conglomerates, that have entered the retail market. What sparked her interest in this area was personal experience.

A former partner and events planner for Coyote Loco Restaurant and Cantina in Ithaca, N.Y., Lang herself aimed to brand their salsa and hot sauces. The process got derailed because of financial reasons and personnel changes. She abandoned the mission but her fascination with it endures.

Passions for food, teaching, and travel have influenced her career path. Before Lang became a restaurateur and lecturer in New York State, she opened a catering business and sourdough bread bakery in Napa Valley, Calif., which she sold in order to accept the position of culinary director for a winery, a post held for eight years. Immediately after college, she moved to Jackson Hole, Wyo., to manage a 425-seat restaurant in a resort for the summer. She found her sea legs that winter as a chef aboard a 95-foot windjammer schooner chartered out of the Caribbean.

Lang, 46, was born in Skokie, Ill., but raised on Long Island and has made New York State her home for much of her life. More comfortable as devil's advocate than cheerleader, she presents the pitfalls of branding, then balances the doomsaying with success stories, data, information and insight.

Restaurateurs are ripe for retail's lure. "The good news is that the food industry looks to you for the next food trend," she tells her audience. Operators do research everyday and their focus group is the customer. Chefs fiddle with the soup of the day, change specials and adjust recipes. It's easy to sell something once. But twice?

That's the challenge. The restaurant patron already is sold on the product. That's why he is there. But retail customers have no initial allegiance. They buy a product once out of curiosity, usually propelled by a promotion such as an in-store tasting or a coupon. The initial lift in sales appears promising but steady sales weeks ► 26

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◀ 25 down the line are what count. Once you sell a retail customer for the second and third time, you hopefully have changed their allegiance from one product to your product.

In the restaurant industry change happens fast. If a guest doesn't like something, he tells the manager. In retail, it is a much slower and a more costly learning experience, Lang says.

The lustre of retail is especially strong if the restaurateur is very successful and customers rave and adore your chowder, vinaigrette, chocolate sauce, margarita or whatever. Every plate that leaves the kitchen is a brand extension. And fodder for the operator's ego.

Be careful, she warns. The locals may love that chowder, but will the nation?

Operators who are successful at retail, distribution-wise, share common characteristics, Lang claims. They had a proven track record, local, regional or national, in running a successful restaurant and, often, in creating a persona. Examples include Jody Denton (Lulu, San Francisco), Rick Bayless (Frontera Grill and Topolobampo, Chicago), Charlie Trotter (Charlie Trotter's, Chicago), Mark Miller (Coyote Cafe, Santa Fe, N.M.),

Michael Chiarello (Tra Vigne, St. Helena, Calif.) and Charles Palmer (Aureole, New York).

"The idea to brand comes when operators want more public awareness," says Lang. Sometimes their ego gets in the way. They consider themselves king of the road. But they never see that their road is limited to and defined by their customers, she says.

"The bad news is that big companies have more money than you," she cautions. "They will copy, steal, and even squash your product. You need to figure how to stand out against the 50,000 new products introduced annually in the supermarket."

Operators who are successful focus on the product and determine what it really offers consumers. And why should people buy it? What need does it fill? Does it address convenience, indulgence, nutrition or health? Figure out how your product can make a difference, know the

competition's price points and how you plan to differentiate yourself, Lang says.

Before Rick Bayless, chef/owner of Frontera Grill and Topolobampo, created a food company and label for his line of salsas, he had earned a reputation as an expert on Mexican cuisine and a noted chef/teacher/author. Over time, the food company he created developed several lines. While his recipes and cookbooks support products, Bayless adds support by becoming a brand himself, she observes, with videos, books and a cable food show. The Web site reflects the mixing of both brands.

Jody Denton, chef/owner of several restaurants in San Francisco and the Bay area, is better known on the West Coast than elsewhere. The line of condiments and foodstuffs that bear his name are beautifully packaged but not directly identified with his restaurants. He never intended to go mass market but focused only on the specialty-foods market. He hired experts, such as food scientists, packaging design artists and retail marketing professionals, to help him in areas he knew little about.

"Operators successful at retail also have a good business sense," theorizes Lang. She parallels the challenges of retail and restaurants. In both you need to know the customer first, then create the product to those needs. Know the competitors, their price points and how to differentiate your product and price to compete.

Producing a signature product isn't the only way to keep your name before the public. An easier route is refreshing or renovating the restaurant itself. Lang recalls one cash-strapped operator in Ithaca who added a fresh coat of paint to the restaurant. "Not only did his business pick up, but customers insisted the food tasted better."

Personalizing the dining experience is another way to enhance the brand. A chef, making the rounds of the dining room with samples of a new dish, and asking "what do you think" gets customers involved.

Giving guests something to take home, she says, such as a box of sweets with a logo, creates a memory and forges the connection between product and consumer that is at the heart of branding.

—Margaret Sheridan

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