

# The sensory theatre of food retailing

*No chocoholic could seriously walk past a Max Brenner store. Through his retail outlets, Max Brenner, who originated the concept in Israel has created a unique chocolate culture that deliciously seduces you with aroma, taste and captivating ceremony. Sharon Givoni\* guides us through the new world of 'experiential retailing'.*

Leaving aside the alluring décor, it is the unique Brenner smell that entices customers – the addictive rich fragrance of roasted cocoa beans and melting chocolate. With a strong emphasis on stimulation and sensuousness, you will experience the full gamut of sights, smells and tastes.

Welcome to the world of 'experiential retailing' – an emerging concept that reflects a shift from merely buying products and services to buying experiences. At Max Brenner you do not get the sense of people rushing in and out for a quick hot chocolate. It is a place where customers come to linger over the chocolate experience. The experience becomes a discussion point in its own right. Customers delight in dipping fresh strawberries into warm chocolate fondue or taking part in the 'hot chocolate ritual' by making their own 'Suckaos' (hot milk served in a vessel with a candle underneath and plate of chocolate buds to be mixed in as you drink).

Tasting is an integral part of the Max Brenner experience. Staff will mingle with customers with trays of exotic chocolate offerings to sample while waiting to order. Visually, the rich colours of the décor and long chocolate brown benches create a sense of nostalgia and romance. And while the design of the bar is modern, the coordinated clothing worn by the sales staff, the coloured floor, chocolate displays on wooden shelves, bags filled with chocolate powder and slabs of



*A famous Brenner suckao*

chocolate complete with huge knives, are reminiscent of an authentic corner store.

This experience does come at a cost. The price of a Max Brenner hot chocolate is \$5.50 on a weekday with a 55¢ surcharge on the weekend. Judging by the number of customers walking through the doors, this is a price that people are more than willing to pay.

The Australian Centre for Retail Studies (ACRS) has conducted research in this area looking at the trends happening overseas and how local retailers are responding. According to Michael Morrison, Research Director at the ACRS, experiential retailing is about creating a strategy that centres on the five senses that are linked very closely with the brand. Using the sense of smell, sound, taste, sight and touch retailers can make their target market feel a sense of comfort and belonging in the retail space. Customers feel good and want to stay longer. They become ambassadors of the brand.

Executive Director of the ACRS, Amanda Young,



believes the strong movement towards experiential retailing will gather momentum as consumers become more affluent and time poor. "Good service," she says, "has become a given. Customers are seeking out experiences and are willing to pay for them."

While the growth of experiential retailing is by no means limited to a food context, Morrison points out that it is particularly pertinent in the context of food outlets where consumers tend to view price, quality and service as stan-

dard requirements and experience is fast becoming a key value differentiator. And if the formula is right, consumers are quite happy to pay a premium for that experience.

Why now? Pine and Gilmore, in their book, *The Experience Economy* surmise that the rise of technology and ongoing search for differentiation in an increasingly competitive world is an important factor. Rising affluence has also had a large impact – "we are going out to eat more frequently, at increasingly more experiential

*There are six Max Brenner Stores Australia wide including one in the QV Building, Melbourne and five in Sydney located in Paddington, Chatswood, Manly, Double Bay and the newly opened Elizabeth Street store. A new one is due to open soon in Melbourne Central.*



venues – even drinking more ‘festive’ types of coffee.”

Koko Black is another Chocolatier indulging customers in a complete sensory experience. Situated in Victoria Arcade in Melbourne, the owner of Koko Black, Shane Hills, describes his shop as a ‘five star chocolate shop’. The chocolates are freshly made on the premises and passers stop at the purpose-built window to watch Belgian-trained Chocolatier, Dries Cnockaert, whip up his chocolate masterpieces. People are drawn to



the performance and feel a sense of involvement in the chocolate making process, one customer drawing the analogy of watching a chocolate river in the Willy Wonka chocolate movie.

Downstairs you can purchase some of the beautifully crafted hand made chocolates that are displayed in an antique style wooden cabinet like precious jewellery. Or you might want to try a Koko Black hot chocolate made with real Belgian chocolate in the intimate Baroque-style café upstairs. The combination of the sensuous aroma of melting chocolate, soft romantic music, elegant interior (dimpled leather couches, arc windows and dark wood furniture) almost makes you feel like you are in an exclusive club as waiting staff with white gloves serve your beverage to you in elegant cups.

And for those sweet tooths who are not only into chocolate, you should try the ice creamery Cold Rock. The concept, which originated in

Boston, USA, involves the creation of your own ice cream flavour combination before your eyes on a refrigerated granite slab.

By choosing up to six of an extensive range of ‘mix ins’ and watching their ice-cream being mixed on the spot, customers feel a sense of involvement when creating their personalised flavour. They take away the memory of the experience, not just an ice-cream. The shop prides itself on offering up to 3000 different flavour combinations.

Experiential retailing has even extended to selling a simple juice. Vibrant Australian fruit juice franchise Boost has taken Australia by storm with its combination of colourful branding, cheerful staff and upbeat music, all an integral part of the Boost experience. Waiting for your drink to be made also appears to be part of that experience. When the juice is ready the staff calls the customer’s name and there is sense of familiarity. Again, customers become

involved in the process by choosing their own fruit combination and maybe adding one of the seven ‘super supplements’.

Boost Juice is a success story that speaks for itself – over 175 stores have mushroomed around Australia and the numbers are still growing. It’s a formula that works.

Modern food retailing is about buying an experience not just the product. Customers aren’t just buying a Max Brenner hot chocolate or a Cold Rock ice cream – they’re participating in a sensory indulgence.

As retail food outlets strive to cut through the clutter of sameness, the idea of ‘retail theatre’ is being rapidly adapted by companies as they seek to take their place on the main stage. Curtains ready? Let the show begin. \*

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