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Sports Retail and Food Strategy

“Who ate all the couscous?”

Why is the above terrace chant an impossibility in 2010? Because food in sport is initially architecturally driven, then lease driven.

How do we achieve any improvement in the food offer at the world's major sports stadia? The answer is to get in early with a food plan. Early enough to influence the architecture.

The plan needs to extend beyond food and include all other appropriate retail.

There is no more excuse in the 21st century for customers at major sporting events to have inappropriate, poorly located, under-resourced food than there is to be kept hanging on a line being told “all of our customer advisors are busy”.

So, how do we originate a plan? Start with the basics. What is the venue for – mono sport or multi-use? Who are the audience? How will the venue be used?

The vast majority of venue operators recognise the financial benefits of food and retail and also the amenity benefit but rarely execute the plan well. Why? They are not retailers or caterers.

Contract catering in the work place has improved dramatically in the last few years. Now it is the turn for international sports venues to literally up their food and retail game. Is it any coincidence that on the Wembley Stadium website the only mention of food or catering is an obscure press release from 2004 announcing that Delaware North would be taking care of food at the stadium? Worthy company that they are I am astonished that as a public service, food and catering are not higher on the hit list for Wembley Stadium.

As we have seen with the contract caterers a captive audience (office workers for example), expect the same quality and offer that they are exposed to outside of the workplace when they are at work. The sports fan should also expect a decent quality of catering with choice, range and indeed brands. Many of our food brand clients have worked very hard on speed of service, hand held food and product consistency for market environments that have ‘peaky’ footfall. Many of these brands are working exceptionally well (often under license), in venues such as Excel London and O2.

There should be no impediment to a suite of complimentary branded offers being brought together in sports venues.

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So, how do we develop the detail behind a sports food plan? Usage patterns are key. Crowd dynamics is a well developed tool which can aid food placement and indeed measure the effect that it has on crowd flow. One of the dilemmas for food placement is that locations for peak use may not be the appropriate locations during 'normal' venue conditions. This is an issue for consideration in the early planning stage.

In the last few years huge leaps have been made in micro catering. Our work with Pret a Manger, Square Pie and Bagel Factory for example has created catering footprints as small as ten square metres capable of delivering huge amounts of food very quickly. The good news is that they are portable and relatively low cost.

This means that the food plan can be scalable and avoid the stadium appearing 'half shut' during non-peak periods.

Audience characteristics need to be considered too. The food demands for a Beyonce concert will be different to those for a Lakers game. Rather than pushing a generic food offer onto the audience consider product pull. Ask what do they want? Then give it to them.

This can be done in a variety of ways, guest brands, sponsored special appearances, or most simply working with the food team to tailor the menu frameworks accordingly.

Why does this rarely happen? Two reasons:, too much effort and the fear of one off costs. The truth is by responding to market pull, more food will be sold to more people.

Product and price hierarchy is the next topic. The easy win is to sell a restricted, easy to prepare, high margin menu at the same price across the whole stadium. Economies of scale and simplicity make this approach attractive. However look to street food and particularly Asian street food to see how much variety can be created from a few simple ingredients.

This leads on to food trends. What are people eating and how much are they paying for it? This flexibility in planning price and product will reap dividends. Look to the European festival season for inspiration, the food offers are as diverse as they possibly can be as are the price points.

Price hierarchy and margin contribution are a hot topic. If food deals are straight forward fixed price leases there are no incentives on either side to drive trade. Nor are there incentives to pursue high margin products such as juices and smoothies.

Many brands have well articulated event solutions (pop ups is the new vernacular) – certain champagne houses come to mind. Their presence is a win win all round – customer benefit, brand profile and revenue. But these spaces need consideration in the food plan. They need to be interruptive but not obstructive.

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A well considered and well executed food plan needs to be constantly monitored. Is it delivering to its agreed criteria? This is not just a revenue issue but from a customer's point of view it is all about quality and value. Don't be afraid to mystery shop your food offers.

The question is how often should the food plan be reviewed? An annual health check is a good idea. Not only as an internal review, but a market review also. Check what is happening in the market as a whole and ask are our offers still relevant and what innovations should we be considering?

The food plan cannot be considered in isolation from the retail plan. If we parallel stadiums with shopping centres and airports the food and retail mix and placement is carefully integrated to increase dwell time and increase spend.

The same criteria apply to retail as to food, however there are some factors that need consideration that are utterly unique to stadia. Premier league football stores can process up to 6,000 replica shirt sales in an hour and a half before a match. Each shirt is selected, printed and paid for – 18,000 processes in an hour and a half. This informs the architecture of the store, its position at the venue and its non match day use and appearance.

Nike have tried to extend product ranges in their stadia stores however the reality is that non-food retail is largely souvenirs, replica products and memorabilia. This is partly due to the mindset of the customer. Apart from amenity retail this is unlikely to change unless the stadium is part of a larger leisure or mixed use development. If it is, it obviously fundamentally alters the food and retail plan.

The concept of pop ups for food has been mentioned, but it is worth considering for retail. There is a current retailer appetite for low cost short term retail concepts. Could Top Shop and New Look be persuaded to do a pop up for the aforementioned Beyonce gig? Probably if the deal is right.

Our earliest involvement in the stadia business was in the eighties with the Superstadium consortium – a team set up in the wake of the various disasters earlier in the decade to create the all seater stadia we take for granted today. Even then in the eighties we were advocating crowd management through amenity planning – a topic that is still as pertinent today. If the food plan is developed early enough in the process it can have a beneficial contributing effect on crowd dynamics.

The food plan needs to be thought about as a three dimensional entity. It is scalable, flexible, always current, continually monitored, delivering quality and value (and not just for the corporate hospitality). Such a food plan can then be articulated through a design process complimentary to the hard architecture with sufficient elasticity to take whatever future trends throw at it.

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In 2008 Delaware North received an award for innovation and excellence in their food offer at the Emirates Stadium. This should be the norm not an exception. There are a myriad of awards for excellence in food in all sectors yet it appears to be a token gesture in the stadia business. A pathfinder approach is required. From Singapore to Brazil, 21st century stadia are being constructed. Do they have fully integrated food and retail plans?

Let's hope that we can sit and watch the action without the Portuguese or Chinese equivalent of "who ate all the pies" ringing in our ears!

-ENDS-

Notes to editors

About CADA Design Group Ltd

- **CADADESIGNGROUP** is an international brand and retail design consultancy, specialising in British design excellence with an international outlook.
- The London based studios provide strategic consulting, fresh thinking and creative design expertise to a national and international portfolio of clients including Nike, Harrods, Dean & DeLuca, Delhi Airport, Cardiff Airport, Galeries Lafayette, Harvey Nichols and INTERSPORT.
- CADA Design Group has over 60 years experience between the team and clients in 28 countries.

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