

What was that you said?

Are you spoiling your patrons' experience of your restaurants with noise levels that are leaving them tired and cranky? **Ken Burgin** looks at ways to keep the noise down.



EVER COME out of a restaurant exhausted? With the same feeling you have after fighting your way through city traffic? It's probably the noise. According to Zagat, a US restaurant guide, noise is the second largest source of customer complaints after poor service.

The sounds created within your business are serious marketing issues, and can directly affect the bottom line. When people are exposed to excessive loud noise, the first part of their hearing affected is sensitivity to sounds with a frequency above 4000 Hertz (Hz). Normal speech is 2000-3000 Hz, so you can still hear normal conversation but with repeated exposure it becomes more and more difficult to hear sound at lower frequencies.

Gradually it becomes a strain to understand conversation in a noisy environment, and your companions will have to speak up. As everyone starts to shout, up goes the volume, the racket keeps increasing, and you feel tired and irritated.

What inspires the designers of our new hard-edged, concrete or wood-floored restaurants? Sure, young is beautiful, but the over thirties usually have more money, especially when they're heading into their forties and fifties, shedding family and building their earning power. It's not that owners have asked for uncomfortable noise levels, but, in the enthusiasm to create a beautiful space, designers often seem to leave noise levels off the specification list.

A venue doesn't have to be noisy to be fun. In the desire for 'modern', out went the sound deadening materials that would have soaked up the racket. Noise is like bullets, bouncing off hard surfaces and absorbed by soft ones. If you insist on hard floors, there need to be other surfaces to soak up the racket. Carpet is an excellent (and inexpensive) material to reduce noise (especially carpet tiles), and usually more effective than wall or ceiling panels. If you've inherited a space with an old or ugly carpet, investigate carpet-dyeing. A dark chocolate or charcoal carpet is almost unnoticeable, and will get you through until it's time

Say what? Is your restaurant causing headaches for your customers?



for a refit.

During my 'Starting a Café or Restaurant' courses, I often ask participants for a list of likes and dislikes. Many are in the 30-plus age-group, so noise is usually high on the list. Later in the day we look at design and decoration, and use the classroom space as an example. When I point to the floor, everyone wants to rip up the carpet and replace it with tiles or timber. Excuse me? Weren't you the same people who hate noise?

Take a tough stand with your designer—insist noise levels fit within acceptable limits when the space is full. This means volume—measured in decibels or dBA—and reverberation—the way noise bounces off surfaces. Normal conversation takes place at 40-50 dBA, and sound levels start to cause hearing loss at levels above 85dBA (the noise level of heavy traffic). Your responsibility will be to control the volume, the beat and the choice of music. If you have an iPhone, download a free decibel metre and try it in a noisy venue—you'll be surprised.

Match the music mix to your customers, treating vocals with care—they can subtly compete with conversation. Call on some nostalgic memories with tunes from the 60's, 70's and 80's, and alternate albums that intrigue with fresh sounds. The

latest purchase by your 19 year old waitress is most likely not a candidate for the morning coffee mix—take a tough line with staff contributions. Certainly after listening to the same tracks for days or weeks they may be begging for something new, however it's the customers who rule (and pay the wages)—most of them love the music you choose.

Most venues now use iPods to hold their music, with a huge range of tracks. However good reproduction can be undermined by cheap speakers and amplifiers. There are also well-chosen subscription mixes beamed through radio or cable.

Check the noise produced in addition to the music—the scrape of chairs, kitchen noises, coffee machines, juicers and blenders all add up. Unless there is proper sound absorption the bullets of sound will keep echoing around the room.

Finally, it's a health and safety issue. With tighter OH&S standards evolving and an increased focus on duty of care, it's not hard to envisage a day when a nightclub DJ or a bar worker will sue for lost hearing - and a failure of the business to provide earplugs and protection.

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