

Closed, or just changing names?

Today, on my way to the Metro, I walked past where a Mediterranean cafe has been located for the past five years. It was closed, and in the window was a sign saying that “Amai Japanese Crepe” was coming soon.

By the way, anybody know what the hell a Japanese crepe is?

When I got back to my office, I checked on the web to see if I could figure out what happened. I first went to the cafe’s website. It’s still there. Same address. No update on the situation. Then I went to Yelp, and I noticed it said the place was “temporarily” closed but a five-star review had just been posted yesterday. Hmm. Stranger and stranger. I went back to the cafe’s website, and clicked on their Twitter feed. Last post there was from 2015. Not useful at all. Then I went to the Facebook page. I clicked on “posts,” and found one from September 22, which says this:

Thank you everyone for your loyalty and support these past 5 years. We opened in Feburary 2012 and strived to bring a little taste of Isreal and classic Italian espresso to our customers. Now, it’s time to look to the future. XXX will be closed as of September 22 for renovations. We will be closed for two weeks to improve and update the cafe. We look foward to showing the improved us when we reopen.

Errors above appeared in the original post. I just x’ed out the name of the restaurant. There was also a picture of the sign about the Japanese crepes. That’s it. No more information. But now we know the restaurant is changing name and changing focus. What we don’t know is when this will happen, or what the hell a Japanese crepe is supposed to be.

To me, this is a classic and stupid communications failure. Why a failure? Here are the mistakes I see:

1. Failure to use their website to provide updated information.
2. Failure to provide complete information on the actual site (something like: XX cafe is transforming. We aim to re-open on [date]).
3. Failure to use social media appropriately. The Twitter feed should be deleted, and they could provide updates about the renovation, some information about what they will become. Not to mention that Facebook post was from a month ago, where they claim they would re-open in two weeks.
4. Failure to consider what customers need to know. Maybe this is the biggest problem. Nowhere do you really know what is going on.

It's hard to say what will happen here. People who came to this place looking for Israeli food are not necessarily going to feel good about a Japanese crepe (whatever that may be). Passersby will think that the old place is gone, and will not necessarily think the new place is associated with the old.

As with any change, clear and precise communication is necessary. It seems that to this restaurant, communication with customers is an afterthought.

You need more than a gut feeling

At an event last week, I met the owner of a local pizza shop. This pizza shop, which opened about a year ago, is located near me, and seems pretty busy, especially on weekends. I asked him how it's doing. The pizza shop owner immediately said it was doing poorly, and he said the parking situation was to blame. That seemed strange to me since there's plenty of garage parking, which, with validation, is free for two hours. He told me that it doesn't matter, because psychologically, people don't like to pay for parking. And here's a direct quote from him: "I have friends who can spend \$500 on dinner but they won't pay for parking."

OK. I am sure there are people who avoid going places where they have to pay for parking. But I also don't think free parking with validation, and a couple bucks an hour after is the one reason people will avoid going out to dinner.

I have been thinking about this situation for a few days, and I have concluded that this shop owner is looking for an easy excuse for what may be poor business and marketing decisions on his part.

Here are three possible mistakes he has made:

Not scouting or researching the location carefully enough. This particular location has several other restaurants, and the parking situation has not changed in several years. He could have asked the other restaurants if they felt the parking was a challenge. He could have determined how many people walk or take public transportation to get here and how many people drive, and from where. He could have checked out

if people complain about parking.

Biting off more than he can chew. This particular restaurant took over two spaces (one had been a restaurant and the other a shoe store). It is a very large place with both indoor and outdoor seating. Perhaps the space is too big with a rent that is too high to support the amount of people that will eat out here.

Not doing enough marketing (and marketing poorly). When the place opened, I joined the Facebook page for it. It seems that they are doing a few things to entice the community, like a trivia night and a pet adoption event. Now, I am not sure how having a pet adoption event at a restaurant is even a legal idea, and at best is a bit strange idea that may attract pet lovers. I have seen little to promote events in the community and very little creativity. Also, and I kid not, the sponsored Facebook ads promote their top sirloin beef burgers. This is a pizza joint and they should focus on their area of expertise. If you want a burger while everyone else wants pizza, it's good they have alternatives for you. But if you want a really great burger, you are not going to a pizza restaurant for it.

Perhaps this pizza place owner's gut told him that parking is the real issue. But a gut feeling does not mean that it's the correct reason to explain a situation. If he truly wants to improve his situation, he'd commission market research and/or hire a restaurant marketing consultant. He needs facts and actions rather than the feeling that parking, something that will not change and he cannot control, is hurting his business.

What do you think? Does it all amount to parking or may there be other reasons?

Are you making the best business decisions for your marketing?

Yesterday, a friend and I met to have lunch at a new pupusa place in Bethesda that we'd read about. (In case you don't know, pupusas are an absolutely delicious Salvadoran specialty of stuffed thick corn tortillas that are griddled.)

When the pupusa place first opened, it was covered in Bethesda Magazine online (I don't know if it was in the print version). The article stated that the pupusa place was sharing the kitchen with a Japanese restaurant. I assumed it was next door to the Japanese restaurant, but it turns out that it is not separate at all.

I looked up the address online, and set out. Once I got to the block the restaurant was supposed to be on, I walked up and down the street not seeing sign for it anywhere. I noticed a Japanese place, but there was no indication that they served pupusas there. I called the number listed on the pupusa place's Facebook page. I said I was on their street but couldn't find them. The guy who answered told me he was INSIDE the Japanese restaurant, and that they normally only do take out, but that we could sit inside the restaurant.

My friend and I went in, and told the hostess that we wanted to eat pupusas. She told us that it was take out only, but when I told her I had spoken to the pupusa guy and he'd told me we could sit inside, she let us sit in the bar area, and even took our order.

When the pupusas came out, the waitress realized we needed

forks and knives since it's kind of hard to eat stuffed tortillas with chopsticks. It took her another few minutes to reappear with forks for us.

Even with all the hoops to jump through, these pupusas were absolutely delicious, and we both really enjoyed our lunch. We decided that the next time we'd call it in as a takeout order, that is, if this place manages to stay in business.

This pupusa place faces many marketing challenges that are related to its business decision to be inside of a Japanese restaurant. Here are the top issues:

- No signage whatsoever
- No clarity on its Facebook page indicating their physical location inside the Japanese restaurant
- Not a natural fit in cuisines
- No menu or any printed materials
- No clarity on being a takeout business

I am not sure how this place can surmount these difficulties. An article in Bethesda Magazine, and one Yelp review are not sufficient publicity. This place has to rely on word of mouth and even more, on people specifically searching for pupusas in Bethesda.

I'd recommend that the "restaurant" seek out it's own space, even if only a food truck. Failing that, I would recommend it figure out a way of having a sign and a menu available within the Japanese restaurant. And definitely make it perfectly clear on its Facebook page that it's take out only.