

Cultivating Curb Appeal

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Tips for boosting traffic and sales with landscaping

Curb appeal is not just for real estate.

A landscaping strategy can not only drive traffic to your restaurant but also increase the average sale value per customer and keep them coming back for more.

An attractive curb appeal gets people to stop and look, in a world where attention is increasingly fragmented and distractions abound, this is a big deal. Curb appeal draws customers into the restaurant and can be the start of a memorable dining experience.

After all, unless someone has received a personal recommendation or used a website to choose your facility, their first impression is what either brings them in or drives them away.

A facility's overall feeling—from its external landscaping to its restroom design—creates a customer's impression of dining with you. Both consciously and subconsciously, customers immediately connect the outside appearance of a facility to the quality of the experience inside. After all, if the facility pays attention to the exterior, that must mean they pay attention to detail in general. This translates into a belief that if it is good outside, then it must be good inside. Good execution is not limited to the kitchen.

The Impact of Landscaping

Daryl Still, Vice President of Supply Chain at Boston Market, explained that landscaping has become a big part of their free standing locations. In the five years since the organization started implementing this model, average sales have increased 5 to 10 percent in these locations. Locations that did not improve their curb appeal did not experience increased sales. The program has resulted in increased transactions and average unit volumes compared to the strip mall locations, where exterior landscaping is very limited and store fronts look identical. Free-standing locations with a drive-through report an even greater increase in sales of 12 percent.

With a greater footprint in which to be creative, these Boston Market locations employ beautiful plants and shrubs and well-maintained lawns to create a cooler, fresher look. The key, according to Still, is to change out and maintain the features regularly. In some very warm climates, flowers are changed up to eight times a year, while in cooler climates, a seasonal change will suffice.

Dining al Fresco

Outdoor seating is one of the most popular elements of successful curb appeal. For restaurants that can offer it, the results are worth it.

Over the last two years, Smokey Bones has rolled out re-imagined designs at many locations. Corporate Facility Manager Bo Young explained that they have experienced a noticeable increase in traffic and revenue in locations where the redesign has been implemented.

The new Smokey Bones designs draw people's attention in with a large steel trellis, which is a prominent hardscaping feature that is taller than the building and really stands out. In locations where code allows, fire pits enhance the outdoor atmosphere. For locations with outdoor seating, the experience is augmented with fans, misters, televisions and a covered area. The goal, Young explained, is to get people to take notice and come in to try their new polished-casual venue. Once they are in the door, they'll see that it's not just about barbecue.

Restaurant Landscaping Ideas

The outdoor features of a restaurant are very climate specific, regardless of brand. Melding the brand with the local flavor is tantamount to creating a remarkable experience.

Here are a few landscaping ideas that have proven to be effective in attracting and retaining customers:

- Greet your guests with greenery. Plants are calming. Consider using greenery at the entrance, within the indoor and outdoor waiting areas, and throughout the facility. When choosing flowers, remember to select those that are not overly fragrant, which may detract from the food experience or cause allergy issues for sensitive customers.
- Make the most of patios. Outdoor seating and enclosed patios elevate the dining experience. There is a reason Europe is celebrated for its outdoor cafes. Even if climate or location doesn't permit outdoor seating, an indoor patio with interesting features or windows can go a long way to bring the outdoors in.
- Incorporate outdoor plants and rock gardens. Again, plants are calming, and rock gardens feel very meditative. When choosing outdoor plants, consider avoiding those known to attract bees in large numbers. While beautiful, bees are unwanted in the dining experience and can instigate unwelcome emergencies for those who are allergic.
- Dazzle with fire features. Fire features range from cozy to exciting. They exude a feeling of comfort, which makes guests feel welcome and invites them to linger. In cooler climates, the right outdoor fireplaces can also extend the al fresco dining season.
- Create visual interest with trellis and hardscaping. Paths, walls and walkways add to the pulled-together feeling of a restaurant. They can be as beautiful as they are practical and complement plants, shrubs and trees.
- Grow a garden, in addition to the typical plants, shrubs, trees and flowers, consider growing gardens inside as well as out. Vertical systems with herbs and other edibles create a very organic, farm-to-table feel and are currently trendy.

- Create calm with water features. Nothing soothes like running water— from small waterfall fountains to large koi ponds and babbling brooks, water can really enhance a space. Keep in mind that all water features come with a little extra maintenance (just like living, breathing plants).

Employee Benefits

According to a study at Virginia Tech, employees with an outside view of plants experience less job pressure and greater job satisfaction than workers viewing man-made objects or having no outside view. In addition, they are more productive.

Employees spend the most time at your facility. Making the environment conducive to their well-being makes them more equipped and enthusiastic to serve customers.

Let Your Brand Shine

The outside of your property or business is an extension of your image and brand to customers, clients and tenants. Think of it as your window display. It's a huge opportunity within your control, and when done well, it can act as a magnet to new and returning customers alike.

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