

## Martin Dinkele: Why consumers read signals not signs

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'What a pub looks like from the outside is important because it tells customers what to expect inside'

There is a pub near me that re-opened six months ago. It used to have a dodgy reputation. Now it's got a new name and a new look. When you go in it has great brands, the staff are friendly, it's comfortable and clean. The food looks good.

But there never seems to be many customers in there. Why?

The pub is smart and premium inside but the A boards and signs outside tell me different. The blackboards and signage tell me that the pub is cheap and cheerful, that the food is likely to be micro-waved, that it may not sell cask ale. It says "Quality Food" on a standard wooden sign but consumers tell us that actually means "Average Food".

That pub is losing the battle for new customers because the external says mainstream, but the experience is premium.

Customers are confused – everyday drinkers and diners are put off by the above average prices, the type of food, and the fact that it doesn't sell their favourite big brand. Those new customers with more money, who the pub is aimed at, think it's actually an everyday pub with everyday food and the same clientele it used to have before the refurb.

This is another example of how consumers "read" pubs. Like a book cover or that feeling you get when you meet someone new – first impressions count. It's the same with pubs. What a pub looks like from the outside is important because it tells customers what to expect inside.

When this pub was refurbished I suspect the intention was to target the type of customers that go to two other pubs in town. These two pubs always seem to be busy. People travel a long way for their food. The service is friendly. There's a good choice of ales and both have interesting wine lists. Their condiments do not come in hard-to-open sachets. Women feel comfortable.

The only signs on the external of these two pubs are blackboards. What is written on these blackboards changes daily. Last week one blackboard was advertising a "Meet the Brewer" evening. But it's not what is written, it's how it is written and how it looks that counts. Consumers read the signals not the signs.

On these two pubs there are no fixed signs with brewery logos telling me that they sell “Quality Food” or “Cask Conditioned Ales”. In fact, the lack of permanent signs tells me that these two pubs are quality pubs. If a large banner suddenly appeared, or a Sky Sports dish, or the blackboards started to be written in coloured chalks, or perma pens, I would suspect the pubs had changed owners or that they were chasing a different type of customer.

Consumers “read” pub externals this way and take notice of them for one good reason. Their impressions are usually correct. When these impressions are wrong – as they are for the pub near me - consumers get confused and carry on going to the other two pubs.