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Fit for the future

WITH PREDICTIONS OF A DOWNTURN FOR THE ECONOMY A STARK REALITY, THE UK LEISURE INDUSTRY IS LOOKING FOR A WAY TO PROTECT INCOME AND PROFITABILITY. HERE, **ANDY POWELL**, MANAGING DIRECTOR OF UK FIT-OUT EXPERT SPACETAILORS, EXAMINES STRATEGIES TO BOTH MAXIMISE ON SPACE AND PROVIDE REASONS TO VISIT, ENSURING THAT ALL-IMPORTANT COMPETITIVE EDGE

With the first anniversary of the credit crunch looming, a report has been issued by the CBI suggesting that the British economy will grow at its slowest pace in 17 years in the coming year as soaring oil and energy prices continue to take its toll on consumer spending. According to the report, the knock-on effect of this slowdown has been a fall in sales within the leisure industry at a rate not seen since 2001. Set against that, according to PKF Accountants & Business Advisers, the UK's hotel industry may see slower growth in 2008, but strong investment and new concepts will shape and drive the UK hotel market.

Whilst these mixed messages make the market hard to read, one thing is clear: competition for customers never ceases, and those who invest in the future, not only keep ahead of the curve, but are importantly better able to ride the vagaries of reductions in consumer spending. The need for innovation is brought into sharp focus with the slowdown in household spending witnessing millions cutting

back on leisure activities. This covers a broad spectrum from restaurant meals and nights in the pub to gym memberships and visits to the cinema, as people become much more discerning with their disposable income. As a result, more and more people are now basing their purchasing decisions on quality of experience rather than, for example, quantity.

Despite the doom and gloom, the leisure industry has responded well to these conditions with many companies investing in new facilities, refurbishment and restoration for their premises in an effort to continue attracting clientele. That's because most in business are in for the long haul, and realise that we cannot afford to relax, especially when market conditions are not so buoyant.

This level of commitment has injected a renewed dose of healthy competition into the industry with that sometimes overused word 'quality' winning out. It makes sense that when faced with the option of two cinema venues, both showing the latest Hollywood blockbuster, the consumer will inevitably decide upon a venue in

light of its facilities, services, atmosphere and level of comfort.

Key to delivering an enhanced consumer experience is ensuring that first impressions really do count. Upgrading and maintaining front-of-house and public areas is therefore of fundamental importance and is often necessary in sustaining customer loyalty.

For these areas to be distinguished from competitors, they should remain fresh and provide an attractive atmosphere. Importantly, small changes and maintenance work can often provide this and facility managers should not feel that they need to go the whole gambit when undertaking a refurbishment. Preventative or corrective maintenance will uphold a high quality standard and regular checks will highlight any potential issues, outlining the degree of refurbishment required.

Implementing the right components to ensure public areas effortlessly combine both design and functionality is also important. In addition to being sleek and modern, these areas must be useable and conform to strict health and safety measures. Disability Discrimination Act regulations need to be implemented and access to bars, screens (in the case of cinemas), restaurants and amenities all need to be taken into consideration. All of this combines to underline that space planning is vital.

Facilities managers undertaking refurbishment projects will understandably need to ensure that revenue streams continue whilst work is being completed. Companies can ensure minimal disruption by using contractors who are happy to work outside of opening hours where possible and light project management ensures facilities are clean and safe ready for the day's first customers.

Importantly, a quality programme of refurbishment can be achieved without 'blowing the bank'. Working with the right suppliers, working to a strict budget, with the right materials and ensuring a project comes in on time, guarantees a finished article that will draw a crowd.

So the message is clear, whether you operate a national chain or niche boutique operation, invest in your future. Plan for efficiencies, but not at the sacrifice of the customer experience. As they say at elections, the only vote that counts is the one at the polling booth. In the same way, the leisure industry has got to get real and engage with its customers to ensure loyalty, repeat visits and ultimately healthy income streams. ●