

Sugarhouse Aesthetics: What The Public Sees

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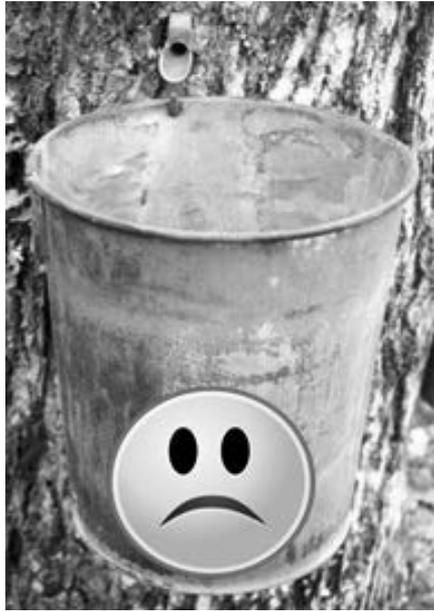
Aesthetics is defined as “concerned with notions such as beautiful and the ugly” related to emotion, sensation, and simply how something looks. As sugarmakers, we have a great responsibility to produce a quality product. We produce a luxury gourmet food that consumers choose to purchase. Some producers are also willing to open up their sugarhouse doors to show the buying public how we make the sweet treat. Repeat customers know the quality of product produced, but for many consumers the operation’s aesthetics are critical to their purchasing habits.

The fastest growing sector within the food industry continues to be locally grown food. Consumers today are more aware of and educated about the values of foods, and they want to know where the food comes from and how it’s made. Agritourism, defined as “any agriculturally based operation or activity that brings visitors to a farm,” is growing rapidly due to interest in locally grown food interests. With the growing disconnect between consumers and agriculture and growing interest in locally grown food, sugarmakers have a great opportunity to increase sales by bringing the customers to us.

Maple weekends and tours have done a great service to all producers as they bring customers out to see us and potentially buy our pure maple products. Unfortunately they can also be an opportunity to turn customers off from buying our products, not just from you but from any maple producer, due to what they may encounter during their visit. And there’s the additional risk of bad word-of-mouth: how many people will a dissatisfied customer tell about their bad experience, influencing their friends and families to not purchase maple products?

You may have heard the saying “don’t judge a book by its cover,” meaning don’t assume that something or someone is the same inside as what is presented on the outside. People do judge food by how it looks and the conditions of where it’s made, though. If you’re traveling somewhere and are

hungry would you stop by the diner that was clean inside and out or at the diner that looks like a dog couldn’t find a clean place to lie down? Firefighters are the only people I know who are willing to run into buildings the rest of us avoid. The public tastes with their eyes and nose as much as they do with their mouth. If the sugarhouse looks dirty and smells bad they are going to



assume that the product inside the container is dirty and tastes bad too. If jugs of syrup for sale are dirty they will assume that the syrup inside is dirty too.

Consumers have been trained by the commercial grocery industry which spends billions on marketing so we buy more products. Grocers understand that if shoppers are provided a safe, clean, comfortable environment they will stay longer and buy more. I'm not saying your sugarhouse needs to look like your local grocery store, but it does need to be clean and brightly lit and smell like you are making the luxury gourmet food product they have come to buy. To the public, if they see a clean operation it equals a clean product. If they see an operation that is dirty and messy, they will assume the product is dirty as well. Right or wrong, visual aesthetics directly relates to consumers' purchasing decisions.

Judgment of the quality of your syrup literally starts at the end of the driveway. If coming to visit you in a \$50,000 car, do you think a customer will pull off the pavement into a driveway that looks like it hosted the mud bog competition for the local 4-wheel drive club the night before? If they have to get out of the car and walk through mud or around unstacked firewood or barrels of syrup covered in mud they may never get out of the car. If the sugarhouse looks like nothing a quart of gas and a match wouldn't fix do you think they will go inside?

If you have put down gravel to keep a clean entry into the sugarhouse what do you think is the next thing of interest to the consumer? It's not buying syrup. Consumer research shows that restrooms rank as the #1 most important issue to customer satisfaction. They have traveled to see you and like most of us when we travel and make a stop, the restroom is the first thing sought out. Research shows that if the restroom experience is good consumers are more likely to stay longer and buy more. If the restrooms are dirty and unpleasant research shows the visit is shorter and shopping is less. This does not mean you must have multi-stall, separate gender restrooms – having one clean restroom will do. Even an outhouse will do fine if it is clean, well lit, and hopefully heated. Remember, first impressions are lasting impressions.



In any sugarhouse the activity revolves around the evaporator. To consumers that is the food processing center. It is up to us to welcome visitors

and educate them as to how and what is happening. Having educational displays goes a long way. I often walk in sugarhouses and see great displays of vintage or antique equipment from the past, however it's often not labeled as such. Consumers not familiar with the industry may think that the old rusty stuff is still being used, rather than an opportunity to learn about the history of our industry alongside all the modernizations that assure we are making

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a high quality, clean product for their enjoyment. You are setting impressions on the experience, but more importantly, the impression of your product. We know the display has nothing to do with the quality of product, yet to the consumer it does have an impact, especially with their discretionary income. Don't have Grandpa's old, rusty, dented, lead-based bucket and tap hanging on a tree outside the sugarcane house so they can watch the sap drip into it. Hang a new food grade metal or plastic bucket and tap for this purpose. Encourage them to look in it so they see that the syrup comes from the sap the tree provides us. It connects them to the process and understanding of how natural and pure our industry is.

Size of operation does not influence consumers as much as cleanliness.

Whether you are high-tech or low-tech you have a great opportunity to educate potentially new customers who may become the repeat customers, as long as they aren't scared off by what they taste with their eyes and nose without even letting a spoon full of pure liquid gold electrify the taste buds of their mouth. Look at your sugaring operation inside and out from a consumer's viewpoint, just like you would when you go to spend your hard earned dollars. You will see things you can do to enhance their experience and the chance they will return, simply by improving the aesthetics of their visit.

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