

## Motel 6 has designs on your business

*Damian Joseph*

*The budget lodging chain hired a designer of cruise ships and airline cabins to spruce up its look and lure in newly cash-conscious travelers.*



*Left, a cluttered Motel 6 room before the redesign. Right, the pared down, spacious new look*

Motel 6 hardly has a reputation for good design. At its best, the 47 year-old chain has been heralded for simple, no-frills efficiency. At its worst, it has been the punch line of jokes about dangerous roadside love-ins.

Executives wanted to revamp the chain's decade-old look. As part of its "Phoenix Project", kicked off by then-new CEO Olivier Poirot in September 2007, the design of the chain's rooms also came up for discussion. And so the company turned to Britain's Priestman Goode, which had previously designed airplane cabins for Virgin Atlantic and cruise ship berths for Norwegian Cruise Lines. Their experience, executives felt, would surely come in handy when tackling the small spaces of the standard Motel 6 room. Designers were briefed to keep construction costs low and to create rooms that could appeal to the broad cross-section of society, from tourists to traveling executives.

The results are starkly different from the previous incarnation. The carpet was ripped up, and wood-effect flooring lends a pared down, spacious look. Platform beds add modernity and character. Ambient lighting has replaced old-fashioned lamps, while accent walls painted with bright bold colors give the room a style just short of hip.

Storage under the bed

To stay within its budget (Motel 6 declined to share figures for this article), Priestman Goode aimed to get the most use out of every piece of furniture. "We had to reduce costs wherever we possibly could," says the design company's co-founder and director, Paul Priestman. In fact, the restrictions led to moments of design ingenuity. For instance, the firm designed one unit to house a flat-screen TV, closet space, and a lighting system. The new beds have space underneath for luggage storage, while there's a compact work area for business travelers. Recycled materials and energy efficient systems were also used.

The redesign comes at a time when the company is looking to market itself to corporate customers. Last year, the company pulled in \$60 million from business customers, but it forecasts \$100 million next year, despite the downturn. "In today's economic environment, increasing the value proposition through design is a smart decision," says Warren Marr, a director at PricewaterhouseCoopers who covers the hospitality and leisure industries. Motel 6 could even benefit from President Obama's stimulus package. "Federal funding for large-scale

infrastructure projects, like highways and bridges, will create jobs, and a lot of those jobs are in trades like construction," says Marr. In other words, the projects may see demand grown for cheap, local lodging.

The first all-new Motel 6 was introduced on May 22 in Santa Barbara, Calif., and to date nearly 60% of the chain has been revamped. (The modular design elements are constructed in a factory before being sent directly to site for installation.) So far, the reaction has been enthusiastic. "Virtually everybody is excited about this room," says Jeff Palmer, the company's executive vice-president for sales and marketing. "From guest comment cards and our Facebook page, we see that 98% of guests are thrilled about the room."

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