

Serving Up the Best Sounding Cup Improves Your Bottom Line

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Today's coffee shops and tea houses are not yesterday's coffee shops and tea houses so why should they sound like them? Turns out, today's customer would likely be as specific about their opinion on the sound in a coffee shop as they are when ordering their favorite beverage. In a 2015 dining trends survey by Zagat, the number two complaint by patrons, after service issues, was excessive ambient noise. The bad news is, most patrons will take their opinion out the door instead of sharing it. Perhaps the shop next door will have a more pleasant ambience? Considering the competitiveness of this market, you want to be the shop that's figured it out.

To solve these issues, we must identify what is going on in these acoustically challenged spaces. When you combine the sound generated by a music system, patrons trying to converse, staff communicating and the inherent noise from coffee making equipment, it builds up and reaches a point where the energy in the room is no longer able to be absorbed or dissipated. Moreover, design trends have evolved towards very open spaces (high ceilings) with hard surfaces (wood, metal, stone, tile, glass) which are very reflective of sound. This wide variety of sound bounces off these reflective surfaces and drives up the baseline volume which causes people to talk louder. The increased noise causes the music to be turned up and this cycle is repeated resulting in a high volume, unintelligible mass of noise.

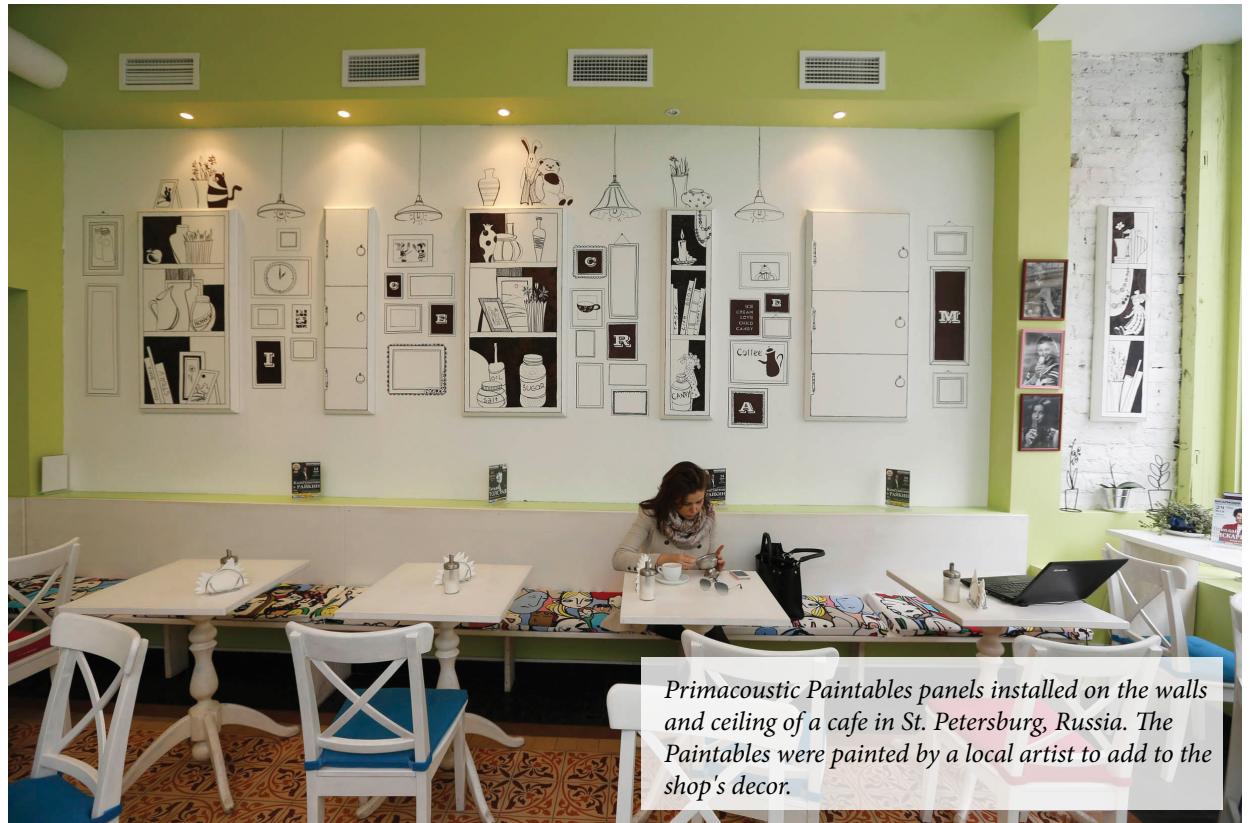
There are presumptions that attempt to find justification for higher noise levels. Some think that the energy in the room makes it more exciting which in turn will perhaps increase sales or that the noise may cause tables to turn more quickly. Although these may hold some degree of truth with a segment of a younger crowd, can your business afford to turn off the larger segment of the coffee drinking population?

It may be a surprise to learn that most people start to lose their hearing as early as their 30s. This is when they start to have issue with masking out background noise and focusing on speech. A noisy shop will naturally become a turn off. Also, an increasing amount of the population is wearing hearing aids and, while these devices do a great job of improving someone's ability to hear, they usually just exacerbate the issue of high volume background noise. Even with the latest digital noise reduction technological advances in hearing aids, background noise remains a problem.

Addressing noise

In order to resolve the excess noise, acoustically absorbent materials should be incorporated; either as part of the initial design, or as an aftermarket addition. In the design phase, acoustic panels can be strategically placed within the ceiling structure or on walls and incorporated into the design of the space. Similarly, post construction, ceilings and walls offer opportunities to help tailor the acoustics of the space.

Some may hesitate to address the acoustics or noise problem in their establishment believing the cost to be prohibitive. In fact, most can be acoustically 'repaired' for between \$2500 and \$10,000 depending on the size.



Primacoustic Paintables panels installed on the walls and ceiling of a cafe in St. Petersburg, Russia. The Paintables were painted by a local artist to add to the shop's decor.

Since most shops are in commercial areas, attention must be paid to fire safety. Panels that are safe for use in commercial applications will have been tested by an independent lab to ensure they pass ASTM-E83 (United States), Can/UL S108 (Canada) or EIN-36535 (Europe).

Selection and placement

When using high density glass wool panels for instance, the most common choice is to install between 20% to 25% wall coverage. Alternatively, panels may also be hung from the ceiling. Placement is not critical. It is more about controlling and reducing the excessive energy build-up in the room.

The thickness and density of the panel will dictate the absorption range. The thicker the panel, the lower the frequencies you will absorb.

Architectural Concerns

Most panel manufacturers offer basic neutral stock colors but panels can also be covered on site using any decorative fabric so long as it is breathable. More recently a paintable panel has come to market that enables the user to spray the panel on site using standard latex paint to match or compliment an existing color scheme. These paintable panels can also be used as an artist would use a canvas.

If you are handy with a screw gun, you can easily fix the acoustics in a matter of hours. Your next cup of coffee or tea will never have tasted better.

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