

Retail Rejuvenation

Smart design sparks sales

By Phillip M. Perry

Great ads and a good reputation draw shoppers to your store. Once they've arrived, though, customers need inspiration to open their wallets. That's where smart design pays off: Your retail interior can be a silent salesperson that turns browsers into buyers.

"A great retail look is critical in today's market," says Barbara Crowhurst, a retail-makeover specialist based in Toronto. "The interior of your store is more important than ever because shoppers have more choices as to where to shop."

Does your own store need a makeover? Here are some ways to create retail sizzle by fine-tuning vital areas such as lighting, color, traffic flow and displays.

LIGHTING

"Lighting is the No. 1 influencer of sales in your store," notes Crowhurst. "Many stores rely on a bank of fluorescent bulbs, but the result is often a monochromatic environment in which nothing really pops out." Crowhurst recommends track lighting in selected locations as a way of highlighting merchandise displays to attract customer attention.

Is your store bright enough? A dark store can be a real turnoff, cautions Crowhurst. "A store looks closed if light on the outside is brighter than inside." If you can't get the interior sufficiently bright when viewed from the outside, try adding spot lighting to your windows.

Here are some additional lighting tips:

- Light your merchandise — not just your store.
- Position spot lighting to highlight your best displays.

- Mix incandescent with fluorescent lights to add variety.
- Got a small store? Make it look bigger by lighting the walls and ceiling. And brightly lit sidewalls can visually stretch a narrow display room.

COLOR

"A change in color can give your store an exciting new personality," says Bob Phibbs, a retail consultant in Long Beach, Calif. "Even the merchandise will suddenly look fresh under a bright new color scheme." Conversely, he adds, great merchandise will look drab in a store with faded color. "You want to occasionally change your store's look so people go, 'Wow, that's really different!'"

It's tempting to opt for the easy (and safe) choice of white or off-white for the entirety of your store. But you can give your display space personality without going overboard. "It's OK to use white, but at least add another color in selected areas," advises Phibbs. "I have seen good presentations where the front of the store is in sage green, for example, but the back is white." That helps brighten the rear of the showroom, which attracts shoppers.

Here are some additional color tips:

- Choose neutral palettes to avoid clashing with merchandise. Beige, cream, off-white, gray and tan help shoppers stay focused on your displays.
- Use brighter colors to highlight selected departments and draw browsers to isolated areas of your store. Bright greens, clear blues, ruby reds and sunny yellows can shout, "Pay attention!"

- Change wall and ceiling colors to attract customers to smaller display areas branching off your main showroom.

DISPLAY

Relocate key departments to maximize sales. "Position your displays of destination merchandise to draw customers through your store," suggests David A. Fields, managing director of Ascendant Consulting, Ridgefield, Conn. "Destination merchandise" or "demand merchandise" refers to items your customers have in mind prior to their arrival at your store. "Do people often visit your store to purchase particular items for which you have built a reputation?" asks Fields. "Consider putting that merchandise in the back of your store." When customers walk by your other departments on the way to destination items, like pool and spa chemicals, they will be inspired to load up their shopping carts with impulse purchases.

Fields also suggests observing your common customer traffic patterns, then positioning displays that draw people to the less-traveled portions of your showroom. "If people tend to enter a certain aisle from one end, put demand merchandise at the other end to pull traffic down the entire aisle," he says. Each key department should have a focal display that shows how to use the merchandise or highlights benefits. If possible, show the product in use. And highlight your presentation with a spotlight.

Pay special attention to the "impulse area" of your store around the checkout. "Your register area is prime real estate, and your best makeover dollars are spent there," notes Fields.

“The front end can be worth 10 times your other store areas. It can produce an enormous amount of profit if you spend some time on your displays.”

Good displays make impulse buying easier. Design bright, attractive presentations that communicate benefits. And limit the number of displayed items. Don't fall into the trap of giving shoppers too much variety.

“People cannot make impulse decisions when they have to evaluate a huge number of choices,” cautions Fields. “Just display two or three of your best sellers.”

ENVELOPE

No matter how great your sales message, shoppers will be turned off by a shabby envelope. Floors, walls, ceil-

ings and fixtures together create a merchandise container. Address them in your store makeover.

“You don't want the condition of your store to detract from your merchandise,” cautions Crowhurst. “Shabby interiors affect how customers feel about your store. I often see very poorly kept floors, in particular.”

How about your fixtures? Are they fresh and attractive? Or are they a mix of old and new materials picked up at various times? “Shabby fixtures take away from product presentation,” says Crowhurst.

Signage should be clean and highly visible, with a limited number of colors. Above each major department, hang a sign visible throughout the store. And mount one that draws people to the back of your store past displays of impulse merchandise. Finally, post smaller eye-level signs that describe important benefits of your best merchandise.

Here are some more envelope tips:

- Fix any missing or stained ceiling tiles.
- Try breaking the monotony of plain walls with selected materials such as paper, fabric, metal or wood.
- Consider creating a bi-level ceiling or floor.

STOREFRONT

Customers can't respond to your great store interior if they never get inside. And what will draw them in? Your store exterior. “The front of your store is the No. 1 marketing opportunity to the consumer world,” says Crowhurst.

A great storefront means more than fresh paint and a new sign. It also includes sparkling window displays that stop passersby in their tracks. While many window presentations have closed backs, they can prevent people from looking deep into your store where they may see merchandise they want. Consider either an open back or the use of materials such as partial shutters or hanging banners that create a divide without breaking the line of sight. Above the windows, consider mounting an awning with your store name.

Finally, try to add accoutrements that make your store look warm and inviting. “Consider buying some planted containers for your storefront

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and putting flowers in them,” suggests Phibbs. “This takes a little work but can soften a cold retail space.”

DESIGN FOR SUCCESS

There’s no cookie-cutter formula for a successful store makeover. The best

redesigns are personalized statements that communicate a personality and a merchandising statement. “As an independent retailer you want to come up with a look that is your own,” advises Tom Shay, a St. Petersburg, Fla., retail consultant. “When

customers walk in they should know exactly who you are and what you stand for. A beautiful store should be a reflection of its owner.” ~

Phillip M. Perry is a New York-based writer and consultant.

Liven Up Your Store

A makeover can make your store come alive. Here are pointers from retail-design consultants:

- Steer customers by your displays. Directional lighting, color blocks, signage and aisle design, combined with careful positioning of destination merchandise, can draw customers through your entire store to increase impulse sales.
- Create easy-to-read signs. Our aging population appreciates large letters against contrasting backgrounds. Avoid ornate letter design.
- Consider banners of canvas or fabric to break up the showroom.
- Choose the right light for your needs. Natural light appeals to shoppers but can fade some materials. Incandescent, while expensive, offers a warm look and can highlight key merchandise displays. Fluorescent is economical but can appear cold.
- Use spot lighting to brighten darker corners of your store.
- Select colors that create a mood. Gray, blue, green and violet create a restful, cool look. Red, yellow and orange are warm and cheerful.
- Consider materials that create a personality. Wood offers old-time charm, masonry provides solidity, metal and glass reflect modernity, plastics can offer a high-tech look.

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