

Visual Merchandising

Visual merchandising is the practice in the retail industry of developing floor plans and three-dimensional displays in order to maximize sales.

Both goods and services can be displayed to highlight their features and benefits. The purpose of such visual merchandising is to attract, engage, and motivate the customer towards making a purchase.

Visual merchandising commonly occurs in retail spaces such as stores.



History

When the giant nineteenth century dry goods establishments like [Marshall Field & Co.](#) shifted their business from wholesale to retail, the visual display of goods became necessary to attract the general consumers. The store windows were often used to attractively display the store's merchandise. Over time, the design aesthetic used in window displays moved indoors and became part of the overall interior store design, eventually reducing the use of display windows in many suburban malls.

In the twentieth century, well-known artists such as [Salvador Dalí](#) and [Andy Warhol](#) created window displays.

In the beginning of twenty-first century, visual merchandising is forming as a science. Nowadays, visual merchandising became one of the major tool of business promotion which is widely used to attract customers and increase sales.

[WindowsWear](#) is a community and database of visual merchandising from around the world.

Contribution to Retail Brand Strategy

Visual merchandising contributes to a brand's personality and the characteristics associated with the brand. The design of the store should reflect this as part of their retail brand strategy. This includes the in-store environment and brand communications used, such as signage and images displayed in-store. These visual elements play a part in building a retail brand and therefore they help a brand differentiate itself from its competitors, create brand loyalty, and allows for a brand to place premium pricing on their products. Part of the brand strategy used in visual merchandising is research into the brand's target market to find out what their customers' values and self-images are. This information can allow the retailer to cater the design of a store and their advertising to match their consumers.

Store Layout

The layout of a store is a significant factor for the maintenance of a thriving business, which can help advance sales and profitability. An effective store layout encourages consumers to shop the entire store and view an extensive assortment of merchandise. The most common forms of store layouts include grid layout, racetrack layout and free form layout. Choosing a store layout depends on the type of store and the nature of the product sold. A grid layout is generally organized in a rectangular shape, which allows customers to shop quickly and maximize shop floor space, ideal for a supermarket or hardware store. A racetrack layout ensures that the consumer only follows one path when browsing the store. This is beneficial in the sense that the consumer will come into contact with every product on the shelf. However, this can irritate customers. Customers may feel that they are being forced to follow a certain path, and can be frustrating when trying to make a quick purchase. Free form layout is a suitable layout for a store that encourages browsing. This type of layout is more relaxed in its structure, which leaves the customer feeling less rushed. The entrance of the store, otherwise known as the transition zone, is an important area in the store. The term "transition zone" was first coined by retail anthropologist Paco Underhill. This is an area where all shoppers pass on entry into store, and is significant as this zone is where consumers can observe the stimuli and sense the general vibe of the store. Therefore, thoughts and representations a consumer has about the store and the brand depend on this area. When customers enter the transition zone they need time to adjust to the new environment including the lighting, the temperature and other sights and sounds. Higher profit margin items aren't recommended to be placed in that area because customers don't notice it while they are preoccupied with adjusting to the new environmental stimuli. Spatial design of a retail store is a key aspect when it comes to creating an enjoyable experience, and is also an effective way of communicating with customers.

Mannequins

Mannequins are used by apparel retailers to display their products in-store and in the window display. They are a tool used to show consumers what their products look like on a person. The mannequins will commonly be styled to match trends as well display the latest products available. A study found that retailers projected an ideal image to consumers with the size and proportions of the mannequins. This is used to further reinforce the characteristics of their target market. However, consumers found the size of mannequins to be unrealistic but would give a favorable response to the mannequins when they were headless. This was because the participants in the study found the faces of the mannequins unrealistic and could not relate to them. Therefore, it is important for retailers to understand the thoughts and opinions of consumers on visual stimuli such as mannequins so they can create a more desirable shopping environment for the consumers.

Point of Purchase Display

Merchandise must be visible, easy to access, and there must be a range of merchandise to choose from. Having visible merchandise is essential for retailers as consumers not only "buy what they see" but are also able to tangibly engage with the physical product. This creates an emotional connection, which can drive the customer to purchase the product. The physical positioning of the product also increases visibility. Products at eye level also get more attention. "Eye level is buy level". Considering these elements when merchandising gives the customer a sense of freedom of choice. "Less is more" is a key principle in visual merchandising. Although having a wide variety of stock and product options is important for consumers, it is also important not to overwhelm the consumer. Having too many choices can be confusing to consumers and that phenomenon is referred to as the "tyranny of choice". Arranging stock so it is not overcrowded, and limiting the amount of merchandise on the shop floor, are important aspects of merchandising. Overcrowded stores can create a sense of stress and anxiety, which does not encourage the consumer to shop the entire store.

A limited product selection can make the purchasing decision easier. In a study done at a high end supermarket in California by psychologist Shenne Iyengar and Mark Lepper, there were two tables of jam samples, one with 24 flavors and the other with 6 flavors. More shoppers were attracted to the booth with the larger selection, 60%, as opposed to 40% being attracted to the smaller selection, but the sales that resulted from that were surprising. Only 3% bought from the larger selection and 30% from the smaller suggestion.

Bundling

Bundling is promoting objects that work together as a set. It inspires people how to use the products in their lives and also makes complementary product suggestions. In a fashion retail store, complete outfits on a mannequin or the placement of tops beside jackets and bags by other accessories such as scarves and jewelry are an example of bundling. The store has already done work in envisioning the look the items can be used to achieve. Bundling also directs attention to specific products thereby limiting the product selection presented.

Atmospherics

The atmospherics also have a large influence on the store environment. Atmospherics should all coordinate with each other to create a consistent ambience and positively influence the consumer's shopping experience and buying decision-making process. Visuals such as light and display are not always enough to enhance the overall ambience of the store, and retain customer attention; therefore, other elements such as music and scents can be used.

Light

Light can be used in many ways in retail stores, from highlighting an object or area of a store to simply illuminate the entire store. Bright light can create a sense of honesty, positivity, and can promote impulse purchasing. Lighting can also be used to highlight the store layout and urge customers to flow through the store, exposing them to more merchandise. The level of brightness in the store is a very important factor in consumer behavior and the retail environment, as rooms that have dim lighting are less arousing than more brightly lit spaces. (Areni, 1994). Lighting can influence the customer's decision making, behavior, and also the overall spatial environment as lighting and ambiance are connected. Customers become more stimulated when the lighting in the room is considered to be very bright and speeds up the pace at which customers purchase products. Markin recommended that in order to slow the pace customers shop at, the merchandiser should adopt a softer lighting technique which will increase the amount of time customers spend in the store. (Areni, 1994). The result of this is a possible increase in the amount of merchandise the stores customer's purchase. This shows us that the differing levels of in store lighting can directly affect the amount of time consumers spend in the store. (Areni, 1994).

The lighting inside a retail store can be used strategically to highlight products on display or to create a comfortable environment for consumers. It is an important element used (alongside music, temperature, fragrance, and layout) in retail to create an atmosphere that matches with the brand's personality. Atmosphere of a retail store is significant as it was found that the mood of a customer will affect their buying behavior. A retailer can use soft lighting to create a calm and peaceful atmosphere for the customer or bright lighting to represent a fun and vibrant feeling associated with the brand. The strategic use of light can change the mood of a consumer and affect their subconscious mind during their shopping experience within a retail store.

Music

The music played within a store can promote a brand's image, and can also aid consumers into making purchase decisions. Music that suits the style of the store and the target audience is an important factor to consider. Music with a slow tempo can cause the consumer to relax; therefore, they spend more time in the store. This leads to more contact with merchandise and increased purchasing. Having music, which is popular within the target market, can also encourage consumers to linger in the store longer. For example, a store with a teenage target market should consider playing pop music, as this is a genre that a younger audience commonly enjoys. Playing this genre will make their shopping experience more enjoyable, which can result in them staying longer in the store, exposing them to more merchandise, and influencing possible purchasing decisions.

Window display

Visual merchandising is a multi-sensory tool used by retailers to catch the attention of customers and attract them into a store to make a purchase. The first piece of visual merchandising customers encounter with a brand is the window display. Window displays are used as an initial attraction to bring customers into a store and are also used as a marketing tool to communicate the brand's image to the consumers as well as to distinguish itself from its competitors.

The importance of the window display is that it is a touch point consumers have with the brand. By generating interest or curiosity with the window display, a brand can leave an impression on the consumer and furthermore the consumer can figure out the quality and character of the products the brand has to offer. An appealing window display can create desire of products from that brand and therefore help with generating sales.

A study in Nottingham, England of the pharmacy and beauty retailer Boots, has found that products introduced in a window display increases the sales of those products and even help with increasing the sales of products which have low sales. Overall, stores who had a window display had a positive increase in sales compared to those who did not.

Colour is a powerful tool in exterior displays. It can aid creativity for exterior window displays and can have a unique effect on the consumer. The use of color can create atmosphere, grab the attention of by-passers, and attract them to the store. Different colors can trigger different emotional responses. For example, blue can trigger a calm response, green and brown can promote restfulness, warm colours such as red, orange and yellow can initiate exciting, cheerful, friendly, vibrant, stimulating reactions, purple can give the impression of elegance and sophistication, while grey colours can give off a depressing, dull feel. Using colors that associate with a certain product or brand representation is also a useful technique when planning window displays. For example, using neutral colors such as green and brown when promoting environmentally friendly products is favorable, as they give off an earthy, relaxing effect; therefore, the consumer perceives those products as environmentally friendly.

Colour is a significant tool used in visual merchandising. It can be used to influence the behavior of consumers and evoke different reactions. Each color can make consumers feel a different emotion, and therefore, retailers will use colors selectively to help consumers make associations about their products on display. Bright and warm colors such as red and yellow can be used to attract attention as well as excite the viewer. Cooler colors such as blue and green gives a calm and tranquil response to the viewer while purple gives the feeling of sophistication and elegance. A mixture of colors to create a contrasting background to the products on display can have a high recall rate by consumers. International retailers need to be wise on their choice of colors used in visual merchandising as colors take a different meaning in different countries. For example, red is seen as a color of luck and good fortune in many Asian countries while it represents danger and excitement in Western countries. Therefore, global retailers are not able to use one set of colors for their visual merchandising across all their stores around the world.

Lighting

Lighting is another technique, which can be used to enhance window displays. Lighting can be used to highlight certain products, and create dimension and set the mood for the window display. It is a successful tool as it can not only be used to highlight product during the day, but at night also. The brightness and colours of lighting can be adjusted to suit the mood of the display. Once again, different colours trigger different emotions and therefore create different moods.

Seasonal displays

Adjusting window displays based on seasonal events, calendar dates, and consumerism-based holidays such as Christmas, Valentine's Day, and Father's Day can be a useful approach to encourage consumer purchasing. Choosing products that suit the season to display in the window can remind consumers to purchase gifts and provide gift ideas for the particular holiday.

Fashion trends

Window displays can be used to set trends; therefore, window display designers must always be one step ahead of trends and predict future fashion movements. The merchandise must be able to direct these trends to the target audience, and be able to communicate them in a way so the audience is able to understand. Clothing must be styled on mannequins appropriately with popular clothing to draw consumer attention to the store.

Tools

A floor map helps visual merchandisers to find the best place for garments, according to the color stories of clothes and footwear in the shop. It is a kind of floor plan with merchandise marked. Another valuable tool is a planogram, to determine the visual look of your store's flow.