

Merchandising Matters



BY JENNIFER BRINGLE

WE'VE ALL SEEN IT: THAT STORE WITH the cluttered, disorganized sales floor, or the schizophrenic shop that doesn't seem to have any sort of rhyme or reason to its organization of merchandise, or the sparse space that could use a good dose of accessorizing.

In a time when retailers are increasingly pressured to establish a strong digital presence via websites, social media, blogs and more, the brass tacks of running their business can sometimes get lost in the shuffle. But any successful retailer will tell you that in-store merchandising is just as critical to their business as any digital marketing initia-

tive. And in a world where consumers are more distracted than ever, capturing their attention in your store is critical.

"Merchandising really helps to put products into context for customers," said Ani Collum,

partner and retail consultant at Retail Concepts, a retail consulting firm. "Consumers are bombarded in this omni-channel world with so many messages. They have lots of places to get products, but if you have them captivated in your store with really good messaging and displays, it suddenly becomes a lot more of a unique experience and creates urgency. If you just display things and let the product speak for itself, you're shortchanging the experience a customer can have."

THINKING LIKE A CUSTOMER

The first step to creating a strong merchandising strategy is to put yourself into



your customer's shoes, according to Collum.

"We always encourage retailers to take some time before you open or when it's quiet and walk through the store, starting from the outside, and literally walk it as if you're the customer," she said. "Just look at everything and look at things like, 'Is it easy to discern what my store name is?' A lot of times the store doesn't have anything marketing the name of the store. Or are your windows being covered by community messages? We advocate for smaller stores to be involved in the community, but have a dedicated spot in the store done in an on-brand way where those things can be posted without being distracting."

While walking, be sure there's plenty of room for parents to navigate the sales floor.

"A lot of times retailers aren't thinking about the target consumer," Collum said. "Are your aisles wide enough for strollers? Is it easy to navigate the store? If you're in an urban location with a lot of people walking

with strollers, it can really impact sales."

Collum also said it's important to remember that all customers are not alike, and thus, they don't all shop the same way.

"Another big mistake a lot of small stores make is forgetting you have two kinds of customers — verbal and nonverbal," she said. "The verbal customer is a really easy sale opportunity, but the nonverbal likes to shop on their own terms and can be distracted. If the product is not merchandised in a way that's approachable for those people with the appropriate signage, you can lose some major sales opportunities. For example, all items in Crate and Barrel have on-brand signage that explains what products do. If you have products displayed in a way that's purposeful with informative, on-brand signage, it can make a world of difference."

BUILD YOUR SPACE

Thinking strategically about the space in a store is one of the most important ways

Underpriced Furniture Superstore utilizes vertical space to display furniture and reduce sales floor clutter.

retailers can create displays that really capture the attention of customers.

"Typically, customers go to the right when they walk into a store," Collum said. "And a lot of times when people are setting their store up, they don't think about that. So it's important to strategically think about what you want on that side of the store, and make sure there aren't any barriers like big tables in the way — thinking strategically about what goes in that front right-hand corner is very important."

At GreenPea Baby and Child in Cary, N.C., owner Krista Cathey and her staff keep front-of-store displays fresh with seasonal arrangements designed to capture shoppers' attention the moment they step into the store.

"We have two tables at the front that are seasonal," Cathey said. "You definitely want to call out what's going on at the time. And it's a good way to keep things fresh. You don't want people coming in and seeing the exact same display every time. People will notice."

GreenPea sells everything from furniture to apparel and offers nursery design services to its clients. Cathey and her team build room vignettes and displays designed to not just sell products, but spark ideas and provide inspiration.

"We have people who come in and say, 'I want it exactly like you have it here,'" she said. "It's that Pottery Barn way of looking at merchandising — putting it all together so that it's easy for the customer. People are very visual; you have to make the displays in a way that they can see themselves or their **p18**



Ani Collum

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kids in these spaces.”

Many retailers, particularly those selling furniture, also grapple with the problem of figuring out how to display as many items as they'd like in the space they have. At Under-priced Furniture Superstore in Norcross, Ga., owner and president Mike Hall has incorporated a vertical merchandising strategy in his store to display more products without cluttering the sales floor.

Hall said the technique also allows the customer to see more options available. In the bedroom area, the store perches select case pieces on shelves near the beds. The display area also shows product photos featuring beds in different finishes than what is shown on the actual product. The full-line store has increased its overall display area to about 100,000 square feet from 72,000. In the youth area, they are able to show 30% more product than before.

“We set out to create a different environment and attribute it to stepping out and being different and treating the customer as they should be treated,” Hall said. “We approach the business radically different than the traditional retailer does. We want to give

the customer a good experience.”

SENDING A MESSAGE

In a perfect world, every customer who walks through the door will have a sales person there to walk them through displays, help them select products and make suggestions that will increase sales. But no retailer lives in a perfect world, and there are days when the store is incredibly busy, or when staff is short due to sickness or other unforeseen absences.

That's when in-store messaging can really make a difference.

Collum said retailers can use creative messaging in displays to boost sales without knocking customers over the head with a sales pitch.

“If a retailer sells a diaper bag, they can create additional upsale opportunities with a simple chalkboard planogram with something like, ‘Here’s the 10 things you need, and



On-brand signage around the store appeals to non-verbal customers.



here's how you pack them in the bag,” Collum said. “Then you can add other products from the store. The thing to

remember with messaging is that if it's not done in a way that's purposeful and thinking about how the customer is going to want or need it, it becomes noise.”

Cathey incorporates that kind of messaging in her store with signs that identify products as ideal for shower gifts, and in less

Seasonal displays keep things fresh at GreenPea Baby and Child.

overt ways, like in choosing items to accessorize room vignettes.

“We use our vignettes to merchandise products from other categories,” she said. “We try to work in what works with that room vignette — such as a basket of swaddles for a bedroom.”

Many of these things cost little to no money for retailers, which is something Collum routinely reminds her clients. While there certainly is a time investment involved, she said the return on that investment usually far outweighs the cost.

“Merchandising is something you don't have to invest a lot of money in to do it right,” Collum said. “There are things you can do with fun vinyls, and on Etsy you can get frames and other things to use to feature a product in a display. Pinterest is a good place to look for D.I.Y. design inspiration. People shouldn't be afraid to take risks and push the boundaries [through] thinking about what's going to make that customer enjoy the experience and convert to additional sales.” ■

Furniture/Today associate editor Thomas Russell contributed to this report.



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