

Influence of Visual Merchandising on Consumer

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Introduction:

The retailing sector, an important agribusiness option, is witnessing a paradigm shift having long-term implications on the way food retailing will evolve in the emerging economies like India. The organized food retail industry in India is still at the infancy stage with a share of less than one per cent in the total food retail market, in spite of the fact that food is the largest component in the consumer's spending basket. Retailers are trying to capture a larger share of consumer's spending by expanding their product portfolio. The share of private labels in the basket of key food retailers is also increasing, with in-house brands competing fiercely with well-established brands. Further, with the opening of supermarkets and international corporate groups are quickly grabbing investment opportunities in the Indian retail sector and the quantum of investments is likely to skyrocket. Amidst this competition where products and quality will be almost similar, the only point of differentiation will be the 'experience' that the consumers will get while shopping. The biggest role of providing the shoppers with an unforgettable experience will be that of visual merchandising. In the present competition the retailers are leaving no stone unturned to gain the loyalty of the consumer. One bad experience, the loyal consumer is gone for good. This not only imply assuring good shopping experience every time a consumer enters a store, but also to retain them by ensuring an impressive visual treat. We get one chance to create the first everlasting impression. This would either create a loyal consumer or would eliminate their chance of ever stepping into the store again. A store that projects a different image and branding definitely gains

in the long term. With this competition in the retailing, only merchandise and the brand name of the retailer would not help eliminate the competitors. Instead, more attention and fine detailing needs to be done in terms of designing the store, visual merchandising in the store, competitiveness in pricing, availability of products, etc.

In this information laden consumer world, shoppers are increasingly asking for better and newer products. Most of the times, the consumer is more knowledgeable than the store employees. With the above facts a successful retailing business requires that a distinct and consistent image be created in the customer's mind that permeates all product and service offerings. Visual merchandising is the answer for raising the bar of what retailers and the store employee should know. Visual merchandising can take the retail experience to a different level. Visual merchandising can help create that positive customer image that leads to successful sales. It not only communicates the store's image, but also reinforces the stores advertising efforts and encourages impulse buying by the customer. Visual merchandising is a major factor often overlooked in the success or failure of a retail store. It is second only to effective customer relations.

What is Visual Merchandising?

Visual merchandising can be defined as everything the customer sees, both exterior and interior, that creates a positive image of a business and results in attention, interest, desire and action on the part of the consumer. A story can be told that communicates to the prospective customer what the store is all about. It includes the dramatic presentation of merchandise as well as other important, subtle features that create the store's overall atmosphere. Visual merchandising is the art of implementing effective design ideas to increase store traffic and sales volume. VM is an art and science of displaying merchandise to enable maximum sale. VM is a tool to achieve sales and targets, a tool to enhance merchandise on the floor, and a mechanism to communicate to a customer and influence his decision to buy. VM uses season based displays to introduce new arrivals to customers, and thus increase conversions through a planned and systematic approach by displaying stocks available.

Visual merchandising is the activity of promoting the sale of goods, especially by their presentation in retail outlets (New Oxford Dictionary of English, 1999, Oxford University Press). This includes combining products, environments, and spaces into a stimulating and engaging display to encourage the sale of a product or service. Visual merchandising is not a mere arrangement of products but goes deeper and wider into the essence of physicality of the store (Davies and Ward, 2005). It has become such an important element in retailing that a team effort involving the senior management, architects, merchandising managers, buyers, the visual merchandising director, designers, and staff is needed.

Eighty percent of our impressions are created by sight; that is why one picture is worth a thousand words (Bastow-Shoop et al., 1991). Each customer has a mental image of a store and its merchandise. A store should have an inviting appearance that makes the customer feel comfortable and yet eager to buy.

Visual merchandising starts with the store building itself. The management decides on the store design to reflect the products the store is going to sell and how to create a warm, friendly, and approachable atmosphere for its potential customers. Many elements can be used by visual merchandisers in creating displays including color, lighting, space, product information, sensory inputs (such as smell, touch, and sound), as well as technologies such as digital displays and interactive installations.

It is more like an art in the sense that there are implicit rules but they may be broken for striking effects. The main principle of visual merchandising is that it is intended to increase sales, which is not the case with a "real" art. Visual merchandising is one of the final stages in trying to set out a store in a way that customers will find attractive and appealing and it should follow and reflect the principles that underpin the store's image. Visual merchandising is the way one displays 'goods for sale' in the most attractive manner with the end purpose of making a sale. "If it does not sell, it is not visual merchandising."

Recently visual merchandising has gained in importance as a quick and cost effective way to revamp retail stores. Traditional levers of competition, such as assortment, service and customer and market segmentation are no longer the buzzword. More people are placing extra emphasis on interior design which has progressed from the shop fitting to entertaining and inspiring the consumers, and hence providing added value to the store. Consumers respond both consciously and unconsciously to visual clues when they visit a store. Visual merchandising is an artistic method to ensure that merchandise sells faster. It's a tool to appeal to the visual senses of the customer. It is gaining popularity with the introduction of self service in retail services. There is increased emphasis on store layout, building, fixtures, equipment, colour displays, silent communication tools and window display. In store displays have taken the art of retailing to a higher level.

The basic objective for visual merchandising is a desire to attract customers to a place of business in order to sell the merchandise. Visual merchandising is offered to the customer through exterior and interior presentation. Each should be coordinated with the other using the store's overall theme. Creating and maintaining a store's visual merchandising plan, however, is not a simple task. It is necessary to continually determine what the customer sees. The VM from the customer's perspective should start on the exterior and work completely through the interior of the store. The top five tips for visual merchandising are entice, impact, inspire, identify and add on .

Visual Merchandising helps in

- * Educating the customers about the product/service in an effective and creative way.
- * Establishing a creative medium to present merchandise in 3D environment, thereby enabling long lasting impact and recall value.
- * Setting the company apart in an exclusive position.
- * Establishing linkage between product, product design and marketing by keeping the product in prime focus.
- * Combining the creative, technical and operational aspects of a product and the business.
- * Making it easier for the shopper to locate the desired category and merchandise.
- * Making it easier for the shopper to self-select.
- * Making it possible for the shopper to co-ordinate & accessorize.
- * Informing about the latest trends or offers by highlighting them at strategic locations.
- * Publicises the business.
- * Publicises the product.
- * Lays a foundation for the future sales.
- * Builds prestige.
- * Supports popular trends.
- * Establish, promote, and enhance the store's visual image
- * Harmonises pure business interest with aesthetics.
- * Arouses Interest.
- * Creates Desire.
- * Causes decision to buy.
- * Takes Advantage of highest profile location.
- * Directs and redirects common customer traffic patterns.

- * Introduce and explain new products.
- * Encourage the shopper to enter the store.
- * Entertain customers and enhance their shopping experience.

Exterior Presentation

VM begins where the consumer connect first with the store- the exterior of the store. This part sets the tone for a shopper's experience. The quality of a store front is a major determinant for a customer, particularly a new customer, and should not be underestimated. The exterior appearance of one store, a block of businesses or a cluster, silently announces what customers can expect inside. Good exterior visual merchandising attracts attention, creates interest and invites the customer into the business. The exterior presentation can offer a conservative, progressive, and lavish or discount image to the customer.

How a store visually welcomes customers has a lot to do with whether or not they enter the store. Although good prices and positive word-of-mouth advertising is important, it is hard to overcome the negative image of a poor store exterior. When examining a store's exterior, consider the following questions:

- * How do customers locate the business?
- * Are the sidewalks clean, safe and accessible?
- * Are the exterior signs clean, fresh and readable?
- * Does the store front need cleaning, painting or touchup?
- * Are the outside entrances clean and accessible?
- * Are the windows clean, bright and inviting?
- * Are the window display preparation materials such as tape, pins and packaging materials removed?
- * Are the window displays frequently changed?
- * Do the window displays carry a theme?

The Visual Merchandising tools for exterior presentation are

1. Exterior Signs.
2. Awnings.
3. Walks and entries (Entrance).
4. Landscaping.
5. Window displays.

Exterior Signs; A sign is a silent salesperson, and part of a shopper's first impression of a store. In less than 10 seconds the sign must attract attention, tell who the business is and what it has to sell. An effective sign will communicate what type of business is being conducted. Off-premise signs provide information and direction, especially for travelers and new residents. Signs can also help effectively communicate a poor location. The lettering should be large enough to read from 200 feet. Signs with 8-inch letters can be read from a distance up to 250 feet. A sign's design conveys a great deal about the business inside.

A stark design and limited materials may suggest discount prices and no frills. Elegant and expensive sign materials may suggest luxury goods and services. Signs may also be used to target a specific market segment such as youth, women, senior citizens, singles, etc. Where many signs compete for consumer's attention, design and logo become even more important. They should be unique, noticeable and readable. When preparing a sign to draw the customer's attention, consider size, shape, materials, lettering, height, placement and structure. For example, among several rectangular signs in close proximity to one another, construct an oval or circular sign that will stand out. Signs with unlit or missing light bulbs, flaking or faded paint, or cracked and peeling backgrounds can hurt the overall store image. A shabby or dilapidated sign implies a lack of concern with the business image, and a sloppy, poorly managed business.

Signage not only highlights the name of your business, but it also adds visual beauty to the street and streetscape. Signage is a direct indication to store image.

The signage should be

- * Brief, well-designed, well-lettered and easy-to read signs will convey a feeling of welcome.
- * Design graphics appropriate for the nature of the business, and create a message that is clear and simple.
- * Focus on one or two key words to describe the business. A clean, clear message will have more impact.
- * Signs should be well maintained, and painted every three years or sooner if they weather or fade.
- * A store's sign is its signature. It is personal, original and continuously recognizable to the public. It should create an image that is consistently carried throughout the remainder of the store and its business actions.
- * The lettering should be large enough to read from 200 feet

Marquees: This special type of sign is used to display the name of a store. An effective marquee must stand out from the other businesses to attract attention. It can be used to announce a change in seasons, a special event or a promotion.

Banners; Banners are used increasingly as an inexpensive but colorful, eye-catching means of promotion. A new and interesting appearance can be offered by changing the banners frequently. Consumers will think exciting changes are taking place, and be drawn into the store. To provide continuity, the same banner design, reduced in size and scale, can be hung from the marquee and displayed inside the store. However, do not overuse banners because shoppers will stop noticing them. With each new banner, select a different size, shape and color from those previously used. The design concept used on the banners will be more effective if an attempt is made to carry the colors and graphics throughout the store, and on promotional materials and newspaper ads.

Awnings; Color and appeal can be added to a store's exterior with the use of awnings. They provide the customer with protection from weather and makes viewing the window display more pleasant as it reduces heat, cuts down on glare and reflection, and prevents fading of the merchandise from exposure to the sun. However, an awning in poor condition may do harm by distracting from the total store image. Many businesses are updating their storefronts with new back-lit awning systems. Other names for these may include electric awnings, interior lit canopy signs, and back-lit conventional awnings.

These modern-looking awnings are used on new as well as older buildings and are usually bright and attractive, especially at night. A variety of styles, exist such as concave, convex, long dome, square and coop style. Most are interior lit with an egg crate type bottom that allows light to shine through and yet

will not allow birds, etc. to enter into it. The illuminated awning fabric is a translucent vinyl that comes in a wide variety of colors. The store name is incorporated into it with a translucent (vinyl) film. Sign and awning companies can assist you in selecting and installing the right style, color and design of awning that would be appropriate for your building.

Walks and Entries (Entrance)

Approximately 75 percent of first time customers remember a store's entrance, which provides the first and last view of the store's interior. Picture walking up to an expanse of wall whose flat surface is pierced only by a plain glass door, as opposed to the protective feeling offered by walking under a porch or canopy. A properly designed canopy or porch not only protects the customer in bad weather, but can add to the aesthetics of the building. When adding an entryway, be sure it is designed to blend or be consistent with the architecture of the building.

A cluttered entryway causes shoppers to indefinitely postpone entering a store, while an attractive, well designed entrance is inviting to the customer. Entrances that allow shoppers to come into a store without being aware of their entering, is also becoming more popular. An example is a v-shaped window display that funnels window shopping traffic into the store.

The entrance to the store leads the customers to the store and merchandise. Stores with selling racks and tables outside the store should always ensure entrance is not blocked. Decorative tile work on the floor of the entrance could reflect the image of the store. At the entry we can put a tropical tree on either side which makes the entrance more attractive. At the counter it is better to keep products that are close substitute or complimentary to the main product. But the counter and the entrance should not be clogged with excessive products.

Landscaping; Landscaping should lead the customer's eye to the focal point using color and texture to provide contrast and harmony. The focal point is the business sign and/or the building itself. Landscaping can also screen undesirable sights such as garbage receptacles, power transformers and refrigeration equipment.

The essence of good landscaping is simplicity; simple landscape designs that are easy to maintain. Planters, flower boxes and plants used in front of a store add to the general appearance, regardless of what type of merchandise is being sold. Plants (especially flowering bedding plants) enhance the overall

look of the store, and also add to the store's positive reputation in terms of beautifying the community. Planters placed below and in front of a display window actually strengthen the display by adding greater depth to the setting.

The following guidelines are suggested for stores that have flexibility:

- * Concentrate hardy native tree species in groups at ends of buildings. Plant low-branched trees, along back lot lines to reduce noise and give privacy to buildings.
- * Most shrubs should be planted as individual specimens or in small groups.
- * Hedges may be used at strategic points, such as street corners, where they must be kept low. Preference should be given to species that have an acceptable appearance and height without continuous trimming or pruning.
- * Vines and other ground covers may be useful in shady spots and to protect banks against erosion.
- * Sturdy benches for resting and relaxing can be a part of the landscape and may encourage customers to stay longer. Aesthetically designed and strategically located garbage receptacles for customer use will help keep the grounds free from litter.

Window Displays: Special emphasis should be placed on a store's window displays because they are the information link to the potential customer. A good window display enhances communication of the product, brand and image. As many as one in every four sales, could be the result of a good window display. Window displays should attract attention, create interest and invite people into the store to purchase goods.

A retailer's window is the most controllable element in relation to image and must match their merchandise's target demographic. Display Window may communicate style, content, and price point. They can be seductive, exciting or based on emotional stimulus through stimulation, or evocation of all five senses. Another direction taken by retailers who rely on volume sold is price-based selling. These clearly emphasize value for money with easy and obvious ticketing.

Be careful not to crowd too much merchandise into a window, as customers find it difficult to determine the message and what items are being promoted. Shoppers also lose interest when the same window display is left up too long. It is especially important to frequently change window displays in small towns

where customers pass by several times a week. New displays indicate that new, up-to-date merchandise is available.

Properly lighted window displays can help sell specific products or ideas that promote a store's image. Window lights should be strong enough to overcome the reflections from outside objects, such as parked cars and buildings. At night, additional lights on overhead marquees and projecting cornices can make the window area look larger. Closed-back windows require a high level of general illumination. Massed window displays are often lighted with overhead fluorescents which are supplemented by closely spaced clear incandescent lamps. Use miniature portable spotlights to accent small display areas, price cards and specific items in a massed display. Compact footlights help relieve shadows near the bottom of vertical displays.

Window displays are more successful when a dominate theme is carried throughout the display, regardless of whether the featured products are fashion-oriented, institutional or promotional in nature.

Suggested window treatments that have proven successful include:

- * A single object against seamless paper.
- * Merchandise displayed as it would be utilized in a realistic setting.
- * A theatrical setting using fantasy and drama.
- * Straight merchandise glamorized with props.
- * Animation, such as in holiday windows that draws crowds of shoppers.
- * The use of sculpture, paintings or art objects for a touch of class.
- * Media tie-ins, with current area activities, films, stars or best selling books.

Window displays should be in harmony with the entire surroundings. When planning a window display consider the building facade, street, people and their perceptions, color harmony, lighting and viewing angle

How to get maximum impact of Retail display window? To obtain maximum impact follow the simple ways mentioned below;

1. Keep it simple. Too many graphics, too many messages translate as clutter. Make sure that your window message can be understood quickly from afar and that it is memorable enough to be noticed.
2. Be relevant to your customer and season.
3. Have a window display strategy on visibility. Are they open windows to see through to the retail inside? Or shadow box windows with a promotional graphic backdrop? Interactive? Defining the type of window display can make future maintenance easier and help to lay the groundwork for display limitations.
4. Think in stories.
5. Have a third window. If you don't have room to envelope multiple areas with the window message, make sure to have a third window that is focal, as you walk into the store.

Interior Presentation

Selling space is the most important part of a store and therefore, efforts to utilize each square foot will help to maximize sales. One proven way to do this is through interior displays that effectively show merchandise to the customer. When planning interior displays, remember that the theme and image presented on the exterior must be carried throughout the interior of the store to provide consistency for the customer. The purpose of interior display is to develop desire for the merchandise, show what is available, and encourage both impulse and planned buying.

Three major goals of a store should be to:

1. Motivate the customer to spend money.
2. Project the image of the store.
3. Keep expenses to a minimum.

Well-designed displays and in-store promotions are essential for a consistent theme and to help the customer find advertised items. Information provided by the Point of Purchase Advertising Institute (POPAl) indicates that nothing influences the consumer's purchase decisions more than advertising used where the sale is actually made—the point of purchase.

Researchers have found that 64.8 percent of all purchase decisions were made inside a supermarket. This included impulse purchases along with substitutions and generally planned buys where the shopper had an item in mind, but no brand. Most people indicated they purchased the item because they saw it displayed. Displays or advertising alone may not increase product sales substantially; however, combining advertising and display into an integrated promotional campaign will usually be more effective. Some effective displays are created by suppliers or brand-name manufacturers, while others are developed from scratch.

Display Design

An effective way of attracting customers to a store is by having good displays, both exterior and interior. A customer will be attracted to a display within three to eight seconds; that is the time a customer spends to determine interest in a product. Every display should be planned and have a theme. Good design makes a visual presentation come together. This means the design attracts attention in a way that strengthens the store image, as well as introducing merchandise to the customer. The display does not totally determine purchase, but does make it four times more likely (Kerfoot et al., 2003). The store environment has to be consciously designed to positively affect the consumer (Kotler, 1973–1974).

A product display is a composite of some or all of the following: products, background (e.g., floors and walls), mannequins, fixtures, props, signage, lighting, and music that create an enriched experience for the customer through a gestalt of retail environment elements concentrated in areas of the store. Research (Ko & Rhee, 1994) investigating the consequence of product displays in stores on consumer approach responses has been scant.

Before designing good displays few questions has to be answered which helps in making a good display. The questions are;

1. What is the store's image?

2. What type of customer is being attracted?
3. What is the concept of the merchandise to be presented in the display?
4. Where is the display going to be set up and how will the location determine the design?
5. Why is this merchandise being put on display as opposed to other merchandise?

The principles of display used in design include;

1. Balance.
2. Proportion.
3. Rhythm.
4. Emphasis.
5. Colour.
6. Lighting.
7. Harmony.

To execute a display that will sell merchandise, it is necessary to have a working knowledge of the principles of design. When applied appropriately, all parts of the display are pulled together to create a purposeful, effective and aesthetically pleasing presentation. An understanding of these principles will make it easier to design a display for all types of merchandise.