

Visual Merchandising – a tool to develop a brand and complete the store design. An enquiry into an apparel store

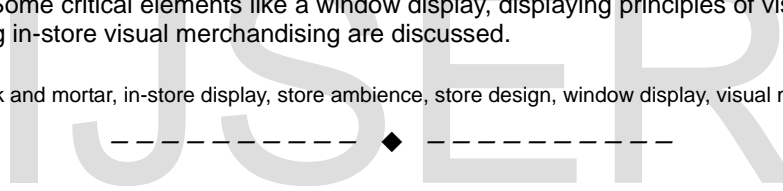
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Abstract— There are various ways to display a product in the store. However, if the product is presented neatly, it attracts people to get into the store. Visual Merchandising is the main factor that contributes to enhancing the store ambience. With the presence of online selling platforms like Amazon, people prefer to shop online as they are exposed to multiple options of a similar product. But what they miss out is the experience they get while shopping in a store. Online shopping at times leads to buying the wrong product, especially when buying clothes. We are unable to touch and feel the product, check the size, colour variations etc. This is why the majority of the audience still prefers a brick and mortar store where they can see, touch and feel the product before buying. In the fast-paced working environments, shopping has become a therapy for many people where they feel relaxed, going to the shops and also helps them break their routines.

To attract new and old customers, retailers are making sure that their store design is up to the mark. There is no compromise these days when retailers have to invest in a physical store. Window display, in-store signage, wall and floor fixture displays, store layouts, etc. are some of the critical factors that contribute to the store ambience. The customers only enter the store, if they like the window display or the message in the window display is very clear about the brand. It is the crucial area in the store where the customer usually gets an overview of the brand. That is the reason why visual merchandisers change the window display on an average every two weeks. Window displays should be designed in a way that communicates the brand message to the customers.

Along with window display, the in-store display is equally important to enhance the array of the products and store ambience. Products that are displayed thematically and neatly increases the visual impact. The above quickly leads the customer to decide whether to enter the store. This article aims to focus on the factors that help develop store ambience along with the store design. Some critical elements like a window display, displaying principles of visual merchandising, the product lifecycle and planning in-store visual merchandising are discussed.

Index Terms— apparel store, brick and mortar, in-store display, store ambience, store design, window display, visual merchandising



1. INTRODUCTION

To build a brand, along with the product retailer, also focuses on visual aspects of the store. In today's world, visual context is more important than the product itself. The art of displaying the product in the store is known as Visual Merchandising. "Eight independent variables namely window display, storefront, shelf display, wall mount display, countertop display, electronic centre rack, signages/graphics and store atmosphere, have been studied to trace their impact on the dependent variable viz. the consumer perception regarding the store image for visual merchandising. From the analysis, it was found that customers have a unique and different perception for visual merchandising of different stores. The atmospherics of one outlet and shelf display of another outlet have a strong perception or image; rest variables do not have a strong positioning in the customer's mind regarding visual merchandising." (Mehta and Chugan, 2019)

The term visual merchandising is referred to as the placement and presentation of a product in line with the store interiors. Effective displaying of the products can benefit both the brand and the customers. It gives the customers more choice to shop at the same time also helps in the more natural selection of the products. This is more suitable when a person goes to buy an outfit in the store. As a visual merchandiser, one should understand the current market trends and what the customer wants. The way the store is displayed, it has to tell the brand story and help the brand to increase the sales. The story of window exhibit was started in the year 1909 by the London retailers like Selfridge "These elements mean "design" is brought to the fore and, in particular, it is a visual design that is emphasized." (Kent, 2003). "Selfridge revolutionized the world of visual merchandising by leaving the window lights on at night." (Morgan, T. 2011). Selfridge was very creative when it came to designing the window display. They will make it a story by using real-life examples. This helped them to attract more customers in their stores.

Window Showcasing as many retailers says and proper storefront is the first two parameters that a customer comes in contact with any store.



(Katies Melbourne, 2019)

The above photo is the perfect example of 'Katies' Shop-front. The window display is off centred. Due to this, the focus goes on large open shop-front with gondolas in front and then draws the attention on to the window display. Sleek Illuminated 'Katies' sign adds the value to the brand with its mini-

malistic look. Customers have an opportunity to shop from both sides of the stores. The large and open shop-front with small window display gives an idea to the customer whether to go inside the store or not.



(Ralph Lauren, 2019)

This is another classic example of 'Ralph Lauren' store in Bangkok. The closed and large window display draws your focus only to the window display, and if that interests, a customer then only the customer will enter the store. The illuminated sign inside the exhibit takes a secondary place while stating the product is the hero and brand is already established.

From the above two examples, we can state that the shop-front is the primary focus for the customer to get into the store. To attract more people, especially in apparel store where there is always a challenge to make sure that the window displays represent more as a showcase rather than just a display. It should not only complement the product but should also support the store design display. It is vital to amalgamate all the elements of the store and window display to represent a brand.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Weekends are to chill and relax. After a long tiring week, people like to have relaxed weekends. While Majority of the people are in the shopping centre doing their grocery shopping, they do not mind to pop in stores to check out weekly specials. It gets challenging for a visual merchandiser to attract those weekly customers doing grocery shopping also to shop for themselves. New moms like to pop in apparel stores even during the week as they take their newborn babies in the pram for a strole. They are the ones looking for attractive offers all the time as they live on a tight budget with added responsibilities. Proper visual merchandising is essential to attract both existing and new customers to the store. Due to the increased presence of social media, online marketing, online shopping, many brick and mortar stores are struggling to trade in the present times. One of the primary reasons for this is the store design and visual merchandising. Hence excellent visual merchandising is required to sustain the store in the shopping centre and also to increase the brand value. Visual Merchandising focuses on both the interior and exterior of the store and helps to enhance store design.

There are various techniques used by a visual merchandiser to create an in-store experience that helps the brand to lift their sales. Where a brand does not use these techniques, then it will fail to perform in the competitive market. Customers

these days are not only looking for a good bargain but is also looking for a shopping experience. *"In the larger department stores, men's fashion collection such as Alexander McQueen, John Galianon, and Dior sit together in one area to create the men's designer room. The design of the floor layout demonstrates carefully considered the use of visual merchandising: note its cleverly positioned fixtures, clear signage, and the use of the window at the back of the cash desk, which creates a focal point for customers entering the department."* (Morgan, T. 2011).

3. DISPLAYING PRINCIPLES OF VISUAL MERCHANDISING

The image of the store is built by brand positioning, designing experience and by giving feature zones. A successful store design should bring in customer life concept as well as brand values. In modern society, with changing fashion, a store design should accommodate the new market environment to maximize sales. *"Good visual merchandising makes a store stand out and attracts shoppers, and the only thing needed to realize its potential is a little creativity."* (Merchandising, Miller and Retail Next, 2019). The author further emphasizes on identifying the target market to understand their taste and lifestyle to create compelling in-store visual merchandising. It's not hard to figure out your customer's lifestyle as she says everything is available through social media.

The Following principles should be reflected while visual merchandising the fashion store.

3.1 Window Display: Window Display plays a significant role in creating a brand. It is the first point of contact for any customer. The beautiful window display will get in more customers than just a show. It is a message that you tell the customers about your store and brand.

3.1 Uniform Display of Goods: To achieve the best result, the brand concept should be fully integrated while displaying the products. It should always create a new shopping experience for the customers.

3.2 Association of products: The relationship between store design and products should be influential. They should compliment each other. To do that, products should be connected and displayed in a way that they tell a story about the brand and enhances brand values. The way the products are displayed in the store is critical. It should be easily accessible by the customers, and the customer should enjoy the shopping experience. Customer should feel at home while shopping. Every time they come to the store, they should get a new adventure.

3.3 A useful and practical way to display the products or merchandise is to present clearly. Customers should not feel monotonous. Customers should be easily able to identify sale products and also any other promotions going in the store.

3.4 Create a smooth, balanced display space with substantial support:

It is essential to create a space that has got all the stable elements like a window display, floor racks, fitting rooms, reserve space, cash counter area, and wall displays. Based on customer shopping habits, the store design should be able to impact customers psychologically so that they can move easily into the store. Hence, this

will create a positive shopping experience for the customers and will generate more sales.

4. THE PRODUCT LIFECYCLE

Before in-store visual merchandising is planned, visual merchandiser has to understand the product lifecycle. The product lifecycle is developed, keeping in mind the customers and the brand. As a visual merchandiser, once has to detail the stages of the product life cycle so that the store is merchandised based on that. There are six stages for the product lifecycle:

4.1 Building the Range: Trends, colour palettes and key shapes are translated into a story. The orders are then placed six months ahead of launch.

4.2 Executing the Range for in-store and online: The range is handed over to the creative team where campaign and VM directions are developed along with the marketing team. There are some very conscious decisions taken at this stage.

4.3 Story Launches: New store arrives in stores and is set up at the front of the store.

4.4 Story sells through: After around two weeks, once the story has started to sell through and some style will have depleted, it will move back to make way for the next new story.

4.5 Story Depletes: At around four weeks, the stock will have depleted further and will be condensed onto a rack or refreshed with the new product.

4.6 Into Markdown: At around six weeks, what's left of the story will move into markdown (exclusive season essentials).

5. PLANNING IN-STORE VISUAL MERCHANDISING

There is no particular method where one can plan the visual merchandising of a store. A store has many different products which can be put in various fashions.

The following points can help put the store together.

5.1 Editorial Display: This is the main display as you enter any store that helps to tell the story of the brand. The combination of racks and tables is kept in order to showcase the best selling or new arrival of the products in store each week.

This image for W.lane store in Sydney Australia is a corner store, and the editorial is placed in a way that it is accessed from both the entrances of the store. The editorial racks consist of 2-way racks and a group of mannequins. Due to the smaller window display, and larger opening, the editorial cluster is created right near the entrance to catch customer's attention.



to sell the products. It creates a story within a store about the product and its journey. The brand photo shoots their new products, and those images are then either displayed in a frame or a light-box to draw attention from the customer. These images are strategically placed in the store so that customers travel to all corners of the store. The perfect example of a river island store is shown above. The group of images has been displayed into the frame to showcase their new arrivals. This is placed just outside the change room area.

5.2 Establish a Message: When you walk into any store, how many times you remember a promotion or a brand message? As a Visual Merchandiser, make sure that the brand promotion is conveyed to the customer through the display system.
(Boden, 2019)



(River Island, 2019)

5.5 In-store Signage: It is essential to display in-store signage either for the product or messages about the brand. This helps in building a sharp brand image.

5.6 Outfit Building: Outfit building is a crucial part of the merchandising process as it offers suggestions to the customers on how to wear a trend. To build an outfit, as a visual merchandiser, you should understand the current trends in the market and how the customer dresses. Outfit build should be inspirational and wearable but not predictable.

The classic example of 'Boden' store in the UK. It is simple visual merchandising through colour coding of the products sends out a clear message to the customers of the simplicity and elegance of the product. The store has got a well-balanced colour palette to highlight the product.

"Retailers believe that a store's layout and merchandise presentation affect the degree to which shoppers enjoy their experiences in the store (Sherman, 2016; Wu et al., 2013). Consistent with this notion, most fashion retailers have aggressively increased the complexity of their stores, believing that customers will favour a wide assortment of items and varied experiences. To illustrate, fast-fashion brands fill their mega-sized stores with various products, ornaments, and facilities to maximize the use of limited space (Bruce and Daly, 2006; Ghemawat et al., 2003). However, this practice has rendered some store environments to be excessively complex." (Jang, Baek and Choo, 2018).

5.3 Establish required props, fixtures and tools: As a visual merchandiser, you should make sure that you source proper accessories for each story that is being displayed in the store. Sometimes, the props have to be selected in such a way that it can be used for longer times and is interchangeable within the store so that there is less waste of these products.

Visual complexity not only affects consumer behaviours but also affects the store sales. Visual complexity is not limited to interior design décor but also includes merchandising as well. Hence, planning and designing of the store with the least complexity is a task. It is observed that "By using designed stimuli, it is possible to effectively control for variations in store complexity that past studies have overlooked. Controlling store complexity in this fashion allows researchers to test for interactions. Visual complexity affects consumer behaviour" (Jang, Baek and Choo, 2018). One of the most essential characteristics in re-

5.4 In-store Product images: Many times, an image or a cluster of product images helps



gards to visual merchandising is the idea that the brand is trying to tell the customer. "It's considered as one of the silent salesperson in marketing and in case of any flaw or miss communication the purchase behaviour of consumers might get negatively influenced" (Ali Soomro, Abbas Kaimkhani and Iqbal, 2017)



(Crossroads 2019)

Above is the example of the Crossroads Store in Sydney Australia. The whole space is merchandised with colour coding, and proper outfitting has been done. This merchandising helps the customers to pick the outfits consciously and also can mix and match from the same group. 30% sale sign is printed on an attractive yellow colour background. However, the size of the sign should be perfect so that it does not overpower the outfits, and the message of the discount is passed on to the customers.



(Crossroads 2016)

This is another photo of the same brand and same store but different time of the year. The wall Merchandising looks very basic, and it seems all the products are just hung without any theme. It is a perfect example of an inferior wall merchandising. By this merchandising, sometimes a completely wrong

message can go to the customers about the brand, and this leads to loss of sales and spoiling of brand image.

6. WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT WAYS IN WHICH VISUAL MERCHANDISING BENEFITS EVERYONE, FROM THE CUSTOMERS TO THE BRAND?

There are many ways a brand can be built. But one of the most effective ways is by having a very strong in-store visual merchandising. Below are the few benefits of having an excellent in-store visual merchandising.

6.1 For Customer:

- 6.1.1 Fun and exciting shopping experience
- 6.1.2 More outfitting ideas
- 6.1.3 More Choice of products
- 6.1.4 Easier selections of products
- 6.1.5 Can turn browsing costumers into buying costumers

6.2 The Store:

- 6.2.1 The better looking retail environment
- 6.2.2 Easier to maintain product presentation standards
- 6.2.3 Easier to measure performance
- 6.2.4 More comfortable to differentiate between lifestyle and destinations
- 6.2.5 Act as a silent salesperson.

6.3 The Brand

- 6.3.1 Creates a brand consistency
- 6.3.2 Increase brand identity
- 6.3.3 Stock is presented in its best format

7. SIGHT LINES AND HOT SPOTS

What are Sight Lines, and why is it essential to identify them? The sight line is what the customer can see when they are at the storefront. It is important for a visual merchandiser to identify the stores with sight lines so that each corner of the store is best utilized and can create clear pathways with the help of floor fixtures.

What are Hot Spots and why are they important?

Hot spots are those visual junctions that the customers see first. They are created by visual merchandisers on purpose to get customer attention. These junctions usually define sight lines and pathways in stores. It is vital to determine these hot spots accurately to get more customer inflow.

8. ROLE OF A HOT SPOT?

Hot Spot is one of the most effective ways to generate sales. Most customers are tailored to regular offers and promotions as they visit the store often. There are three easy ways to define a hot spot in the store:

- 8.1 **Make it look special:** Keep the feature rack or display unit in the hotspot or dress the mannequin with new arrivals or as the most selling garment. You can also have a hot spot with different colour vinyl flooring to stand out in that area. Accessorize it with a story or a theme.
- 8.2 **Tell the customer where to go:** You can always have a friendly conversation with the customer, telling them what to buy from the hotspot display. 90% of the time this gets converted into sales.

9. FIXTURE PLACEMENT AND CONSUMER FLOW

The installation of the fixtures will determine the consumer flow (i.e. the direction in which the customers travel around the store). Exact fixture placement will also help to zone your store. With effective fixture placement within your storage space, you can help manage the consumer flow and help to influence the parts of the store that she is drawn to. Usually, the floor racks are not positioned in straight rows like runways. The idea is to make sure that the customers are moving throughout the store. Different racks should be spread evenly throughout the store, and they should be spread evenly throughout the store. By doing this, we create balance, depth and height in the store space.

10. CONCLUSION

From the above study, we can conclude that it is imperative to have excellent visual merchandising in the store for the brand to succeed in the market. It is crucial to learn and understand market trends. Customers these days are looking for a shopping experience than just buying off the shelf. For that visual merchandiser has to understand the market trend and also present the products creatively in the store. Store display starts from the front with window display being a focus and then flows into the store. It is the first zone where you create a brand impression. The consumers get attracted to a very well defined store which can lead to impulse buying. As a visual merchandiser, one should not only understand the current market trends but also understand the brand and brand values and how it is translated in the store. From the above study, we can conclude that visual merchandising is the constant evolution of brand and brand values. Retailers sometimes increase the complexity of the products. However, it is the visual merchandising that helps to convey the message to the consumers in a straightforward form. In-store elements like signage and props also play a significant role to draw customer attention. Creating different zones in the stores with the help of wall and floor fixtures also help to maximize sales. Customers should have a great shopping experience. They should feel comfortable while walking into the store. Store Designers only creates visual space. However, visual merchandiser adds in the background with the help of product display, props and signage. Small changes can help to increase store sales. It is imperative for any store to display their products effectively. The above methodologies can be used as a guide to developing a visual merchandising technique by any brand to increase the footfall in store. The good store design is only complete with excellent visual merchandising of the product. It is a creative journey that never ends.

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