

Implications

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Shopping Behaviors: Implications for the Design of Retail Spaces

Do you or your retail clients ever wonder why customers leave retail stores empty handed? It may have something to do with the design of the space and location of the merchandise. If we consider how people shop, it may tell us something about how retail environments need to be designed to maximize customer purchasing. One individual concerned with understanding what motivates consumers to purchase in the marketplace is Paco Underhill. Underhill (1999) in his book, *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping*, makes several recommendations that have relevance to designers interested in planning and executing effective retail environments. Our goal is to share five of his recommendations that we believe are particularly important for designers to consider.

Transition Zone

Have you ever noticed when you are shopping and in a hurry that you find yourself in the middle of the store before you are able to slow down and take a look at the merchandise? Underhill noted that every store has a transition zone or area where customers begin to slow their pace and make the transition from being outside of the store to being

inside. He refers to this area as “the shopper’s landing strip” (p.47). What is important about the transition zone is whatever is located in the zone is pretty much lost on customers. If there is merchandise displayed in this area, customers are unlikely to see it.

What does having a transition zone mean for design? For a big store, retailers can consider this space as waste and avoid placing or doing anything of importance there. For a small store where space is at a premium, the goal is to keep the transition zone as small as possible. Perhaps the best strategy to shorten the transition zone is to create a power display. A power display is a large, horizontal display that acts as a barrier. The barrier is intended to slow customers down sooner and speed up the transition from being outside to being inside the store. Slowing the customer down sooner gives the customer time to absorb the layout of the store and decide where to go.

Chevrons

The key to having customers purchase items is their ability to locate items in the store. Underhill recommends maximizing customers’ view of the merchandise by chevrons. Chevroneering involves “placing shelves or racks at an angle”



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instead of shelves being placed at the traditional ninety-degree angle to the aisle (p.79). The outcome of chevroning is that shelves are located at forty-five degrees. As a result, more of what the shelves hold is exposed to the customers. The logic behind the recommendation is the more customers' see, the more they purchase. However, there is a disadvantage to chevroning. The store can display only 80% of the merchandise that could be displayed using traditional methods. The question becomes: will you actually sell more by displaying less?

The Butt-Brush Effect

Each customer has an area of personal space. This is an area that when invaded causes customers to feel uncomfortable. Personal space translated into a retail environment suggests that when a shopper is bumped or jostled while looking at merchandise, they may become uncomfortable, lose interest, and leave the area. Underhill notes that "irritated shoppers do not tarry; in fact, they frequently leave before purchasing what they came for" (p.117). Creating maneuvering room for customers eliminates or greatly reduces the butt-brush effect. More maneuvering room extends time customers spend in the store and enhances the probability of purchasing.



Crate and Barrel creates maneuvering room with wide aisles

Seating Area

As retail merchandising faculty, we spend time in stores looking at how merchandise is displayed, how customers are treated, and how customers shop among other things. One of the things we note is shopping tends to be a social activity. People like to shop with others—



whether friends, spouses, or other relatives. These shopping partners need a place to rest. "A chair says: we care" (p. 88). If shopping partners have a place to sit, most likely they will not complain and shopping can continue for longer lengths of time! Underhill talked about the importance of where to place seating. Seating should be provided by the dressing rooms. In particular, in providing seating for male shopping companions the store would want to keep seating away from areas that women feel are personal, for example, the lingerie section.

Dressing Rooms

Many retailers want to minimize the non-selling areas (e.g., storage) of their stores. Some apparel retailers make the mistake of assuming that a dressing room is a non-selling area. Underhill noted that many retailers "think of dressing rooms as bathrooms" (p.170). We agree with Underhill that dressing rooms are a huge selling tool. Retailers need to devote enough, time, money, or space on their dressing rooms. Dressing rooms are the location where most apparel buying decisions are made. Dressing rooms need lighting that is flattering, wall hooks and hangers for customers' clothes, and furnishings that entice their use. The mirrors should be large and first rate—"they should look like the frame for a flattering

portrait” (p.172). Dressing rooms must be clearly marked so that they are easy to find. The longer the customer has to look for a dressing room, the more likely they will leave without making a purchase.

Final Thoughts

In addition to the recommendations that we have highlighted, any design decisions that involved signage, display, store layout, fixturing, and the like basically impact the store’s effectiveness as a comfortable and enjoyable place to shop. It has been well established that the amount of time a customer spends in the store depends on how comfortable they are in the store. The longer the retailer can keep a customer in their store, the more the customer will buy. Hence, the three-dimensional design of the retail environment plays a significant role in the retailers’ success.

Reference:

—Underhill, P. (1999). *Why we buy: The science of shopping*. New York: Touchstone.

Working with a Retail Merchandiser

Retail merchandisers are concerned with the planning required to have the right merchandise at the



right time in the right place in the right quantity at the right prices, and with the right sales promotion for targeting specific customers (Stone, 2004, p.4). Saavy designers interested in designing a successful retail space might consider incorporating a retail merchandiser as part of their design team—for a number of reasons.

Perhaps the most important reason is that the merchandiser has in-depth knowledge of brands that are going to be featured in the store. Whether the store is going to carry several brands (e.g., JCPenny, Sears) or whether the store is an expression of a single brand (e.g., Gap, The Limited, Pottery Barn), retail merchandisers understand that managing the brand(s) is the future of the store.



A retail merchandiser can answer three key questions for designers that impact the design of the store.

Question #1

The first question is what brands will be featured in the store and how are those brands positioned? How a brand is positioned defines the way retailers want consumers to think about them. In other words, the retail merchandiser can share information regarding which specific consumer groups the store is intended to engage and what differentiates this store from its competitors.

Question #2

The second question is what is the personality of the brand(s) featured? Since a brand’s personality may be the one and only feature that separates it from the competition, the designer needs to know the brand’s personality to convey it through the store’s design. Is this the fun brand? Is this the creative brand? Is this the mysterious brand?

Question #3

The final question is what are the brand’s affiliations? In other words, how do you want people to be perceived as a result of being known users of the



brand? What do you want others to think about your customers?

The answers to all of these questions must be addressed during the initial discussions with the owners of the retail business and should form the core of the programming discussions occurring during the

pre-design phase of the project. Without having an in-depth understanding of these issues, the most aesthetically pleasing, innovative, or functional retail environment could still spell ruin for its owner. Answers to these questions will enable the retail designer to design a space that supports the business needs of the owner by shaping the customers' experience. The experience and insights of retail merchandiser might just help ensure that happens.

Reference:

—Stone, E. (2004). *The dynamics of fashion*. New York: Fairchild Publications.

About the Authors:

Seung-Eun Lee, an Assistant Professor of the retail merchandising program, joined the University of Minnesota's faculty in 2002. She received her M.S. and Ph.D. from Iowa State University. Her research focuses on understanding the influence of new retailing technology on consumer shopping behavior and issues related to small independent retailing. Her articles have appeared in various professional journals, including *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, *European Journal of Marketing*, *International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research*, *Journal of Business Management*, *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, and *Journal*

of Industrial Technology. Lee currently teaches multi-channel retailing, retail promotion and consumer decision making, among other courses.

Kim K. P. Johnson, Ph.D., is a Professor in the Department of Design, Housing, and Apparel. She serves as retail merchandising program chair. Her scholarship focuses on retail merchandising and the socio-psychological aspects of clothing. She practices the integration of teaching, discovery, and outreach in such projects as "Small Store Survival Strategies" and "Effect of Teasing on Adolescent Development." She serves as the editor of the *Clothing and Textile Research Journal*. She has co-edited three books—*Dress and Identity*, *Appearance and Power*, and *Fashion Foundations* and has several publications in the *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*, *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences*, *Clothing and Textile Research Journal*, and *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, among others. She is a Fellow of the International Textile and Apparel Association. Johnson received her Ph.D. and M.S. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and her B.S. from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.



Seung-Eun Lee, Ph.D. (left) and Kim K. P. Johnson, Ph.D. (right)

Recent Retail Titles

According to Johnson and Lee, the following recently published books might be of interest to you if your practice or area of interest focuses on retail design:

—Tucker, J. (2003). *Retail Desire: Design, Display and Visual Merchandising*. East Sussex, UK: Sheridan House.

—Dean, C. (2003). *The Inspired Retail Space*. Gloucester, MA: Rockport Publishers.

—Miller, D., Jackson, P., Thrift, N., Holbrook, B., & Rowlands, M. (1998). *Shopping, Place, and Identity*. London: Routledge.

—Wrigley, N. (2002). *Reading Retail: A Geographical Perspective on Retailing and Consumption Spaces*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Related Research Summaries

InformeDesign has many Research Summaries about retail design and related, pertinent topics. This knowledge will be valuable to you as you consider your next design solution and worth sharing with your clients and collaborators.

“Retail Area Design Influences Shopping Behavior”
—*Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*

“Rise of Themed Flagship Stores”
—*Journal of Retailing*

“Consumers’ Attraction to Point-of-Purchase Displays”
—*International Journal of Consumer Studies*

“Why Teens Go to Malls”

—*Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*

“Wayfinding in Shopping Malls”

—*Environment and Behavior*

“Designing Retail Stores for Disabled People”

—*Journal of Retailing*

“Music and Scents Can Improve Retail Service”

—*Journal of Retailing*

“Consumer Perception of Store Image”

—*Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*

“Scanner and Checkstand Design Can Influence Wrist Injury”—*Human Factors*

Photos Courtesy of:

Caitlyn Quinn (Crate and Barrel Interior, p. 2)

Debbie Boyles, University of Minnesota (Lee and Johnson, p. 4)

Caren Martin, University of Minnesota (remainder)



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