

RETAIL maverick

by
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Out with the Old, In with the New!

SOME NEVER TIRE of the old stuff. "Tried and tested, season after season." "If it was good enough for my father, it's good enough for me." They sleep-walk through the business day, drifting from one project to another, doing things the way they have always been done - just because that's the way they have always been done. Less-than-perfect results become the norm. "Sure, that will do." It's a standard product to a standard audience in a standard way. A slave to mediocrity.

Did I say, "Walking in circles?" If you continue to stick with dull, you become dull yourself, as do all those around you. Some of us consistently engage in repetitive behavior that has neither rhyme nor reason. In some ways, it's understandable - it's an overstressed world of hard-wired technology, political saber rattling, terrorists, financial turmoil and other multiple threats that pelt us morning to night.

But there's another group out there. They're really tired of the "old stuff." They're tired of mediocrity and are paralysed with thoughts of old ideas. They realise the market is obsessed with novelty. They know that traditional marketing and



Tell a Story

Customers have visions of entertaining friends in their beautiful backyards, looking at this display. Martini, anyone?

business models have worn thin. They have noticed a revolution. They know remarkable stands out. They know it's safer to make risk part of the strategy. They know "old stuff" isn't working because it's in almost every slot in every industry, and

all of it is already overflowing with the downright boring and the unappealing. A new season is on the horizon and almost upon us. It's a new year - a time for new formulas and new ideas. Uplifting, inspired and fresh ideas are the order of the day.

These new ideas need to be increasingly "cool" and engaging. Above all, a new season is a time to slide out of our old merchandising shell and produce displays that are valuable. Dispose of the old one-dimensional merchandis-



ing model of the yesteryear (read, the one the competition uses on the other side of town). The one that stops you from standing out and being remarkable. It's holding you back, you know it.

The straight, colorless A-to-Z layout only engages a few of the five senses. It lacks design and character. It has no synergy with the customer. It looks the same today as it did five years ago. It's just bits and pieces of mixed merchandise with no identity. It consists of multiple shrines to the manufacturer but possesses no in-store brand identity. It doesn't have an internal/in-house merchandising policy to map out and guide

the consumer through the store for the purpose of unplanned purchases.

Connect with Customers

I would describe visual merchandising, in simple terms, as a road map. It is a series of visual cues and elements to guide customers around your store, highlighting the route using color, theme and strong emotional graphics. Today, the graphics element is fast becoming flat screen TVs communicating in full color a clear and literal message.

Visual merchandising is always evolving. The first visual merchandising breakthrough was the end cap, which could "grow sales by up to 700 percent!" Originally, it was used



to promote sale goods by price. It was featured merchandise at the end of an aisle and bulk-stacked. Today, its function is to promote new merchandise and inform customers of specific uses and benefits of items. And it works. It improves profitability and exposes customers to key elements of your garden center. The more your customer discovers, the more effective your store becomes.

Connecting with customers is critical, and the ambience in and around your store is critical. Customers will remember whether it felt like 40 degrees below zero with dark heavy clouds or 75 degrees with clear blue overhead. They'll remember whether it was an uplifting and positive shopping experience with elements of excitement and curiosity, or not. And then, they'll go tell their friends!

Good ambience utilizes control of color, both in the product and its setting and light levels. Don't forget things like

what kind of light level is necessary for customers to read a product label. Sounds, whether water features, musical chimes or Internet-downloaded background music, help contribute to an impressive ambience. Fragrance is also important, as scents remain in memory banks longer than any other sense. The aroma of vanilla in fashion stores can double sales. Why not try vanilla scents when business is slow? Try changing to zesty orange to make customers relaxed when it's busy and bustling. It's easy to do - simple



Create a Memorable Experience

Good ambience utilizes control of color, both in the product and its setting and light levels. Your customers will remember the excitement of the shopping experience.

sachets near a heat source or ventilating fan do the trick.

All of the above must be wrapped up in good design. Good, natural customer flow is important, and rethinking the garden center layout should be an ongoing process. Departmental adjacencies have a profound bearing on sales. There's no point putting fertilizers next to scented candles or water gardening beside the restrooms! The decision to expand or contract a floor area occupied by a given category should change with profitability. Big profits equal a bigger category. If there are no profits, consider abandoning the category.

At some stage, stop and ask your customers what they remember about your garden center? Let's hope they don't hesitate. At some point, your connection with your consumer will reveal itself in your store design - its ambience, those eye-popping displays and dominant colors and themes.

Here are 10 things to think about in preparing for 2012 and beyond:

1. Ban straight lines - it's what box stores do best.
2. Look at plants as living fashion.
3. Create seasonally adjusted themes to excite.
4. Become a color expert, and tell your customers.
5. Choose merchandise wisely, and present it in a consumer-friendly way.
6. Keep it clean, very clean, inside and out.
7. Don't be a haven for horticultural "anoraks" - it won't make you money.
8. Connect with your consumers using all five senses.
9. Deliver happiness, then get on the path of profit, passion and purpose.
10. Care first, sell second.



And here's another tip: it's all about people - you, your staff and your consumers. Despite the huge shift in the way we communicate these days, with a myriad of social media choices and new digital interfaces, it's still only about one thing: the people. It's the people who are doing the communicating, and it's how they engage with each other. The digital methods aren't as important as the message. Stand out, be different and constantly improve your customers' experience. ■

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