



Optimize the sales environment

RETAIL DESIGN

JAMES GULLIVER, WHO FOUNDED one of the U.K.'s largest retail businesses—Argyll Foods—once summed up the retail sector as: “Retail is detail.” For all independent retailers, every nuance is important. Including store design. It can be crucial to your store’s success, but the retail design is too often overlooked.

“I have literally seen people walk into a space, put some stuff in it, slap a coat of paint on the walls and start selling,” says Jeff Hardy, principal of Quadrangle Architects in Toronto. Taking a haphazard approach and hoping for the best is not the optimal way to design your store, Hardy says. “Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t.”

If you happen to have the right products in the right place at the right time, you just may succeed, Hardy says. Conversely, conscientious store design

is planning for success. A 2010 study by RetailWire and Dechert-Hampe and Company found shopper experience tied with customer service when it comes to overall customer satisfaction. And the top factor influencing shopping experience? Customer-focused store design.

Patti-Lynn Card, owner of family run Patti-Lynn Interiors in Stouffville, Ont., puts it this way: “If the store doesn’t look like it has been designed, how can you tell your customer ‘Yes, this \$20,000 floor is for you?’”

IMPORTANT DESIGN ELEMENTS

Card believes many independent floorcovering retailers focus on the wrong element. “I find they’re more concerned about the bottom-line pricing and comparing it to people around them rather than focusing on their own brand and making their store part of who they are. I think that’s really important. It’s part of my



is also lit by fluorescent lights high up on vaulted ceilings. Card was very conscious of the interior lighting, and changed to daylight bulbs that complement the natural window light.

However, sunlight and daylight bulbs show colours differently than cool- or soft-white bulbs. Hardy says this is part of the reason why store lighting is an important element of the overall design. "You might want lighting that reflects what you might see in your home versus what you might see in a normal atmosphere where you're going to see different lighting results," he explains. "Depending on how your store is designed, you might want to create miniature rooms within your store so you can feature different flooring products."

CREATING COMFORT

In retail design, making customers feel comfortable is crucial. They must be engaged. Experts say when shoppers feel comfortable, safe and engaged they stay longer and are more likely to purchase from you.

"It's more about the experience of the retail than the retail, Coryander Friend, a California production designer, said in a Design Intersects Everything Made (DIEM) 2014 panel discussion about the future of retail sponsored by the West Hollywood Design District in Los Angeles. "The lines have blurred a little bit. The consumer is so much more active in the design process and what they want to buy. They're not just turning it over to their designer. They want to participate."

Creating that comfortable, engaging environment involves everything from the flooring material to the right lighting, to having an area for one-on-one consultation; to store navigation; to sightlines; and to the height and arrangement of product displays. "Ultimately [store design] is a combination of all those things," says Hardy.

Stephanie Jones, an interior designer with Bergmeyer Associates, in Boston, Mass., says the challenge is designing a store that's functional but engaging. She stresses the importance of understanding "what factors are really influencing [customers'] decision-making while they're in the store. Look at the big picture," she says.

"Store design is something we put a lot of thought into," says George Leahy, co-owner of Fabulous Flooring in Moncton, N.B. "Our store has a logical flow to it. Our sales area is in the centre and the samples are around the perimeter. We try not to block the view from front to back, so the placement of taller displays is important. There's a fine line between too much selection and not enough. We want customers to feel they have a lot to choose from without being overwhelmed." *Continued*



Patti-Lynn Card of Patti-Lynn Interiors, in her sales environment.

brand. It sets me apart and makes people buy here." In addition, Card says, the big elements are comfort, ease of movement, wide aisles, a good sightline and lighting.

Last March, Card moved into a larger space a couple of kilometres down the road from where Patti-Lynn Interiors was located for 20 years. "Coming into a space like this, there were things you could not change, so you design around them to make it the best for you," she says. For example, a bearing wall meant Card couldn't open up the space toward the back of the store as much as she would have liked.

There's a key difference between designing your store in a virgin, new space and in an older building, says Hardy. "If you move into an older space, you're very often left with the remnants of the previous tenant, so there are costs and time associated with removing all of those things."

Card's new store has plenty of natural light. However, it



Vehicles, entrances and showroom flooring all touch customers.

FLOORS GENERATE REVENUE

Think of the floors in your store as a revenue generator. For one thing, the right flooring material helps create the comfortable environment, and keep customers in your store.

A 2009 study by the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management found a direct relationship between store flooring and customers' perceptions. What shoppers think about products depends on whether they're standing on a hard or soft surface and the distance they are from a display. Comfort or discomfort under foot can affect buying decisions.

Both Card and Leahy are very conscious of the floors in their stores—for the other reason why flooring choice is important. "It shows people what can be done with a floor. It gives a better representation," says Card. Both store owners make sure their floors are changed out regularly.

Card has her flooring displays at the front of the store. Flooring sales make up 75 per cent of Patti-Lynn Interiors' business. The section includes a classy glass table with comfortable chairs where Card can consult one-on-one with clients.

Mid-store there's a long customer-service counter, sur-

rounded by the paints section. And there is a coffee station—an important design element for Card. Customers can enjoy an instant cup while they're browsing or discussing a project with her.

THINK OUTSIDE

Card attests, thinking beyond the interior space is important. She considers Patti-Lynn Interiors' website, the store's exterior entrance and signage and even the store's trucks as part of her store's design. All these things working together draw people into the store, she says.

"The signage and outside of the store must be part of your design," says Card. "You have to make sure you have a beautiful first presence."

Mark Moussa, who owns Arteriors in Los Angeles and was also a DIEM 2014 panelist, says his website is an integral part of the store's design. It makes Arteriors publicly accessible even though he sells only to interior designers. "[Consumers] can download tear-sheets and take them to their designers and say, 'Hey, this is what I like.'"

Hardy realizes many independent retailers are budget conscious. Professional retail design costs for a store around 2,000 square feet typically range between \$30,000 and \$40,000, he explains. The bigger the space, the higher the cost.

But there's good reason to work with professionals who can help you, Hardy says. "They can take your entrepreneurial spirit and translate it into an identity for your company, and that can lead to future growth." 

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