

## **SECTION: 4: Investigating Design Principles and Art Elements to Communicate Store Image and Build Profitable Retail Sales**

### **Part 1: Examine the Six Basic Principles of Display**

#### **Part 1: 1-1 Plan the Merchandise Presentation and Displays**

Visual merchandising personnel must develop a plan for each merchandise presentation. Initially, an overall strategy that defines the *Who, Why, What, Where, and When* of a merchandise presentation must be established. Additionally, there must be a timetable, organizational chart, and sketch to scale for each major display event.

##### *The “Who” of the Display*

The first aspect of a display that must be considered by visual personnel is the identification of the *Who*. In other words, “Who” is being targeted (i.e., the retailer’s target market). The displayer must not only know the customer targeted but also the customer standards and the community in which the customer resides. (Refer to **Section 2: Part 1** of this course.) When utilizing visuals as a selling vehicle, the displayer has only three to eight seconds to attract the customer’s attention and to create desire for the product. Therefore, the display must “talk” directly to the consumer. It must not be too sophisticated for the audience, or contain snobbery or shock elements to which the consumer does not relate, nor offend the consumer in any manner.

##### *The “Why” of the Display*

*Why* is the specific merchandise, concept, or trend being presented instead of other merchandise alternatives in the store? Do the displays support an introduction to a special promotion or storewide event? Are the displays being utilized to introduce a new trend, new merchandise classification carried by the store, or a specific brand or seasonal item?

Is the merchandise elegant, expensive, exclusive to the store, or unique product? If the display is promoting the rapid sell of the merchandise, how many pieces or what quantities of merchandise in the display are available in stock? If there is not enough stock of the merchandise classifications presented in the display available for sale, the customer is disappointed and sometimes even annoyed. On the other hand, if the merchandise classifications are buyer mistakes or undesirable merchandise, regardless the quantity of the items available or how much the merchandise is romanced in the display, it is not the most appropriate merchandise to feature either!

Remember, there are many objectives or reasons for displaying merchandise. A visual merchandiser must contemplate each display concept and determine if that idea supports the strategic plan of both the store and the visual division. In summary, there are many solutions to any problem. Therefore, the visual merchandiser must consider carefully the objectives for displaying specific merchandise categories. Additionally, visual personnel must take care to examine the physical properties of the merchandise and determine the enhancements needed to display the items.

##### *The “What” of the Display*

*What* is to be presented? Is the merchandise selection in the display created to support store and fashion image, an innovative fashion trend, or new seasonal arrivals; or is the display introducing a new brand now available in the store? The *theme* or big concept of the display will assist in not only providing the objective of the display and the “what” for the merchandise selection but will also be a

major “thread” that ties the display elements into a unified whole. The theme of a display frequently dictates the product classifications displayed and color scheme of the display, as well as the type of props and accessories that complete the composition of the display.

Theme sources may be seasonal, holiday, institutional, or mega and/or fashion trend themes. For example, for each climatic season, such as spring, summer, early fall, fall/winter, and holiday, there are specific themes which depict that particular time of the calendar year. Spring suggests growth and change while fall signifies autumn leaves and cooler weather. However, when utilizing climatic themes, the visual displayer must not wait until the season arrives to begin displaying the new fashion trends. Merchandise must be displayed before the retailer’s peak selling season.

Major holiday themes may evolve from Valentine’s Day, President’s Day, Easter, Memorial Day, July Fourth, Back-to-School, Labor Day, Columbus Day, Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, and Christmas. All of these themes dictate specific merchandise classifications, color schemes, props, and accessories. Other themes for displays may evolve around special institutional events such as the retailer’s anniversary sale or some special charity event sponsored by the store.



However, more than likely, the display theme will be developed from the most current fashion trend found in the products of the retailer’s merchandise mix. For example, a spring theme may be based upon a nautical concept but in updated silhouettes or innovative colors of marine blue, yellow, and white. The southwestern theme automatically connotes a brown, khaki and olive green color palette accented with turquoise and coral. Patterns prevalent for this theme are the Aztec print, cactus and motifs found native to the southwest. Accessories to complete this theme are frequently turquoise, coral and other natural stones set in sterling silver.

Thus, the store and fashion image, the merchandise classification, the quality of the merchandise, and the design and quality of the display itself must all relate in theme and concept and be on a similar level of aesthetics, significance, and sophistication. It is very important that the display design supports and

sustains the store image, since poorly designed displays actually may damage the retailer's store and/or fashion image.

The target consumer identifies a certain "look" with a specific retail store and expects to find that particular "flavor" throughout the store on each visit. If the merchandise is displayed inappropriately, the consumer is confused and sales can be lost. The displayer must "*look at the product through the customer's eyes*" in order to determine the best or most appropriate method for displaying a specific product category or brand.

However, the bottom line is that the "*merchandise itself is the number one element of the display*" when determining the what and why for displaying a specific merchandise classification or item. Thus, the major concept that the displayer must consider when selecting the merchandise for a display is that he/she is concentrating on displaying merchandise and not actually creating an aesthetic creation that does not present or promote the best characteristics of the merchandise itself!

#### *The "Where" of the Display*

One of the first elements when building a display is determining the appropriate physical location in the store that will be most lucrative for showcasing the merchandise in the display. The location of the display determines the background area, the type of props, the signage needed to enhance the presentation, and the attention-getting devices needed to attract the target consumer.

Based upon the product classifications, price and quality of the goods, and the fashion and trend level of the merchandise, the visual merchandiser must locate a physical location in the store that is most conducive to maintaining and promoting store and fashion image, that is best for stimulating and motivating interest of the target consumer, and that is the most contributive to increasing both impulse and add-on sales, as well as total sales volume. There are many such locations in a retail store for exhibiting merchandise. Merchandise islands, display cases, point-of-purchase displays, platforms, demonstration cubes, and interior shadow boxes, as well as architectural structural elements such as columns and ledges are all in-store locations that are viable possibilities to be considered by the visual merchandiser. Each of those locations will be described briefly below.

#### Holiday store display

The *merchandise island*, especially on the main floor, near an entrance, stairway, and/or elevator or escalator, is one of the most valuable display locations in a retail store. Being considered as a 100 % traffic area or a very heavily traveled traffic path, this location should feature a display with "pick-up" merchandise. In addition, the display should be built so that the customer may view the merchandise from all sides. Many times the retailer displays impulse buys or low-priced, easy-to-sell volume merchandise in this area, as well as recently advertised items.



Often mass-merchandise arrangements are displayed on merchandise islands. They may take on a form of a step, pyramid or zigzag arrangement. The *step format* arrangement is a graduation of levels from lowest to highest arranged in a stair step structure, with all levels being parallel. However, sometimes the base might be wide in order to accommodate more merchandise.

The *pyramid format* is built on a broad base and gradually narrows to an apex at the top of the display. Thus, the display becomes smaller and more compact as the eyes near the top of the display. This is a static display and calls for a unique use of color, theme, and/or lighting.

The *zigzag format* is a combination of the step and pyramid. Unlike the pyramid, it has movement and appears to come alive! Usually the steps are not uniform in height. This format is good for displaying a large number of small items.

The above formats are excellent for displaying multiples of a product classification such as housewares, jewelry, and other accessories. Many times these types of displays are utilized for special events or storewide promotions. They are most effective when combined with motion, sound, or other unique effects.

Retailers utilize display cases for multiple purposes. *Display cases* are not only featured selling areas for specific merchandise classifications, but also they are utilized for storage for the product on display. Although this type of display is very effective for exclusive, expensive merchandise, it has some drawbacks. For example, store personnel are needed to oversee the display case when it is used as a selling fixture; and many times display cases take up space that could be occupied by multiple selling fixtures.

However, the display case is an excellent fixture for protecting merchandise from undue “touch, feel, and steal”! Also, it is an excellent fixture/location for promoting special merchandise themes and/or seasonal merchandise classifications. Inside flooring of cases should be covered either in neutral fabrics/materials that call attention to colorful merchandise or in fabric/materials that relate to the color of the season or a storewide theme or event. Fabrics, texture, and colors set the mood for and enforce the theme of the merchandise, as well as create ambience for the store.

The *point-of-purchase display* (i.e., POP) is the merchandise presentation of a product at the point or place in the store where the final sales transaction takes place. It promotes customer involvement, creates impulse buys, attracts shoppers’ attention and piques the curiosity of the consumer without sales personnel being present. Oftentimes this display is designed and created by the manufacturer for promoting a new product or for promoting brand recognition.

The point-of-purchase display quickly informs the consumer of what the product is, what it does, and who makes the product. Since this type and location of display takes valuable space, it must be economical and efficient for both the vendor and retailer. With the point-of-purchase display, lighting and motion are sometimes utilized as attention-getters in order to attract the attention of the target consumer and to create an exciting and fun retail store environment.

*Counter displays* are utilized in order to expand a shortage of space or to display small and hard-to-merchandise items at point of sale. These displays should foster selling action, must be light weight in order to be moved easily, and must be low enough in height so that the customer can see over the display. This type of display should not be over utilized in one area.

*Platforms* separate the display from the selling floor, highlight merchandise from a distance, and permit the customer to view product classifications hidden within the department. Platforms are utilized in the home furnishings department in order to feature vignettes of related or lifestyle merchandise. The most exclusive merchandise, unique classifications, and/or the most recent arrivals, plus seasonal and fashion merchandise should be featured on the platform display. This is valuable real estate for a department and should be utilized to build increased traffic as well as impulse and add-on sales.

*Demonstration cubes* are moveable cubes that are usually grouped in clusters. To call attention to special buys or other special products, these cubes are utilized as mid-traffic islands or as “off-the-aisle” displays in order to draw consumers into the department. In shoe departments, these cubes are used for display fixtures. Additionally they are also located in remote areas of the store in order to call attention to hidden areas or out-of-the-way and difficult to find merchandise assortments.

*Interior shadow boxes* are usually located behind counters, at eye level or sometime above. These miniature, elevated display windows are used for small merchandise, fashion accessories, and exclusive and expensive items. Background and floor coverings for the shadow box display cases should be lined with appropriate fabrics, colors, and textures in order to complement and draw attention to the merchandise. Props should be chosen with care and should reinforce the trend or seasonal theme of the merchandise displayed.

Architectural display locations include columns and ledges in the store. *Columns* are an integral part of the construction of the store. Utilize them for storewide events, special themes events, or unique merchandise introductions and new arrivals. *Ledges* are high, straight display areas over wall cabinets, tops of storage units behind the selling counters, or other high fixtures. Merchandise stored or housed

below these ledges should be featured on the ledges. Additionally, ledges may be utilized for image or institutional displays (i.e., displays promoting an idea rather than merchandise) or product and/or seasonal and promotional displays such as Valentine's Day, anniversary sales or end-of-season sales.

The location of a display also may determine the type of display setting as well as the design elements emphasized in order to create the display. Many retailers today adhere to the retailing concept of "lifestyle merchandising" or depicting, in the retail setting, the everyday lives of the target consumer. Lifestyle merchandising is a presentation of both merchandise assortments and displays. This type of merchandising tells the consumer "how to wear or use", "when to wear or use", and "where to wear or use".

Retailers attempt to provide a fun, exciting retail environment that is enticing to the target consumer while promoting the store and fashion image. The type of setting in which the retailer attempts to drive sales is very important to the end results of those goals. There are at least five settings available to the retailer as a presentation tool. They include realistic, semi-realistic, environmental, fantasy, and abstract settings. These settings will be discussed briefly below; however, the student might like to conduct further research on these topics.

The *realistic setting* is the type of setting to which the consumer relates most readily. It is a miniature depiction of an everyday life environment. It is immediately recognized by the customer and teaches the "eye" of the consumer what is needed for a particular activity or event; or, better yet, it draws attention to what products the customer is missing or needs. Even though "real life" props should be utilized in this setting, the visual merchandiser does not wish to "merchandise the display" so well that the customer would rather buy the props than the merchandise on display! Scale, shape, and balance, as well as color, texture, and lighting are very important elements in this type of setting.

In contrast, in the *semi-realistic setting*, the visual merchandiser "sets the stage" for viewing the product in an "everyday real world" setting but leaves certain aspects of the display presentation or picture to the imagination of the customer. These settings are appropriate for ledges, island displays, and backless windows.

On the other hand, the *environmental setting* promotes all items on display for sale or shows how and where the product is to be used. This setting is also known as a vignette. The background becomes merchandise that can be sold with the other products on display. For example, in a furniture store, the window treatments at the faux window behind the sofa becomes an integral part of the display, yet is also a product for sell.



A very interesting setting is the *fantasy setting* or a setting of expected or unexpected elements in unexpected places such as chairs floating on the ceiling or lamps on the floor. The fantasy setting requires a creative, innovative approach. This type of setting also calls for an active imagination on the behalf of the consumer. It is one of the most difficult settings to design, to construct, and to make intelligible to the target consumer.

Lastly, in the *abstract setting*, the merchandise becomes dominant and the setting itself, sometimes referred to as an architectural setting, reinforces and supports the message. The background is an arrangement of lines, shapes, panels, cubes, cylinders, triangle, curves, arches, and circles that do not depict anything realistic, nor can these elements be interpreted by the viewer as a particular concept. The setting supports the merchandise and is the background that reinforces the trend concept.



In summary, along with the merchandise itself, the colors selected, the textures of the merchandise and the props, and the shapes and arrangement of the display elements, plus the lighting should all be planned in relation to the location of the display.



### *The “When” of the Display*

When is the merchandise to be displayed? Timing of a display, especially if the merchandise is seasonal, is one of the most important factors to be considered during the planning process. Merchandise must always be displayed before the peak-selling season of the retailer. (Refer to the Buying-Selling Curve in **Section 2: Part 4** of this class in order to view fashion change, speed, and direction.) Remember, neither climatic nor retail selling seasons wait for the displayer; therefore, the displayer is not at liberty to take a lengthy amount of time to make decisions about store visual communications!

### *The Plan for the Display*

After defining the who, why, what, where, and when for each visual presentation, visual merchandisers must develop a specific *plan* or guide in order to build the actual display. This plan consists of a) timetable, b) organizational chart of all activities, and c) sketch of the display. The *timetable*, laying out the timeline for completing all activities, must be established. A checklist of strategic points and activities must be charted on this calendar to assure that all activities are completed and requirements for staging the display are completed in a timely manner. These timetables are usually constructed six months in advance and/or when the retail buyers develop the Six Month Merchandise Budgets. (Refer to the “Retail Math for Profit: How to Think Like a Buyer” course offered by Cotton University™ in the College of Retail postings.)

Nearer to the time for staging the planned visual presentation, an *organizational chart of all activities* is established; and, responsibilities for each of those activities are assigned to individual visual personnel who are responsible for executing the tasks and meeting deadline as designated on the timeline. This organizational chart assures that all activities are completed and that deadlines are met in a timely manner. Then, an actual sketch of the display may or may not be drawn to scale in order to leave no detail to chance!

Lastly, when planning the merchandise presentation and displays, the visual merchandiser must be aware of what is happening in the local community, country and world. Are there sporting or social events, cultural or artistic endeavors, or environmental and other community issues that might be incorporated into the display for impact, to attract the consumer’s attention, or to sell product?

When planning, visual personnel must also pay close attention to the state of the store’s or department’s sales volume, any special events or promotions being sponsored by the retailer, and any other happenings within the store that might impact the visual presentation or calendar. In fact, most retailers maintain a special events and promotions notebook of the previous year’s activities, as well as an advertising calendar and activities of the competition. Usually, those events and advertisements that were the most successful are noted and detailed information is recorded so that the event or advertisement may be utilized as a basis in the next year’s marketing plan and budget. Of course, *the visual presentation, especially the displays, should be coordinated with the advertising and special events.*

In summary, an effective visual presentation or display introduces, informs, and reinforces a theme, a merchandise concept, and/or store and fashion image. There must be a plan created for each display, and that plan must address the store and fashion image, the location of the display within the store, the merchandise and the trend concept to be presented, the demands and wants of the customer being targeted, and the selection of the setting type, props, lighting, and signage for the display. As always, the consumer has the last word, as the effectiveness and success of the display is verified when the customer purchases the product.