: **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: 1-4 Maintain Good Composition
The fourth principle of *"The Six Basic Principles of a Retail Merchandise Presentation or Display"* is *"Maintain Good Composition"*. When creating the design of each display, the composition or the use of the art elements (i.e., color, texture, proportion, line, and shape) and design principles (i.e., composition, balance, rhythm, repetition, and dominance) along with the theme, props, attention-getting devices, and signage must be planned in detail. The impact of the design principles, attention-getting devices, and signage are explained in this part.

Composition is the organization, arrangement, and/or grouping of the various parts and elements of the display in order to create or achieve a unified whole. It is the arrangement of the previously discussed art elements coupled with the design principles that produces a unified, easily understandable product concept or work of art. The arrangement or composition of the display elements directs the viewer's eye to various bits and pieces of the creation, yet the viewer recognizes the display as a total work. Thus, the major function of good composition in a display is to create *unity and harmony* that communicates a well-planned message and directs the consumer's eye to all the elements or parts of the whole. Therefore, good composition ties the product, props, and display background together as a common concept or "big idea".

Specifically, when creating good composition in the display, the visual merchandiser selects and manipulates the elements of balance, rhythm, repetition, and dominance as well as props, attention-getting devices, and signage. *Balance* is the state of harmony among the elements of an artistic composition. It creates a state of stability or equilibrium in the display. There are two types of balance: formal or symmetrical and informal or asymmetrical.

In *formal balance* each side is a mirror image of the other side or its opposite part. Each side must contain the exact same elements that are equal in weight, importance, and prominence. Formal balance in a display usually indicates that the merchandise is expensive or is of a higher quality. This type of balance is utilized with formal attire, business apparel, and other expensive merchandise that calls for dignity, authority, or formality in the presentation. Traditionally, formal balance has been a major technique utilized in creating aesthetically pleasing displays. However, the overuse of formal balance can create boredom or a staid state.

Asymmetrical or informal balance is more interesting, exciting, and usually more casual than formal balance. With *informal balance* either side of a display appears to be of equal weight, but the elements of each of the sides are not a replica or mirror image of the other side. Even though the individual components of each side of the display differ, there appears to be a balance of weight and size of the objects on either side to create a harmonious state or a stable equilibrium in the artistic creation.

To create interest, many visual merchandisers use an odd number (i.e., 3, 5, and 7) of items or objects with informal balance in order to build an attention-getting display. For example, to balance a large item on one side of the display, the visual merchandiser might position several smaller items, appearing to have the equal weight of the large item, on the other side of the display in order to create informal balance. Other techniques utilized in order to create informal balance include the incorporation of a bright color, a shot of light, or something equally as large as the item on the other side, yet not the identical item, in the display.

Also, visual personnel might utilize a large expanse of negative background space in order to create informal balance. However, a large negative background space calls attention to the object within the composition. Therefore, instead of positioning the object in the center of the display space, it is more interesting to place the object to one side or the other in the large space. Then the space on either side of the object becomes just as important and interesting. Further, to create more interest, the space should not be divided into half but into thirds or fourths when positioning the object in the display. Additionally, surrounding objects near the space or display should not become more important than the featured, saleable items in the display.

As previously discussed, the element of color can also be utilized to create informal balance. For example, several soft colors may be used to balance one smaller bright color. For fun, interest, and whimsy, sometimes a visual merchandiser may plan to create an outstanding display that lacks balance. However, the composition still must appear to be technically correct, and not just a mishap that was built without the proper knowledge and understanding of appropriate fundamental display principles. This technique is very difficult to achieve and is usually left to the seasoned displayer with much experience and expertise.

Another design principle that must be considered for building aesthetically pleasing displays is rhythm. *Rhythm* is the movement of the eye from element to element, from background to foreground, and from side to side in the display. It is very important that the movement of the eye from element to element is easily achieved, as the viewer should not become bored, distracted, or lose track of the path already viewed.

All effective displays must have a *dominant object* that the eye may utilize or "rest upon", and then move from, in order to view all of the subordinate objects in the display. Thus, all displays should have a *focal point* or dominant element that attracts the eye and immediately catches the attention of the consumer. The dominant element or the focal point of the display should be established in the initial stages of planning the display presentation.

Some elements become dominant by color, size, and/or position within the artistic endeavor. For example, dominance may be created through the merchandise itself in the display. Merchandise becomes dominant through the arrangement of colors, lines, shapes, balance and/or light. A small item that is sharply contrasted with its background might become the dominant point of the display, or one item sharply contrasted against its background highlighted with a strong shot of light may become the focal point of the display.

Merchandise should definitely be the featured component of the display; however, the mannequin(s) in the display may become dominant by virtue of size or the color of the merchandise that is being shown. Dominance may also be created through the arrangement of weights of various elements such as texture in the composition and gradation of color and light.

Another aspect of rhythm is repetition. *Repetition* is the reiteration of an idea, concept, or motif. The concept is repeated over and over again to make an impact. For example, the same garment, the same pattern, the same color, the same line, the same shape, or the same form may be used over and over in the display. A more concrete example of repetition is the utilization of a large quantity of the same small item in a large display area. The small item stands out due to the quantity used and the placement of the item. Remember, an odd number of items is always more interesting than an even number.

Furthermore, a display is read from left to right as if reading a book. Therefore, one of the most important spaces in the display is the upper left corner. In the upper left corner of the display, begin to execute rhythm or make the eye travel across the entire design with use of color, repetitive shapes, shadows or light placement, lettering or texture or other useful design techniques.

Thus, to create rhythm or movement of the eye, there must be an unobstructed, balanced *flow* in the display. For example, too many objects in a display impart a feeling of overcrowding, while too much color, too many textures, or too many patterns will make the eye "hop" and become irritated or tired. However, too few objects or too much space in the display obstructs flow also. Most experts indicate that too much blank space makes the eye "jump"; and, if the consumer has to concentrate too hard, he/she will not glance through the entire design.

A useful technique that may be utilized by the visual merchandiser in order to create a seamless flow in the design creation is known as overlapping. *Overlapping* is achieved by not separating objects in the same area with too much blank space. Therefore, the eye is not interrupted and can read the remainder of the design idea.

Last, another design element that must be addressed in a creative endeavor is that of proportion. *Proportion* is the proper size relationship between object and space; or it is the relationship of size, scale, and the weight of elements between each other and the entire composition. Proportion, like balance, creates a sense of order.

Articles play off each other through size, shape, and color. First, consider the size of the display area. Then, plan a contrast or comparison of the various elements in order to show a sharp difference. For example, a difference in texture or an incongruity in objects can heighten the contrast. Also, an outrageous difference in texture between the merchandise and its environment provides a "feel" or "touch" of an item that is more apparent to the eye.

Additionally, an evident change in proportion adds creative interest and an aesthetically pleasing aspect to the visual. An overly large object makes an average object look smaller, while a tiny object makes that same average size object look larger. Proper proportion of items in the display, as well as the composition of the display, and the area in which the display is located are all critical to a successful, aesthetically pleasing creation.

Finally, when discussing maintaining good composition in a display, the visual merchandiser must address not only the previous design principles but also attention-getting devices and signage. Attention-getting devices in the display are integral to both the composition and success of the display. *Attention-getting devices* are any element in the display that call attention to the major theme of the display and/or the display and merchandise itself. These devices should relate to the merchandise as well as the current events or issues in the local community or region.

The type of the attention-getting device selected for the display depends upon the store and fashion image, the type and price of merchandise being displayed, the lifestyle of the target consumer, and the neighboring tenants to name just a few criteria. Attention-getting devices include color, line, composition, scale, contrast, and repetition. They may be based on lighting, humor, mirrors, nostalgia, motion, surprise, shock or even amusing or unusual props.

For example, humorous attention-getters usually evoke a smile from the consumer and create a relaxed environment for customer selection and purchase. Motion attracts attention while mirrors reveal new angles of the merchandise and add a sparkle to the display. The shock of overturned furniture or a common everyday item in a very uncommon position might go from surprising, to amusing, or even to shocking.

To complete the composition of the display, many retailers like to accompany the display with descriptive signage. *Signage* is a term used to describe the various visual or graphic forms stores use to communicate with customers in order to stimulate the desire to buy, to create store and fashion image, and to reinforce or backup the merchandise display. Signage is used with a display to help establish the theme, explain the qualities of the merchandise, provide pertinent information about the product, or to introduce a new fashion trend or new product classification.

Signage should harmonize, enhance, and pull together the "look" or theme of the display. Specifically, signage should:

- assist sales personnel in selling merchandise
- help customers in making selections

- create interest and hold attention
- allow customers to compare merchandise classifications
- stimulate impulse sales
- identify merchandise, brands, and product classifications
- communicate with customers when sales assistance is not available
- increase sales and boost profit at minimum expenses.

The four guidelines for sign composition, design, and layout include the following:

- Do not waste space and time with unnecessary words.
- Avoid big, technical term unknown to the consumer.
- Relate the features that encourage consumer interest in the product.
- Do not use selling features of merchandise, such as color, that are visibly obvious.

In summary, as the visual merchandiser creates and builds a display, the use of the art elements and design principles as well as props, attention-getting devices, themes, and signage must be planned with care. To maintain good composition, always evaluate the display using the guidelines listed below.

- Decide upon formal or informal balance.
- Plan for dominance or a focal point, usually the merchandise itself, in a display.
- Create rhythm through the use of a dominant element and repetition of other elements.
- Check proportions of merchandise and props in relation to the space and boundaries of the display.
- Utilize signage to reinforce the display theme and hold the attention of the consumer.