

SECTION 2: Establishing the Retail Store Image: Six Step Method

Part 3: Develop an Inviting Store Environment: Create Identifiable Store Elements

Introduction: Develop an Inviting Store Environment

The third step in developing the store image is selecting the elements or store image cues and attributes that create the mental image or impression the public perceives regarding the store's personality. Each retailer must "paint a picture" or present a unique personality or character of the store that he wishes the target consumer to recognize in comparison to the store's competition. **Store image** is a mirror of what the store stands for with regard to value/quality of merchandise, price of product assortments, customer service types, store personnel, promotional direction and community citizenship.

Store image is:

- what makes a customer shop in one store over another store
- the positioning of the store in the channel of distribution
- the differentiation of the store from its competition
- the exclusivity of the store's offering as compared to the competition.

A store creates a mental perception in the minds of the consumer whether it is attempting to do so or not. Therefore, it is very important that these perceptions are established and controlled by the specific retailer. Perceptions are based upon such elements as:

- *generalities* or history and store founders, store location (i.e., type such as shopping center, mall, free-standing) and surrounding external environment, the tenant mix or store composition of the center, and target consumer
- *physical elements* such as a store's architecture, exterior and interior décor, the center's marque and/or signage that identifies the store (i.e., colors, lettering type and font style, materials)
- *personnel elements* such as an adequate number of sales associates with product knowledge and enthusiasm to build multiple sales
- *customer service* attributes such as types of services provided by the store and the consumer perception of these services
- *product* elements such as the retail/vendor matrix, brands carried by the store, the value/quality of the product, the merchandise assortment, product exclusivity and differentiation, the degree of fashion leadership that the store reflects
- *price* cues such as the price ranges and price points of a store's merchandise assortments, the value/quality equation implemented for pricing product
- *placement* elements such as channel of distribution and type of location where store operates
- *promotional mix* that includes media mix, community involvement, visual presentation and display, fashion coordination, special events, etc.

Even more important is the fact that if consumers have not visited a store and formulated a mental perception, they use other elements or visual cues to make a decision about the store. For example, word-of-mouth descriptions by family members and friends; window displays, advertisements and types of special events promoted by the store; type of clientele entering or leaving the store; and types of automobiles in front of the store and parking lot are all elements consumers use to create perceptions of the store. Thus, it is most important that the retailer selects and establishes elements or cues that are

the most prominent for building the store/brand image for that specific retailer. Additionally, it is much more difficult to change an image than it is to establish a beginning image.

For example, Belk, the largest family-owned department store in the southeast, recently successfully updated its store image in order to compete with present day competition. Corporate headquarters held focus groups with target consumers from the community in order to determine the current perceptions of Belk stores. Based on the research findings, the company created its updated image reflecting the history of the organization and its southern location.

The retailer changed its logo, signage, tagline and colors. Since the third generation is now overseeing store operations and the stores are mainly located in the south, a symbol to designate those cues was incorporated into the store logo and signage. A three petal graphic, symbolizing the three generations of the Belk family, was executed in shades of blue, signifying a cool, calm, and comfortable southern environment.

Additionally, the font and style of lettering for the Belk name were changed from the traditional scroll of the capital Belk "B" in a turquoise color to a lower case lettering in an updated font. The lower case font is a more contemporary, updated style designating a trend of the modern times. The tagline became "MODERN. SOUTHERN. STYLE."® Although it took several months and thousands of dollars to reimage, the signage, packaging, and promotional tagline of the retailer have "painted" the belk stores as stores with a "MODERN. SOUTHERN. STYLE"®!

In the following segments of Part 3, the store elements essential for creating an identifiable store image will be delineated in segments 3-1 through 3-8.