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Merchandising Basics

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By Lisa Plummer



Effective visual merchandising is somewhat of a science, combined with a little psychology and aesthetic flair. Here are a few basic principles to help create attractive, effective and compelling displays and a fun retail experience that will catch your customers' attention, inspire them to spend more money and keep them coming back!

Know Your Customer Profile

Before planning your displays make sure you've done your homework about your customer demographic so you can gear your merchandise accordingly, advises Gary Petz, retail profit specialist for Discovery-Based Retail.

"Keep in mind that you've got customers coming in for two reasons," says Petz. "You have the tea connoisseurs who know what they want, and you have the casual users who have maybe heard about your store but don't know a lot about tea. You have to merchandise keeping those two (customers) in mind."

For example, for the tea aficionado, carry top-shelf, unique or medicinal products and premium accessories. For the tea newbie, create beginner teaware sets and focus on educating them with

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helpful POS signage placed on displays (as well as throughout the store), explaining the different types of teas, flavor profiles and benefits.

Light It Up

Good lighting and light levels can influence shopper comfort and create visual interest, so make sure to pay special attention to this important detail when illuminating displays.

“Older people like larger print and brighter stores so they can read things,” says Petz. “Keep your demographic in mind and if you can, keep your ambient light a little lower and put in track lighting to highlight your product displays. If you can do some perimeter and accent lighting, that can make accessories shine and seem more high-end. Remember, people are like moths - they’re drawn to light.”



If there’s one major investment you should make in your shop, it’s good lighting, agrees Linda Cahan, owner of Cahan & Co. and author of “Feng Shui for Retailers.”

“For pretty much any type of teashop, unless you’re wholesale or discount, you need to have a mix of lights,” says Cahan. “Whether you do a mix of halogens, fluorescent, spotlights and specialty lighting and ideally LED lighting or whether you have basic fluorescents, the more complicated the lighting plan, the more expensive the store will be perceived as being.”

If investing in more sophisticated lighting isn’t feasible, consider adding spotlights along the walls to create patterns of bright and brighter light, which will accent products and accentuate colors. Opt for warm-colored bulbs or full-spectrum rather than blue tones, suggests Cahan.

Get Color Savvy

As a core component of effective visual merchandising, color should be considered an integral part of your displays. Not only does color stimulate the eyes and add interest and excitement, it also makes your products “pop,” helping to draw shoppers to key display areas.

“Color matters,” says Petz. “Color can demand a shopper’s attention, evoke emotion and influence decisions. Your merchandising plan should include bright colors not only for displays or end caps, but also for the middle-of-aisle runs. Visually painting your store with colorful focal points will help draw shoppers to those key areas.”

For example, arranging teapots in colorful “ribbons,” or vertical rows of color along a shelf, either in one line of solid color, groupings of like colors or random colors, can help capture the shoppers’ eyes and inspire them to investigate.

Color can also have emotional and psychological impact, so it’s not only important to select a store color that reflects your theme, scheme and brand, but also one that will evoke the right kind of message to your shoppers. According to Cahan, certain colors can affect people in the following ways:

Orange: evokes a sense of warmth and positivity; most favored by trendsetters and creative people; the color of affordability.

Yellow: keeps people bright, optimistic and alert; too much of it can cause anxiety.

Green: inspires harmony and balance; helps people lose track of time, calm down and relax; better for browsing than buying.

Blue: decreases appetite; serene and mentally calming; can be perceived as cold and unfriendly, depending on the shade.

Purple: the color of spiritual awareness, introspection and truth; people tend to steal less in a purple environment; the wrong tone can be seen as purely feminine.

Red: increases appetite and energy; makes people move and eat faster; can cause irritability

Arrange Strategically

So you’ve picked the right spot for your displays, put them together and now it’s time to just cram the shelves full of merchandise, right? Wrong! Where you place, and how you space, arrange and group products is key to attracting the customer’s attention to all the right places, namely to the kind of merchandise that will help increase your profits, says Petz.

“I would try to merchandise the high-profit, new and premium products at eye level,” says Petz. “That’s your real estate in retail, from the knees to the top of head (approx. 4-6ft.). Put your staples,

your everyday tea at the bottom. You have it, it's on display but it's not where you want people to pick up stuff."

Although maximizing shelf space is important, there are a variety of factors to consider when arranging and spacing your merchandise, says Cahan.

"Whenever you merchandise something, space equals cost," says Cahan. "If things are packed very close together, there's a sense that they cost less. If there's space between them, it feels like they cost more. It also depends on your price point - if you have some special items, maybe they deserve their own shelf. Ideally, you want to put things on a shelf that make sense together and may be bought as a gift or set."

How you display merchandise will not only depend on your store's theme and décor but also on your demographic, says Brian Keating, founder of Sage Group LLC and publisher of Specialty Tea Is "Hot" Report. ®

"You'll arrange things differently in a grab-and-go shop versus a store that sells a lot of bulk tea," says Keating. "If you have a lot of students, you might do it by pricing. But always use the less-is-more rule: don't crowd the shelves! Three, four or five items on display can say more than 15 or 20. Visually it's a turn off if there's too much going on in the display. It's overwhelming and nothing is highlighted. Pull five to seven items to the front of a shelf or a freestanding display, highlight those items and mark them with a special price."

Match 'Em Up and Keep It Fresh

Most people love things that match or work together in a set. Not only do merchandising themes create exciting visual appeal, they also boost sales. For example, for new tea drinkers, put together a starter set that includes everything they'd need to enjoy tea, including a pot, tea, strainer and cup. If you carry non tea-related merchandise, such as candles, find one that matches the color, flavor or aroma scheme and throw it into the mix. Offering fun gift sets not only helps take the guesswork out of tea shopping, it's also a convenient solution for shoppers searching for gift ideas.

"If you have a beautiful multi-colored teacup, find a teapot in a solid color that works and make it look like a set," says Cahan. "Bring in some tea that has a flavor or a label with a similar color story. People will be attracted to the display and might buy it or give it to someone else because it matches. You're basically creating 'outfits' out of your merchandise."

You don't want your customers seeing the same old, tired displays every time they walk into your shop, so keep shelves stocked with new and interesting products. Make it a habit to move and rearrange your merchandise at least once a month, especially on floor displays or anywhere you're displaying new product. And don't forget the seasons and holidays, which can be great additional revenue opportunities, advises Keating.

"Don't let your teashop be frozen in time," says Keating. "The importance of creative and ever-changing merchandising schemes and layouts is vital. And remember to change up displays for seasons and holidays. For instance, for Valentine's Day, put together his and hers tea sets. There are probably 20 holidays you can take advantage of."

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Photo by Dan Bolton

Proper lighting is essential.



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