

BY UNDERMINING THE VALUE OF A VISUAL MERCHANDISER, THE RETAIL INDUSTRY AS A WHOLE IS DOING A BIG DISSERVICE TO THE EFFORTS OF THIS INDISPENSABLE SET OF PROFESSIONALS.



Visual Merchandising:

# It's Not Window Dressing Anymore

— by Ken Nisch

**V**isual merchandising has been an often misunderstood, undervalued, and woefully under-leveraged strategic retail tool during much of the history of retail. The very term 'window dressing' is typically a pejorative phrase that is intended to denote something that is superficial, not meaningful, and without substance. If indeed the term and the activity are seen that way, one can only imagine the level of respect and understanding given to those who perform these duties.

By contrast, the stylist or fashion director who makes the celebrity runway ready, the group that stages the home or condo for sale (earning additional dollars and profits for the developer), or the chef who prepares the amazing food presentation in the five-star restaurant, all are seen as people who create value with their skills. Then why, is the retail industry so wary and late to accept and leverage this important strategic tool?

Much of the reluctance likely goes to the heart of the senior management, the organisation, and those who drive the business of retail from an operational, logistics, technology and sourcing perspective. They rightly see the value for their business being created at the beginning of the process. I can't count how many times I've heard the phrase, "If you have the right merchandise, nothing else matters."

Yet in today's environment, the problem is that many companies have the right merchandise; they have it at the right price, at the right location and at the right time. Much of today's differentiation is being created not by the many things that they have done "right" up to the point of presentation; but rather, the difference is being generated during this last, and some might argue, most important step – in the store environment, at the moment of magic.

## **Begin with the end in mind**

Let me turn the clock back a bit and talk about where the real value of visual merchandising comes into play. Indeed, it is not at the end of the process. It doesn't happen when the boxes arrive. Rather, if it is truly going to be strategic, it happens as an integrated first stage; as part of the creative process.

Business writer, Stephen R. Covey, suggests, "Begin with the end in mind." Visual merchandisers can be a key resource, even at the point of product conception when the "end in mind" is crucial. They have the eye to see what is necessary in terms of building blocks, components, to create the visual balance, excitement and harmony



that is necessary for effective displays. They understand that “not enough of this” and “too much of that” will not work at the point of sale.

#### **The art and science of storytelling**

Visual merchandisers’ work serves to establish the art of storytelling, of engagement and interactivity in ways beyond those who source and manufacture, or even operate and view product outside SKUs and gross margin. Merchandisers recognise that in the end, most products boil down to a handful of commodity components - cotton, steel, silk, et cetera. Through correct visual

merchandising, the customer becomes engaged and sees the emotional aspects - the dream, the desire of the product - beyond its pure price and value.

This is why the visual merchandiser needs to be a part of the senior management

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team of the company. This is the person who owns its heart and possibly a piece of the company’s soul as well, and becomes the advocate for the experience, the story and the emotion. Until now, this hasn’t happened for many reasons; many of which

will not enter the industry until such time as the retail industry respects and values their efforts. On the other hand, the retail industry is reluctant to invite the visual merchandising industry into the boardroom, continuing to see their efforts as just that



are because of the visual merchandising industry itself.

Visual merchandising has often been focused on subjectivity, rather than science and objectivity; a focus on the art without understanding the science, and in many cases, a lack of professionalism that top retail organisations, frankly, should not and do not accept. But this is clearly a “chicken and egg” situation. The right professionals with the creative bandwidth and business savvy

of window dressing, rather than as a strategic part of what the company can and should do with its business.

Great examples of benchmarking partnerships exist. Visionary leaders in this area such as the late Andrew Markopoulos of the retailer that is known today as Macy’s, James Damien who drove the creation of a new experience for the Best Buy group, and Simon Doonan of the Barney’s organisation, represent individuals who have been role models for those looking both on the corporate and/or visual side.

#### **The ‘Life of the Party’**

The other area that is key to both leveraging and establishing visual merchandising as a strategic tool is in the area of the retail experience itself. Too often, retail experiences are created and then

left to the visual merchandiser to enhance, or in some cases, mitigate. Without integration of this team during the entire prototype development process, we often see store environments that are significantly over-designed, inflexible, and static.

To some extent, a great store is like a great party. We all know that moment before the guests arrive, it appears that everything is right, but still, we recognise that the party has not



started yet. When the guests arrive, they complete the party, making it spontaneous, lively, and much in the same way great visual merchandising finds a partnership with a great retail store. If the party is too elaborate, staged, and too

restrictive, the guests (here, visual merchandising) would feel uncomfortable, unwanted, and awkward. Also, if the guest is overdressed, inappropriate, or uncomfortable in their 'clothing', the party fails.

My perspective is that in some ways great visual merchandisers understand that if the customer actually sees or identifies the visual merchandising, they've come "overdressed" to the party. However, for certain occasions



and events, customers are expected to be "overwhelmed" by what is happening in the store, particularly as it relates to visual merchandising.

However, in most cases they are looking for an implicit message, an idea that leaves "oxygen" in the room for them to contribute as well as to consume. It should do so in a way that is synergistic with the retail experience, the brand, the product; in a way

that recognises the importance of each, but more importantly creating a win-win situation that can be achieved through integration of all these elements - product, environment, visual, the brand, and the consumer.

#### No more 'Window Dressing'

I recently had an opportunity to judge one of the visual merchandising contests that took place within the Indian market. The artistry, beauty, and craftsmanship of many of the window and in-store displays were stunning. The use of materials, the amount of labour and detail - all were world class. But yet, as I mentioned above, most felt that they were applied and in many cases, were the 'awkward guests' at the party. The space and the store, in which they were situated in their own right, may have been as well beautiful, but there clearly wasn't a dialogue between these elements in such a way that the visual and the store compounded the impact of the effort, that is, the veritable 1+1=3.

You could imagine the visual director making a presentation to the management director on a series of boards through a computer-generated drawing or even with a model; each sitting in the director's office admiring the cleverness and beauty of the proposal. Yet, did the company's merchant participate? Was the communication and branding director involved? And were these efforts really part of a team consensus (and that does not mean consensus without tension

and creative disagreement!) where each piece (some taking a backseat role, others pulling forward) built a creative synergistic result?

In short, let us not 'window dress' - not our organisations, not the industry, not the consumer, and certainly not the store. Instead, recognise the value and importance that the key goal of the "Chief Image Officer" can add to your company's unique success in the marketplace. ●●●



#### About the Author

*Kenneth Nisch is an architect and chairman of JGA, a retail design and brand strategy firm in Southfield, Michigan. He was named Retail Design Luminary in 2010 and Design Influencer in 2011. JGA's clients include Tashi by Tata International (India), Parx (India), Fantasy World (Kuwait), Hickey Freeman, Saks Department Store Group, Be Ultrafemme (Mexico), Grupo Cortefiel (Spain). Ken may be reached at 1.248.355.0890 or info@jga.com.*