

High-Touch Creates Memorable Experiences

Visual merchandising is not just something you see, but involves all the senses of sight, scent, sound, smell and taste

By Ken Nisch

As we look at how food is presented in the retail environment, let us consider visual merchandising (VM) as high-touch; essentially the opposite of the high-tech store elements. Keep in mind however, that VM is not just something you see, but involves all the senses of sight, scent, sound, smell and taste. Creating a fully activated visual merchandising environment makes it necessary to leverage all of the senses. The smell of fresh roti coming off the griddle, ground spices and coffee, the scent of flowers, and the visual theater of food being prepared, be it purely for sampling and/or to dine, is all part of the visual merchandising strategy.

Today, modern Indian grocery stores have made huge leaps in creating efficient, organised and logistically effective outputs for food products. The interesting challenge has been how to bring the warm first-person connections, and the scents of food that the consumer loves out of the local market, without the chaos, challenging hygienic conditions, and lack of convenience that it is typically known for.

Food as Theater

In many parts of the world, Europe and the U S in particular, the concept of food as theater has been evolving rapidly, with today's store





occupying a space not different from the kitchen, but only one step away. And in many cases with food preparation in the store's kitchen that middle ground of ready-to-eat is becoming a major part of the economic success. 'Value added' food is occupying centre stage within the grocer environment.

This "theater" begins from the smiling and interesting people preparing, presenting and sampling food, to the sights and sounds of wood fired ovens, pastas being prepared, cakes being baked, frosted and decorated, and fresh fruits and vegetables being prepared. All of these activities communicate not only a sense of freshness, but a sense of a close-source character, as they also help to reassure the customer of the quality, cleanliness and care that they can assume the food has received – literally from the farm to their table. Taking the customer back to the sources of products where it's grown, the personalities and nature of the people who grow the food, is also part of the visual merchandising that should not be overlooked.

The Art of Food

Basically, the whole concept of visual merchandising is what I would characterise as "the art of food," not just the organisation of food. In the many years of being in this business, some of the most beautiful and artistically arranged merchandise presentations that I have seen have been within the grocery environment. Specialty retailers, and even the best of the chain retailers, have taken elements of perishables ranging from produce, meats and fish, bakery, cheeses and dairy, and specialty foods, such as gourmet and wine and have created a visual "ring" (i.e. the perimeter of the store that is a feast for the eyes and the senses).

Raising the Bar

Not overlooking the centre of the store, the growth of category management has taken some of the best food and commodities suppliers and motivated them to raise the bar on presentation of other basic pantry type products such as spices, condiments, and basic sauces; with heightened professionalism related to labeling, colour banding, etc.

Some retail groups in Europe and the US even mandate to primary and secondary suppliers the creation of a harmonious colour palette, packaging size, and labelling approach so that the ultimate outcome is a highly organized and complementary management of colour blocking and product display. This results in the 'German' centre of the store as organised, calm and simple to purchase sensibility, while it complements and contrasts to the more 'Italian' perimeter of the store that excites the senses and often fills the shopper's basket with items that may create a bit of 'buyer's remorse', albeit happy and satisfying, and as well, memorable relative to their recent shopping visit.

Staffing is Key

Remember again that visual merchandising impacts all the senses, and its most important part is the store's staff. Through their approach, friendliness, openness, and reflection of the consumer, the staff can articulate the store's mission and sensibility to provide helpful, warm, and engaging advice to the consumer, and ultimately be seen as 'store friends' for this highly discerning shopper. ■

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