



Photo by Finn O'Hara (Toronto), courtesy of Sport Chek

Designed to Sell: Today and Tomorrow

Brick-and-mortar stores aren't going away. Look for evolutionary, not revolutionary, changes on the horizon.

By Janet Groeber

More than a handful of national retailers are rethinking their physical store presence. Some are experimenting with how big a box to build. Both Walmart and Target are rolling out smaller footprints to serve urban locations where a superstore would be tough to support profitably. Meanwhile, renovation and remodels continue with specialty store operators such as Jamba Juice redoing up to 100 units in 2013 along with Target, which announced a similar number of store renewals.

For those still in the game, they must factor growing acceptance of technology -- plus the buzz around omni-channel retailing (Belk and Saks are in the headlines) -- and an aging Baby Boom customer base. Then there's the Millennial

customer who embraces sustainability, social causes and social media. Case in point: Aéropostale, a co-ed specialty store chain geared toward teens, opened its latest prototype in the Roosevelt Field mall blending historic New York City architectural icons with state-of-the-art interactivity, social networking and access to its e-commerce site.

Shop On

So what's a retailer to do? Go shopping, advises Judy Bell, for ideas and inspiration because successful stores are ones worth watching. Her first stop? Nike Chicago. "Nike closed its Chicago store for six months in 2012 for a remodel, so it must have major changes." Nike Chicago's

reopening comes on the heels of renos at the Santa Monica and Portland stores. "Nike is rolling out 'brand experience' stores," Bell says, "that celebrate athletes and shoppers, with a real focus on customer service."

Here's what The Chicago Tribune posted on Sept. 27, 2012: "Nike is taking a different approach with merchandising, grouping items by sport. Lifestyle products, including bomber style jackets, used to be displayed separately but are meshed with the corresponding sport. For example, Bryant apparel is grouped alongside signature shoes."

Bell is a veteran retailer, most notably logging 22 years with Target, holding the title

group manager of creative merchandising, working with corporate presentation, product development and merchant teams. She recently launched Energetic Retail, her Minneapolis-based consultancy. Bell is also co-author of "Silent Selling: Best Practices and Effective Strategies in Visual Merchandising," a best-selling text now in its fourth edition. "(The book's) formula," she explains, "is 'look, compare and innovate.'"



Game On

Eric Daniel, creative director, North America, for Columbus, Ohio-based FITCH, says the basis of every good team is organization. "So creating a game plan is job one," he explains. "Your store must display your passion for the category but it cannot be overwhelming and confusing, which translates into lowered quality and price point perceptions." Make it easy for people to navigate and find what they want, Daniel says. That means large and readable signage, clean and wide aisles, logical adjacencies and organized merchandise.

FITCH designed a new prototype for a national sporting goods retailer that focused on one of its most important customers: moms on a mission. "Consumer research showed that she was shopping for her family on a tight timeframe," Daniel explains. "While she really wanted to browse, there were things that she had to accomplish before she could do that. So we created an intuitive and efficient shopper journey, using an innovative wayfinding and graphics system, merchandising zones and a drive aisle to showcase new products."

Big and bold graphics tap into emotions about parenting, character-building and healthy lifestyles. "And she can lean on any of the easily identifiable sports 'authorities' for advice. If she can quickly tick things off her 'to do' list," Daniel continues, "then she allows herself time to explore the store." Such increased dwell time generally translates into additional sales.

Ken Hansen, assistant vice president and visual director for Vestis Retail Group, Philadelphia, recently assumed additional responsibility for Eastern Mountain Sports, the Peterborough, N.H.-based operator of 68 stores in 12 East Coast states. But for the past four years, Hansen has overseen Bob's Stores, the Meriden, Conn.-based operator of 35 locations in six Northeastern states.

A top issue, Hansen says, "Is finding the right balance between creating an environment that reflects our brand, but also allows adequate expression of vendor identities." Brands work hard to develop and maintain distinct images, he explains, "And (we in the) stores need to find a way to respect that."

A look at Bob's Stores' recent prototypical design in Long Island, N.Y., offers brands special treatment they seek without ceding control. The store's layout allows for clear sightlines. A center aisle runs from a central cashwrap positioned in the front of the store to a shoe wall at the rear. As customers make their way to the shoe wall they pass the store's center zone, anchored by a series of merchandise "totems," an easily reconfigured displayer. Elsewhere, lightweight and moveable merchandise fixtures have been designed to accept vendor-supplied graphics, which contributes to Bob's Stores' "House of Brands" philosophy.

While flexibility is crucial, Hansen continues, "I've learned some things should be permanent." These include lighting, simple

aisle configurations and end-of-aisle feature areas. "I am always looking for ways to make great presentation easy for store associates at all levels."

Covering the Bases

That brings us to the role visual merchandising plays in the design of a retail environment. Here are a few pointers from Robyn Novak, creative managing director, Interior Design, Specialty Retail, at FRCH Design Worldwide, the Cincinnati-based architecture, store planning and design firm, responsible for a range of sporting goods retail projects including Bob's Stores, Under Armour and Dick's Sporting Goods.

- 1. First and foremost, tell a great story.** Have a clear point of view and inspire the customer with product display. Do it simple, do it right, but don't overdo. Pay attention to detail. The quality of the presentation reflects the overall perception of the customer.
- 2. Use a powerful message** at the entrance to draw customers in. Carry the theme throughout various touch points within the store. Make messages succinct and presentations uncluttered.
- 3. Use the main traffic aisle as your retail power aisle.** Impulse buys can be driven from here.
- 4. Create a manageable palette to work within** and use a few core risers, props and messaging pieces that can be composed to tell a small, curated story or layered for a more robust collection. Simple hardware systems and flexible fixtures in core presentations can easily change with the seasons as well as between softlines and hardlines.
- 5. Establish a meaningful schedule to refresh messaging** and displays that allow customers to be inspired by what's new.



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