



## **The Art of Merchandising**

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You would be correct to describe Visual Merchandising as a creative conversation between interior design, your merchandise and store plan, fixturing, and graphics-all drive by a powerful marketing scheme. Think of it as art merged with business. Developing a distinctive branding palette creates an experience for the customer during his or her visit. Consumers will generally choose one store over another by how they feel in each. Large retailers face enormous challenges in getting their message across and encouraging repeat traffic. Outfitters, on the other hand, enjoy a luxury over retailers in the sense that your customers are unique to the river experience you provide.

All businesses spend a lot of time, energy and money on the development of systems. Recently, large retailers have realized that they are not just about transactions alone, but need to get involved with developing relationships with their clients. The new trend is in developing “social spaces” in order to encourage lingering and enhance the client’s experience in the store. Big retailers are no longer solely interested in client’s demographics. Instead the driving force in retail today center around a client’s psychographic or well-being. This new approach signals recognition of the store environment as a journey – and not just a destination. What used to be viewed as important, such as following trends, has been replaced by a more personalized, customized experience. Authenticity trumps expensive by providing a deepened emotional connection between client and store, replacing the allure of exclusivity that often “turns off” a potential customer. It’s no longer about what you have, but rather what you experience.

A simple illustration of this kinder, gentler approach can be seen in the softer lines being used today in fixtures and how stores increasingly are bringing the outdoors inside. One large retailer in all



their stores, positions a wall-sized water feature that brings in the audible connection of a relaxing rainfall.

Another real boon to retailers is the new mannequin, which is more fluidly fabricated, providing an attractive, natural drape in clothing, shoes and accessories for a multiple purchase display. Soft colors painted on walls and subtle background music, modulate to increase not invade concentration; lend a pleasant atmosphere to the overall shopping experience.

An outfitters store can replicate the trip experience. To do that, you could begin by realizing your river trip *IS* your branding. Build on that while keeping in step with the current retail trends outlined above. Customers are already acclimated to the natural, outdoor approach in their hometown malls, so you need to join the party! Once inside your store, your customers' first glance tells them whether they'll want to linger.

So the question is: Is your store and merchandise presentation successfully marketing the image of your business? If not, I would like to suggest an approach called the C.I.O., or Chief Image Officer. Every aspect of your business sends a message, so you might replace the old chrome racks your clients sees when he or she signs in for a trip with more creative fixtures that sync with the river experience. First impressions will carry over to your store afterwards.

To be successful requires a willingness to be innovative. Innovation allows for new ideas, approaches, and attitudes. If what you did before didn't work, change your approach. And remember, enthusiasm and creativity often bubble up from the bottom, so include staff members in the thinking process. Plan a day to visit malls, or specialty stores or boutiques and take notes and digital images of what you liked. Change the interior of your store space often – it will especially be important to those important repeat clients, as well as stimulating to your staff.