

# Retail as Theater

**A**lthough marketers are wisely starting to move dollars from traditional channels to the store as a new media platform, many are not maximizing returns.

Part of the problem lies in the conceptualization of the store as a media platform and a lack of appreciation of the complexities involved. Television advertising can deliver great awareness and branding results, for example, but it is two-dimensional and presents products in a silo—one ad after another.

In sharp contrast, the store exists in multiple dimensions in time and space. Products are next to—or near—their friends (e.g., salty snacks and beer,) and enemies (competing brands). Products can be picked up and put back on the shelf, or placed in the cart.

The store also can be a tough world for marketers. There are challenges such as wear-and-tear, physical differences from location to location, and the necessary reliance on many thousands of different store personnel and

independent merchandising companies to install messages, displays, and other communications elements consistently (or even at all!).

## AN EXPLOSION OF STIMULI

Marketers are a sophisticated bunch, but in optimizing the store as a media platform they are in new territory where only a few companies have real experience. Fortunately, there are insights they can benefit from to optimize their in-store investments.

To maximize retail's potential, marketers need to develop a deeper understanding of the visual, physical, and interactive aspects of the shopping experience. Unlike traditional media, which is linear and one-directional, the store is an explosion of stimuli.

Retail is an opportunity to tell a story, to

drive trial-and-repeat purchases based on shopper interaction and creativity. To optimize the store as a media platform, content and communications should be developed within the context of multi-dimensional design, environments, and in-store vignettes that connect with shoppers on product, category, and emotional levels.

Development should also focus on creating visuals that surround entire groups of products and brands, not just single brands or products. Marketers must think in multiple dimensions to create category destinations, stores-in-store, trial areas, or even seasonal cross-category environments built around events like entertaining. They must also develop a mindset of creating a dimensional, visual story around groups of products.

## HAMMING IT UP

We recently redesigned stores for The HoneyBaked Ham Company, a food retailer with several hundred locations that is famous for its glazed hams. The brand faced both a challenge and a missed opportunity. These stemmed mostly from the extreme seasonality of its business, a disproportionate percentage of which takes place during holidays.

At Christmas and Easter, the customer queue could extend out the door, resulting in long waits and very frustrated customers—not a good situation for a company doing a large amount of its business in just a few emotional days. Many locations also had a dated, utilitarian feel.

Our theatrical opportunity opened up with the fact that the HoneyBaked Ham Company uses blowtorches to create its glazes. It's a spectacular process that you should *not* try at home unless you are a welder or a host on the *Food Network*.

Previously, the glazing process took place in the back of the store—hidden and out-of-the-way. The new design took that process and celebrated it front-and-center, in a gleaming glazing station right in the

**The store is a stage. And don't forget audience participation.**



middle of the store and clearly visible through the front door.

This marked a departure from the old paradigm and the embracing of a new order in which the heritage and unique aspects of HoneyBaked Ham became an integral part of the buying experience. The dramatic presentation of product creation, in addition to creating some great branding, also put on a show for people waiting in line.

The impact was a reduction in perceived wait times as well as the engagement of shoppers in the creation of their purchases. All of a sudden, going to pick up a HoneyBaked Ham had experiential, entertainment, and word-of-mouth equity.

A second aspect of redesign of the store addressed the need to overcome seasonal barriers. The strategy had two prongs: one focused on creating a non-seasonal destination for meals, such as lunchtime sandwiches as well as other prepared foods. The other very important layer of the strategy focused on the physical selling environment that creates the brand experience and supports and promotes these incremental sales (which increased by 30 percent).

The design approach transformed what had been a “utilitarian” store into an enticing “general store” format, including multiple add-on purchase opportunities, such as relishes and other prepared foods. Warm tones, materials and graphics drew customers into the experience and promoted incremental purchase and repeat visits beyond traditional seasonal trips. The new approach led to a 35 percent increase in revenue-per-square-foot.

#### A FLEXIBLE DESIGN LANGUAGE

Whether for HoneyBaked Ham or any other brand, the technical aspects of retail-as-theater present critical challenges because in-store conditions can vary. Consequently, rollouts in multiple stores must recognize two issues.

First, the unique layouts, shelving, fixtures, and physical requirements of each store must be respected in the design and engineering of the solution. A second design requirement is the modularity of system elements and graphics so that layouts, panels and environments can be easily changed, store-by-store and season by season.

These are not difficult requirements, but they are often new to marketing and brand teams as well as to traditional agencies, and must become part of the retail-as-theater development checklist.

Visualizing retail-as-theater demands a new way of thinking about communications. This requires viewing messaging and shopper engagement in multiple dimensions of time and space. But it offers many treasures for those who will adopt it and celebrate the opportunities that its complexities offer. ■



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