

COURTING THE

Grocery stores are distinct from other retail venues in that customers arrive with a list, a fixed budget and the intention of getting out as quickly as possible. And with competitors often nearby, making your store pop out from the pack is tough. Here, two experts in retail design offer their top 10 tips for romancing reluctant customers and ultimately influencing them to buy.

1 MASTER THE FIRST IMPRESSION

With new grocery stores seeming to spring up nightly, applying the old adage, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression,” to your store only makes sense. According to Natalie Tan, instructor of Merchandising and Display Strategies at BCIT and retail merchandising expert, a customer’s first impression starts as early as the parking lot. “Can I easily find a space?” she asks. “How far away are the shopping carts, and



what is the condition of the carts?” Disorderly piles of shipping crates, peeling paint and overflowing garbage cans show a general lack of care and may lead shoppers to form a negative impression before they’ve even entered the store. Inside, the easiest way to punch up a storefront is with an attractive produce display. Fruits and vegetables look best in natural light, and keeping stock replenished creates a sense of freshness and abundance.

2 AVOID THE “BOOMERANG” EFFECT

Consumers who make a beeline for the milk refrigerator and then to the checkout are what Tan calls “boomerangs.” Drawing customers down every aisle isn’t achieved by one rule, but rather a combination of elements designed to encourage the customer to move more slowly and thoroughly about the store. As Melanie McIntosh, retail services consultant and founder of Inspire Retail Solutions, says, “people are attracted to light,” so installing attractive lighting around the perimeter will encourage customers to move from one end of



the store to the other. Tan says some stores use “wigglers,” or hanging signs that tend to sway and visually lure customers down other aisles. Grouping complementary products together is another way to keep customers lingering; placing cereal on the end of the aisle closest to the milk fridge, or pasta beside the sauce are examples of “adjacency planning,” says Tan. An eye-catching display atop an aisle far from the entrance entices customers to check it out, turning a boomerang customer into a lingering one.

3 CREATE INTIMACY

Far from the old days of being wowed by rows upon rows of repeating product, consumers are now looking for displays that speak to them on a personal level. Elements like soft lighting and hardwood floors invoke an inviting and personalized setting that takes the individual away from the grocery store and into a relaxing environment that’s pleasing to the senses. Rounding off the

edges of a big grocery store with flattering light and informative details about certain products transforms a cold and static store into one with a sense of familiarity. People become more open to product information as they draw closer to the product itself. Engage the customer directly by having recipes in the baking aisle that customers can take away, tips on food preparation in the ethnic food section, and introductions to exotic fruits in the produce department.

4 DESIGN MINI ENVIRONMENTS

The shopping experience should tell a story. But a simple beginning, middle and end – enter, find, purchase – doesn’t make the most memorable story. “Tell a story within a story,” Tan suggests. Designing mini-environments within your store adds layers and subplots to the basic buy-it-and-get-out tale that will help the customer visualize themselves using unfamiliar products. Tailor spaces within the store to complement departments: sales of organic foods and health supplements benefit from hardwood flooring, customized fixtures and text relevant to the product. Industrial-style shelving works well for stacks of cereal boxes and bathroom tissue, but for luxury purchases consumers like to know they’re getting the highest quality – so don’t risk devaluing more extravagant goods by displaying them the same way you might display cheaper staples like laundry detergent.



5 ENGAGE THE SENSES

Exciting the customer’s five senses plays a vital role. “Grocery stores already have that to their advantage,” McIntosh says, since many

CUSTOMER 10 RULES OF STORE DESIGN



already make the most of bakery smells, gleaming apples and pleasant music. Setting the bakery near the door draws passersby into the store, as they smell fresh baked goods and suddenly realize they're hungry. Go further by offering samples. Samples of featured foods have been proven to boost sales, but some stores only provide these infrequently. Always providing a sample product creates a consistently positive experience.

Arranging produce in contrasting colours draws the eye, says McIntosh, as does Tan's product pyramid. Display items in a triangle with a larger, more expensive item in the middle flanked by smaller, less costly ones. This makes the smaller items seem more attractive and encourages the customer to reach for the one in the middle. Making products easy to grab is key; once consumers have an item in hand they're likely to add it to the cart.

6 KEEP IT CLEAN

One of the most common complaints about mom-and-pop type stores is that they don't appear as clean as the big guys. Dusty soup cans, stained floors and smudged windows don't shout good hygiene, and consumers aren't inclined to make repeat visits to a dusty local, when there's a sparkling clean one up the block. But unclean appearances can manifest in other ways. Chipped paint, rickety fixtures, burned-out light bulbs and over-crowded shelves reflect disorder. For smaller stores battling a lack of space, Tan recommends a minimalist approach. "Make every item



precious," she says, and simplify displays. Clogged or tight aisles that are difficult to navigate are enough to make customers steer clear of a store entirely.

7 ASSOCIATE YOURSELF

Influencing the way customers shop actually begins before they've set foot inside your store, with TV and print advertising. It's your duty to pick up where the ads left off and reinforce product associations. Tan uses Royale bathroom tissue's iconic kittens to illustrate this point: "Make a display with pillows," she says, and reinforce how the customer perceives the product. This offers assurance that the product is the "right" one, and creates a familiarity with the product, even if the customer is purchasing it for the first time.

8 USE CLEAR SIGNAGE

Carefully chosen and informative signage is essential in creating a positive shopping experience, according to both Tan and McIntosh. They both cite unclear aisle or department signage as their biggest pet peeve, and actually avoid grocery stores that have inadequate signage. Labelling aisles so that the information is clear from all points in the store is crucial, as is maintaining a level of professional quality by avoiding hand-written or modified signs. On the other hand, too much signage appears cluttered and confusing, causing customers to disregard them completely.



9 LOOK AFTER KIDS

Often parents are forced to bring their youngsters along to do the shopping. A grocery store can be a very dull place for a child, leading to impatience, whining and tantrums. Tan suggests a kid-friendly area where the young ones can burn off some steam, satisfying both child and parent. Kid-friendly product displays using bright colours and fun characters provoke interest in little shoppers, and engage them emotionally in the same store as their parents.



10 ROLE PLAY

Imagine you are the customer. Start with the parking lot and work your way through the store, bringing some items with you to the checkout. Note how you and your fellow consumers move through the store. Do you pass quickly through one area, but are drawn to another? Can you easily follow the signage? Are all five senses engaged? Are you exhausted



and stressed, or do you feel satisfied? How can the wait time at the checkout be improved? Looking at your own store through someone else's eyes can be a challenging task, so McIntosh suggests taking photos along the way. Photos will give you a fresh perspective on things you pass by every day, and can help you see what your customers see. **GT**