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Crates, CADDIES & CARTS

The clutter of changing displays is reduced if you compartmentalize, containerize and mobilize.



BY LINDA MCKENDRY, VMPC

QUESTION FROM READER: When I change my windows it's like a domino effect of misplaced props and products all over the store. Not only that, everything is complicated when customers come in and I spend more time apologizing for the chaos than waiting on them and they often leave saying they'll come back later. I know I should change my displays more often but it always leaves such a mess in so many areas and takes days to clean up. How can I make changing displays hassle free?

ANSWER FROM LINDA: No matter what size your store is or what kind of layout you have there are ways to stay tidy, organized and free to serve customers while changing displays. Many sales have been made from the crates and cartons of unpacked goods waiting in aisles to be put away. There's a kind of excitement and anticipation in just arrived product, in seeing what's new. Imported goods peeking out of handmade, stencil-stamped crates with names of exotic origins are sometimes an ideal display in a nest or stacked in the corner of your store. Not every item has to be completely unpacked, cleaned and placed just right on a shelf—so keep that in mind next time you unpack.

Otherwise, it is a good idea to have an area set aside for unpacking, inspecting, cleaning and pricing items before they take center stage within view of your customers. That way, if there is interest in an item on its way to a special display destination, at least it is priced and ready to sell. Always take a look at the way the merchandise is packaged. Use the packaging as much as possible in displays for risers, props, backdrops and just to

have nearby when the product is sold. This saves time searching in a back room or under a counter for the right box to gift wrap. It also reduces breakage and makes merchandise easier to handle while being put away or taken to a display area. Why struggle to carry armfuls of products and make several trips? Or frantically search for a place to put them temporarily while making space in a window or on a shelf? Or worse yet, why go hunting for a hammer here, scissors there, and the right ribbon in the bottom of a junk drawer? Try using crates, caddies and carts to help you organize display changes.

By crates, I am referring to any or all containers that have handles in the sides designed for ease of carrying and stacking. Crates are made of wood, plastic, wire, wicker and cardboard, such as banker boxes. Because they stack, they save even more space while you work and sometimes can be carried two or more at a time. When the color, pattern and style of the crates enhance the visual appeal of the products in your display, use them for risers and props, or turn them on their sides and stack them to create instant shelves.

It's easy to carry a half dozen or so crates, full of props and products to an empty window or space on a floor. Always take one or two empty crates to begin your display with. By the time the product is all arranged, you will have one or two crates left in which to carry back the extra items that didn't fit just right with your presentation, and/or any of the packaging that the items were shipped in that you need to store or want to discard. Tools of the trade are needed during, as well as in between, display changes. These are best carried in caddies.

Caddies differ from crates because they have a handle on top and rarely stack. Again, they are available in as many different materials as crates. I am suggesting that you use them to store and carry the basic essentials needed at every display change. One can be for cleaning supplies and one for tools. Frequently used props, such as plexirisers, plate and doll stands, or hangers may be readily on hand when stored in a large caddie. I like to always have a gift-wrapping caddie that contains bits of string, ribbon, flattened boxes, bows, paper, tissue and scissors. Tie the scissors to the handle and they won't "walk off." Tissue comes in handy, even the used bits, when stuffing a cosmetics bag, for example, or when extra filler is needed at the bottom of a cookie jar that is going to show off a new set of wooden spoons. Plain ribbon in a color to match a product is often just the prop needed to tie up a little bundle of loose items or to support a wall hanging from an existing nail that's a little too high. You don't always know how much you need until you are into the display. Why run back and forth?

Some caddies come with separate compartments. This avoids rooting around in the bottom or finally emptying the whole thing to find the tool you need. However, you can make your own. I once used a round wicker caddie with a very long handle and a high, domed lid to carry around screwdrivers, pliers, scissors, etc. I cut down wrapping paper tubes and bound them together in the center of the basket with a large rubber band. It worked like a golf bag that kept all the clubs separate, visible and within easy reach. The lid to the caddie was turned upside down during display changes and worked as a dish to keep track of little



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loose items, like cup hooks, nails, screws and push pins. Your caddies can run right along with you to various display areas, along with the products and props you need, by putting them all on a cart.

Carts are shelves on wheels which will aid in pushing, pulling and otherwise moving more things quickly and easily while keeping them all in one place. Carts also save your back when items are heavy. If I had my choice, it would be the size of a gurney with a shelf underneath. It would have a built-in vacuum cleaner and drawers along the side that opened up to perfectly organized compartments for every tool and gadget ever needed in making displays. The top would be metal, at counter height, so I could use it for a workbench to assemble props on. Lino knives wouldn't ruin the surface when cutting foam board. Spray glue would wipe off with a neat swipe of a rag. Yes, it would come complete with every light fixture I would ever need and include the extra bulbs, light bars and extension cords. Oh, and a place to keep my coffee hot all day. But enough of that dream.

Most shops I have worked in use either regular supermarket-type shopping carts or variations of a tea cart. Some smart retailers have cleaning and tool caddies in containers that have their home on the bottom shelf of a cart which is covered with an attractive, floor length tablecloth. When the cart is sitting in the middle of the shop, it is doing extra display duty as a table to show off some special merchandise, and it doesn't need a parking stall in the back room. (I was in one

shop where even the store's wooden ladder was camouflaged as a narrow shelf unit displaying a variety of small, non-breakable products, while hanging on the side of a fixture waiting until the owner needed her ladder. And yes, you guessed it, she simply had to get a crate to store the merchandise in while the ladder was in use.) Some shorter aluminum ladders fit neatly folded against the handle of a low cart. That's what I do when setting up trade shows.

"S" hooks are wonderful pieces of helpful hardware that will allow you to hang all sorts of things from the sides of your cart. Your cart may look like a chambermaid's cart in the hall of a hotel, or stewardess' cart in the aisle of a plane, but customers can walk around it. They won't trip over items scattered on the floor, or stoop to pick up dust laden products from a six-month-old display. You can walk away from your cart with confidence to give a customer your complete attention and service. Warning: People often buy interesting things off a cart when it's left alone. Sometimes the creative clutter is appealing. When this happens I know my display has the right combinations of products and props.

When I worked in a national department store as the display manager, I was trained to have everything ready, and as much as possible assembled, on carts, in preparation to create a display. Then I took an empty cart to the area I was tearing down, loaded up the cart, cleaned the area and exchanged the two carts. Under no circumstances was I to have both carts out, in plain view of the

customers, at the same time. Since empty windows and display areas were not allowed overnight – your best advertising time – many times the carts with new products and props were loaded the night before so a full day could be taken to set up the displays. Anything unused was whisked away on the cart and left behind the scenes, leaving the merchandise presentable, even if the whole display could not be completely finished until the next day.

The clutter of changing displays is reduced if you compartmentalize, containerize and put them all on wheels. Crates, caddies and carts keep you organized, save time, space and other resources. They also reduce stress – both yours and your customers – so you can do more displays more often and never have to slow down sales or service. □

If you have merchandising/display questions you would like help with write to Linda c/o Gifts and Tablewares, 1450 Don Mills Road, Don Mills, Ontario, M3B 2X7 or fax her at (416) 442-2213.

Professional visual merchandising consultant Linda McKendry offers full, on-site consulting and instruction for retailers, wholesalers, distributors and manufacturers. (Hourly, daily or contract rates are available.) Linda is also available to speak at corporation conferences or association events. Topics include Visual Merchandising, Carting and Visual Sales Techniques for increasing sales at U.S. To book Linda's services call (905) 813-8725 or write to Linda at VMPC, Visual Merchandising Presentation Consulting Ltd., 6309 Donway Drive, Mississauga, Ontario, L5V 1J6.

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