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# Show 'n Sell



BY LINDA MCKENDRY,  
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**READER QUESTION:** Help! Sometimes I'm afraid to take on new lines from the gift shows because I'm not sure where I will put them back at the shop. When I see something I like, do I have to know exactly where it's going to go before I purchase it?

**LINDA'S ANSWER:** The answer to that is "No!" Relax! Enjoy the shows. Don't be afraid to make some impulsive decisions based on what catches your eye. When you read your industry trade magazines you will see that successful retailers make most of their purchases based on what they like personally! However, practically speaking, let me share some of the trade secrets that we display artists use when we are putting the show together and have to create beautiful displays at the last minute with products we're seeing for the first time. If these rules work for us, then a little planning ahead will work even better for you.

The key to putting products "away" for display is to start with "up, up, and up." Goods to be sold must first be seen. In order to attract the attention of passersby, items must be displayed in the buying zone, an area that extends from just above the knees to the point marked by a comfortable overhead reach. Therefore, no matter what product appears from exhibitors anxious to showcase their wares in the new product display areas, the first things display artists know they will need are lots of *risers*, *shelves* and *fixtures*. Then we begin the process of *grouping* merchandise based on *color*, *pattern* and *style*.

**Big risers:** The most typical ones are painted plywood boxes and platforms of different shapes and sizes that can be arranged in a multitude of ways on the floor or stacked safely on each other. I recommend good old plywood rather than a laminated finish as nails, hooks, and screws can be put in it to securely hold items that need extra support without permanently damaging the risers. Refinishing with paint is quick, easy, inexpensive and offers the most flexibility in choosing the right color for those new items.

I always believe that the fixtures and risers in your shop should work for you, not the other way around. They are not sacred.

Tables and crates that nest are an excellent investment. At the show, when we are setting up, we can have them tucked in closer to each other when the products are still arriving. As it gets closer to show time and we know we have received everything we are likely to get, the tables and crates can either be pulled out to reveal the maximum surface space, or separated from the group entirely to create a different display for those "odd" one-of-a-kind products that need to stand alone so as not to compete with or distract from the ones we've already found a suitable home for.

**Little risers:** The next most common risers to have on hand, are smaller ones that are usually made of acrylic or wood or even the box that an item is packaged in if it enhances the product. We ask the show to provide a variety of shapes, sizes and types including *plate stands*, *easels* and *doll stands*. Even tiny risers are needed to give the right placement of small items like miniature figurines, perfume bottles and jewelry. An initial investment of \$300 to \$500 will give you about three banker's boxes full of smaller risers which will work in a medium-sized shop and cover just about every type of product in the gift and tableware industry. If you tend to do very dense displays in your shop, consider pre-owned acrylic risers which may be somewhat scratched and yellowed, but still not that visible on a crowded shelf.

**Shelves:** Basic shelf units work well too, especially if a shelf can be removed quickly to create an instant "wall" for items that need to be hung or just need more space. I hear lots of buyers say they are afraid to buy the extra large items, but when they do they always

sell. Why? Because they attract a lot more attention and immediately draw attention to an entire collection or new product line. That huge teddy bear, the floor standing candlestick, the trunk big enough to walk in, all make a distinct statement to your customers that you've come back from the show bearing major gifts to the marketplace which will translate into more excitement about your shop.

**Fixtures:** Many exhibitors offer the fixtures you see the items on as part of a deal, and I know for a fact that most of them don't make any profit on these fixtures. Using the fixture designed specifically for certain merchandise makes the job of displaying it much easier. A minimum amount of floor space is required to show off a maximum amount of product. These new "sound centers" are a prime example. The work is done for the display artist and in many cases lighting, props, point of sale signage and storage for backup inventory is provided as part of the fixture. Some fixtures are adaptable to give a little more of a custom look to the whole atmosphere of the display area.

Even at a big show with security personnel everywhere, theft is still a concern. An item on its own riser is less of a temptation to a potential shop lifter because its absence is more obvious than the disappearance of one piece from a cluster of products. We are extra careful at the shows where exhibitors are lending us goods to put on display to get some additional exposure. Also, the correct riser or stand that supports products safely at the right eye level for the shopper, eliminates breakage or soiling from over handling.

**Process of grouping:** First, the risers, shelves and fixtures are grouped to form a pleasing arrangement that is attractive from

the entrance to the area and a traffic flow is defined. The taller ones, like shelf units will be placed against a wall or used as backdrops for shorter risers and fixtures. This is particularly helpful if extra wall space is needed to hang merchandise on.

Second, when the products arrive we begin to group them based on their color, pattern, and style and fit their general sizes and shapes to risers and fixtures already in place. Therefore complementary items are placed together in separate groupings. If the products themselves have a variety of shapes, sizes and heights, then the smaller risers may not be required. However, when products are all the same shape and height, then risers are needed to move the eye in more of an "S" or "M" direction which will hold the customer's attention longer and help them to focus on the details of the product.

Usually we avoid placing items directly on the floor unless a) the display will be seen from a distance and the products on the floor can still be appreciated or b) the products are tall enough to begin with or designed to stand on the floor. The flexibility of having the floor space to work in allows the fixtures to be moved around quickly and easily. Certain products are what I call transition items, that is, they can be placed between two groups and bridge the color, pattern and style of each. They make a visual connection and so can be tucked in between two other displays.

However, even if you have one hundred feet of slat wall, at least the shelves can be moved up and down to accommodate new items and little risers added if there is too much space between shelves because you are trying to accommodate a single tall item. If you have too much space in a shelf above small products, that's where the customer's eye will go—to the hole. Empty space to a customer means that you are running out of product, aren't managing your operation efficiently, or are possibly going out of business. People are drawn to abundance.

So, at the show we continue to cluster and cozy up items that make a single statement or tell a very clear "story" and leave some space between them. If it's a cash 'n carry area, we line up the backup stock close by for easier self-service. Variety is still the spice of life and it helps to target market to as many types and personalities of customers as your product range allows.

Also, don't let a minimum purchase or larger quantity scare you. I once worked

with a museum shop that had an abundance of rose-tinted Depression glass reproductions. I had all the staff unpacking and bringing out every single piece and there were dozens and dozens of the glasses. Naturally, in a small space, there was the complaint that it would look like that was all they had. But who was to say that some customer might not come in to the shop and want to purchase a dozen pieces? If she only sees the typical place setting of six or eight, will she necessarily ask if there are more? Out of sight, is out of mind.

Now, here's what we did with all that glass. On a small, lace-covered antique table in a corner, we arranged a little, intimate "tea for two" with a selection of rose glass pieces. On a shelf we integrated a few more pieces with some figurines that showed off rose and gold. A different fixture had some beautiful traditional stationery items where a little arrangement of rose-colored glasses pulled out the accent color in the paper prints. Some of the goblets went into the jewelry showcase and turned on their sides acted as props for pearls and cameos. Yes, they were all over the store, but in each place they looked different and were making a different statement, while contributing to the overall image that is expected in a museum shop. The items that didn't find a special display were lined up like little soldiers on a plate shelf that ran around the perimeter of the store, broken up here and there by other displays and floral accents. They sold out very quickly—I knew they would—because they weren't in boxes in a storeroom collecting dust being brought out six at a time whenever anyone happened to remember they were there.

Don't let your space inhibit you from making those purchases which boost your energy and enthusiasm about being a gift shop retailer. Risers and platforms can be a weekend project for any carpenter near you, and you can paint or paper them to suit all your new purchases year after year. But, those new products you have fallen in love with may not be there next show and you'll be disappointed for not having tried them. Go ahead! Enjoy the show! Buy new lines! Try them! You'll be "up, up, and way" to new sales and new profits while you turn your shop into a show for your customers!

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To book Linda's services call 905-813-8725 or write to VMD, Today's Merchandising Presentation Consulting Ltd., 6509 Highway Drive, Mississauga, Ontario, L5V 1J6.

*"The key to putting products 'away' for display is to start with 'up, up and up.'"*

(original ads replaced by illustrations suitable for topic)

### Flexible Fixtures

Don't waste space when adding shelves can put more items at the best eye-level. Show more in less space. Stock less often.



Take the time to purchase in volume so you can save money and increase profits. Many items can be stacked to save space and show quantity. Rotate to prime selling space.

### Build "in and out" & "up and down"

More items can be shown in less space by building displays up and down and in and out. The tall items at the back make room for short in the front.



### Themes 'n Color Schemes

Once you establish a theme, it's quick and easy to tuck in more items or make the display larger by adding small stands on platforms and building UP!



This keeps items off the floor and at better buying level.



POP supplied by your vendors are designed to maximize sales in a small footprint.