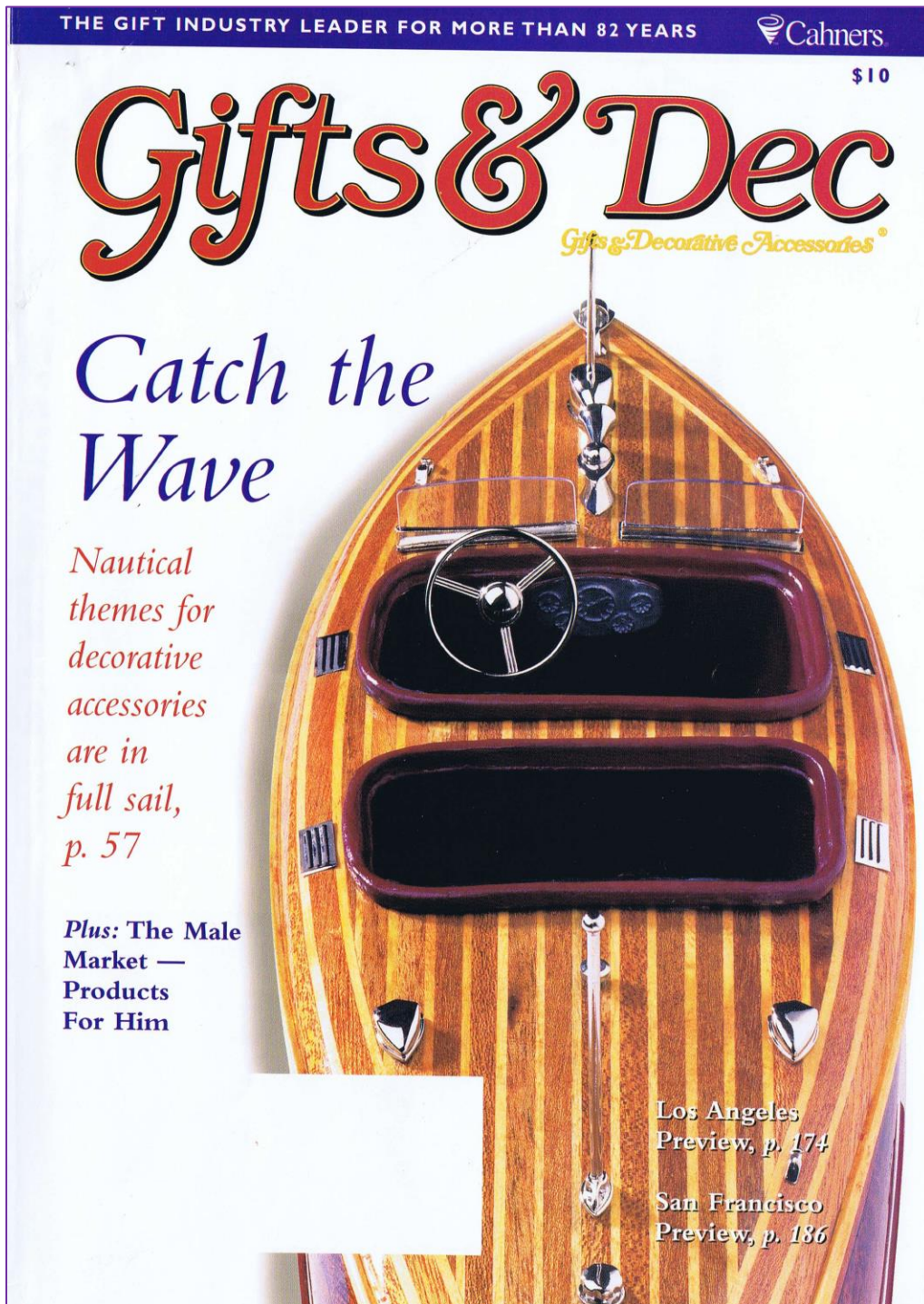


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The Store As a Stage

Staging! It's everywhere. Look at the advertising and editorial all through this magazine. Every product is shown in "staged" settings, with carefully chosen props, color combinations, angles, and of course, lighting. It's the same with infomercials and TV shopping channels — look at the fixtures and furnishings on those studio sets. They're all "staged" to make the product the star. Likewise with well-designed Web sites, even junk mail. That's what good visual merchandising presentation is all about — staging.

Swedish Style

Let's look at one company that has retail staging down to a science. The famous Swedish furniture and home accessories chain, Ikea, begins and ends with beautiful full-color catalogs that entice customers to amble leisurely through a showroom of perfectly lit and decorated little vignettes. When a customer is ready to buy an item, he or she takes it off the stock shelf, pays for it, packs it, loads it, and, at home, assembles it. What makes consumers believe that this is a good dollar value? The staged photos in the catalog. The staging in the showroom. The consumer

**Add design
drama to
your store,
and earn
rave reviews.**

becomes an actor on Ikea's stage after reading the illustrated "script" received in the mail. The store is enticing because customers are allowed to go into the pretend rooms and touch and feel everything. They can turn table lamps on and off; they can sit in a chair and imagine it in their homes, surrounded by the perfect accessories. These featured display areas, where everything is cross-merchandised, are separate from the inventory and backup stock, which are lined up on shelves like little soldiers in a formation.

So, there are two basic elements that contribute to the success of Ikea as a retail store. One is the staged promotional material, and the second, which builds on the first, is the shopping experience, which is staged, in the most literal sense of the word.

Staging in Your Store

These lessons and observations you've made about staged design in other venues, can be applied to your own store. Examine your store just as you did the ads, Web sites, catalogs, and showrooms. What sort of stage do you place your shoppers on? Is your store exciting? Does it stand out from neighboring shops with a personality of its own? Where do customers see your shop from first, and what do they see? What staging does the shop need? Backdrops? Lighting? Props? Organization by themes?

Many of the retailers I work with think that placing ticketed objects on shelves and rotating a few items in and out of their windows is sufficient. When products aren't selling, they blame the product mix. I have one client who



used to pressure me to tell him what lines he needed to carry. He has a very small collectibles gift shop with more one-of-a-kind items than mass-produced goods. The shop is in a good location, in a high-end mall, and offers a wonderful variety of products and price points for every imaginable taste and occasion. However, sales had been flattening out over the years, and the owner was feeling pretty discouraged about the whole retail business. When I finally convinced him that the problem lay not

with the product mix but with his merchandising, he gave me the chance to prove it. It meant making major shifts in fixtures and moving a lot of product around. We scheduled the overhaul for nights, when the mall would be closed.

Working Within a Budget

Since funds for props were at a premium, I shopped very carefully, purchasing only those items needed to make a dramatic change. Wallpapered foamboard sheets were used to line the marble walls inside the front windows, creating a domestic setting for home accessories and collectibles. An extensive collection of carved soapstone, which had been in one window for 14 years, was moved back into the shop in order to make room for a broader selection of products from the entire store.

For a bright look visible throughout the mall, I displayed white iridescent Christmas trees with random-twinkle lights. Tucked into the branches were small understated rose and green decorations that wouldn't compete with formal porcelain figurines or sculptured pieces. The branches were pulled toward the front and the trees were flattened against the walls; this made the trees

To page 44

Visual Merchandising

McKendry, from page 42

appear denser and maximized the display space in the shallow windows. Every rule of VMP (visual merchandising presentation) was applied, beginning with the storefront and working toward the back of the shop.

The results? An immediate increase in traffic and a complete turnaround in cash flow. People came in and asked,

“Am I in the right mall? I thought there was a shop here with green stuff in the window. That’s how I used to know where to turn.” Or, “Is this store under new management?” Best of all, customers who had been frequenting the mall for many years came in and asked, “When did this shop open?”

The Next Step

Nothing was new. Not a single

product had been added. And yet the client’s cash flow changed so dramatically that he is now planning a complete renovation. My recommendations include more attention paid to staging requirements, including power outlets in floors, columns, and front windows that will allow supplementary lighting to be focused on feature displays; walls that can be refinished more often in order to keep pace with changing product lines; and the elimination of fixed aisles, a change that will allow fixtures and counters to be rearranged. The product lines should remain in separate departments, so that regular customers aren’t confused when the stage changes.

(original ads replaced by illustrations suitable for topic)



The stage in a Mall is seen and stepped onto by shoppers a lot sooner than a store on a street. Distance and Eye-level demand different invitations to these shows!



The “stage” and the sidewalk “marquee” are like candy for any child and doting parent!



If you design a retail stage that’s attractive and enticing, shoppers will eagerly step onto it and play their roles.

There are some shops that will survive because their customers have nowhere else to go. But if you want to progress beyond simple survival, you need a plan that will help you switch the sets in your stage quickly and easily. This kind of flexibility will help you keep pace with the expanding TV shopping, online shopping, catalog, and direct marketing competition. If you design a stage that’s attractive and enticing, shoppers will eagerly step onto it and play their roles. ■



The window is staged to show a customer in her home already wearing the featured item. Front view is displayed in the framed wall decor. The props are home furnishings and accessories.

Beautiful staged plumbing fixtures with accessories are on platforms the width of an aisle. Focused lighting on the “star” products make them celebrities. It’s not hard to see how these will look installed in a residence.

Stage standard products for perceived increased dollar value. Stage unique, custom items for increased profits.

Linda McKendry learned the visual merchandising craft at the department store chain, Sears of Canada. She is the author of VMP (Visual Merchandising Presentation) and can be contacted at her Toronto business, VMP Consulting Ltd. (905) 813-8715 or fax (905) 813-8505.