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MERCHANDISING *Magic*

Get into the "reason for the season" and create displays that are sure to draw holiday shoppers.

BY LINDA MCKENDRY, VMPC



The news flash in the industry this year is that retailers have to plan and prepare for Christmas earlier than they ever have. Product presentations planned ahead of time make the holiday shopping season better for you, your staff, your customers and your bottom line. The mundane simply will not do. I encounter many retailers who at Christmas are still convinced that some faded and flattened tinsel garland draped onto the front of shelf displays is enough to create a holiday spirit. These dated and season-worn "decorations" send a very clear message that contribute to the commercialism that so many consumers complain about and avoid. So how can you make "merchandise magic" this year? Get into the *reason for the season* and use some of the following tips to put a plan together that will stop shoppers with its magic and mystery.

Visit shops and showrooms that feature Christmas all year-round.

Even if you aren't selling Christmas decorations and ornaments as your feature product lines, all products need just the right touch of Christmas "props" to make a strong statement that will target market your goods to the right people. There is such a vast array and variety of Christmas products made now in so many colors, patterns, finishes and styles, that you will be sure to find just the right ones to reinforce the image of your merchandise. A visit to a showroom like Innovation's or a leisurely "finger walking" through any Christmas wholesaler's catalogue will get you into the mood even in the middle of summer. Pick out the feature display and mini-display areas in your store that make the magic more apparent to passersby and prioritize your holiday decorating dollars in those areas. Make rough sketches and plans. Develop scheme and themes for displays that marry products with Christmas "props."

Purchase props when you purchase products.

By making your decisions about the products you are going to feature at Christmas and buying the props that work with them at the same time, you will make designing and creating your store displays easier and quicker. Remember to use "props that pop" in your windows or at the back of big stores where you want to make an impact from a distance. Always keep the three things in mind that attract attention the most: light, contrast and movement.

Bigger is better if you want to attract attention. Trees, wreaths and garlands complete with lights, ribbons and ornaments will not only enhance your shop but should be priced for sale. Call them a "Christmas

Carry Out" meaning that they can be purchased but not delivered until Christmas Eve. Imagine no clean up or put away for Boxing Day or the New Year's Day rush. Selling props as products also gives you the capital to buy something completely new and different each year. More mystery! More magic!

Plan winning windows that say, "WOW!"

People walking or driving by in a hurry at Christmas need something outstanding to make them stop, or decide to come back when they do their serious shopping. Good Christmas windows are judged by the number of hand prints on the glass and the number of people who come in and ask about the featured items. Retailers that have very clear objectives and primary focuses are the most successful at Christmas. Stick to very strong statements in single displays by picking themes based on color, pattern, style and target market. Group them densely when stock is high but keep each display separate from those of competing categories. This allows you to show more product in less space with less confusion. Christmas trees in clusters at different places in your shop ranging from large ones in the window to smaller ones on

counters sprinkled with the mini lights will draw in browsers every time. It's Christmas! Your windows are your invitation to the world.

Make changes regularly in your window, even daily, as the same people go by each day thinking their shopping is finished until they see something new which reminds them of someone else on their list or another holiday event requiring a gift or other preparation.

Packaging profits for extra sales and service.

Buy ample wrapping paper, ribbon, labels, tissue, boxes and bags to send shoppers off with items that are not only protected but presented in a way that adds to the magic and mystery of gift-giving. Nowadays, wrapping gifts is an expected service which allows you an ideal opportunity to show off your store's image beyond the confines of your shop. Busy shoppers bustling through streets and malls will carry your billboard abroad when they have their purchases in your shopping bags. Your signature wrap and ribbon on the outside of a gift box should be just the beginning of an event that prolongs the anticipation, as the item inside is further secured with coordinating tissue gently held together with your logo seal. This puts you right in the center of the magic and mystery of Christmas gift-giving right up until the surprise is finally unveiled. Companies like Dunwoody Booth Packaging, which also handles Brisas Labels, recommend ordering your packaging and labels early, avoiding the holiday rush when there may not be the selection of stock items or time to get custom orders. Remember too, that boxes make great risers for shelf displays and ribbons bundle odd items together to make a great little gift package.

Plan to appeal to all the senses.

To appeal to the sense of *sight* we have sayings like: "VMP is what you SEE," or "Goods to be sold, must first be seen." We also warn our clients that "The eye is like a fly looking for a place to land," and "Amuse, don't confuse."

In addition to showing products and props, signs appropriately placed to instruct, inform or direct customers will increase self service and sales. In fact, this silent sales force will increase purchases in-store by 155 percent to 220 percent. Just as props and the right Christmas decorations enhance the appeal of a product display, signs must follow through with the correct image and message. Whether you make small shelf display signs on your computer and place them in generic plexiglass holders and/or in decorative frames, or have professional signs made that are larger or to go outside, plan these early in the season and order them for delivery as your Christmas merchandise is being unpacked.

The sense of *smell*, from a scented candle, a spiced drink, body care products or fresh baked goodies often tantalizes and draws in a customer even before the eye can tell where the source is. Don't be afraid to serve goodies at Christmas in your store. It is still, in any language and in any culture, a basic in hospitality, friendliness and making people feel at home. It adds to the atmosphere of Christmas and slows shoppers down long enough to savor part of what the holiday is all about. Chocolates might melt on fingers and mark products, but little mini gingerbread cookies

won't. What better way to display those beautiful Christmas mugs than to offer a taste of hot apple cider in them to customers coming in out of cold winds.

As their hands warm to the *touch*, provide other items with tempting textures within easy reach to be held and examined. Some retailers purposely price their items on the back or the bottom to encourage customers to handle the merchandise. However, items too small, too big or behind glass for protection need to have separate price tags or signs in the displays. Remember to keep elaborate displays that require a lot of propping, pinning and tacking separate from fixtures where customers can freely make their selections and fill their baskets.

Sounds abound these days as music, tapes and CDs are no longer confined to recording specialty shops. There is more than enough variety in music from Gregorian Chants to South American folk melodies to give shoppers something distinctive and less monotonous than some of the traditional Christmas "elevator music." Even though Dashing Through The Snow and Silver Bells bring out good memories of the seasons past at the end of October, by December 1st, enough is enough. Plan your sounds now by selecting and personally testing the music that will en-

hance the magic and mystery of Christmas in your shop.

Plan a year-end "face lift" with a professional VMP display artist.

Give yourself a wonderful Christmas present that will get your holiday selling season off to a good start and put you in the mood for the season. Delight in something specially done just for you to stand back and admire. A professional display artist can make magic in your store with your merchandise that will enhance your sales and service while saving you time and stress. You will see everything differently and be inspired by a totally new look. If you sell one-of-a-kind items, ask the display artist to design a window you can easily sell from and replace with items of similar color, pattern and style. Risers and props in the right place make displays easy to maintain.

Most professional display artists are not listed in the yellow pages. When you see windows in other stores that attract your attention, don't be afraid to go in and ask who does them. If you live in a rural area, inquire in the next largest city since many display artists travel and have their "rounds" with regular clientele near you already. Again, book early because when you find someone good they

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(original ads replaced by images suitable to topic)



Show more in less space by the use of vertical merchandising and color blocking into themes based on COLOR, PATTERN, & STYLE. Put as much stock as possible out at the beginning of the season and just re-arrange as it's sold out.

Many items that aren't traditionally "christmas" or "holiday" can tuck into these themes and sell as gifts. This includes the colors that also aren't traditionally "Christmas". Many late summer and fall items can look fresh and just right to the shoppers because they are supported by the other elements in the theme.

Try to separate really strong colors with neutrals or solids. This helps to balance the entire store so that no one area is overwhelming and upstaging the rest! The stronger, brighter colored items will draw the most attention, but the contrast of the adjacent neutral ones will increase sales in all departments.



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may not always be available and if you don't have your products and props ready they can't do the best possible job for you.

Merchandising magic is made by careful planning, preparing and presenting with plenty of time to stand back and say "wow" when the Christmas lights come on in your shop. You'll also enjoy the extra glow that will fill your heart along with the "wow" you exclaim over your sales figures for this year. Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays. □

If you have merchandising/display questions you would like help with write to Linda c/o Gifts and Tableware Displays, 100 Mills Road, Don Mills, Ontario, M3B 2X7 or just call at (416) 442-2213.

Create a strong theme in your most visible place to announce the holiday season without having to change up the entire store.

Once Thanksgiving is over you can begin to remind shoppers of the upcoming season of giving. This lets them know you are ready.

