

Thinking About Design

“Good retail design is the result of a rigorous problem-solving process. It cannot be created in a vacuum and is not the arbitrary application of personal taste.” That was the mantra of my former design company and is the reason that, after several years of writing CSP columns, I have finally got around to writing one about design. Previous columns dealt with aspects of the problem-solving process: the necessity of understanding the industry, the client and the specific issues and needs any retail design program must address.

How should you decide whether design can be a cost-effective tool in addressing your problems and opportunities? How should you decide what kind of design you need? How should you establish a budget? What are the criteria you should use in selecting the design team?

Importance of a Good Designer

First, retail design encompasses everything from site planning and store layout through architectural, interior, identity and signage design, including things such as uniforms, menus and packaging. Second, good design can achieve many different things and is not necessarily expensive to implement. Third, all designers are not created equal, even those specializing in the same field: Some treat design as an end in itself with a much more limited view of its scope than mine, and others try to understand your needs before proposing solutions. However, very few really understand your market, listen to your needs and can help in ways that transcend design.

While design is primarily a marketing tool, it can also affect merchandising (e.g., highlighting categories) and operations (e.g., reduced construction costs and layouts



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that optimize efficiencies). So decide what you want design to do for you and then discuss your needs with the designer candidates you interview. Then use the selected team to help write the design program. And just as a doctor can't help you if you are not prepared to drop your pants, a consultant can't help you without complete information. So if you can't trust yours with your confidential data, you have selected the wrong one.



Courtesy of Apple

Here are some things exterior design can do. It can be dramatic and turn a site into a destination. Though usually expensive, this can have a big payback. Objectives that can be achieved less expensively include projecting your offer and drawing customers inside; reinforcing your brand image; harmonizing with the surrounding community; and clarifying the site traffic pattern and highlighting the entrance. These objectives are

not mutually exclusive. Combinations of them are frequently achieved.

Shopping the Basement

The new Apple store in Manhattan exemplifies destination design that achieves many of these objectives. Its tiny footprint at ground level—an almost invisible glass cube housing a circular glass elevator and a large, visible Apple logo—uses a minimum amount of some of the highest-priced U.S. retail space. It uses subtly dramatic design to draw an enormous amount of traffic to an underground selling area. While it must have cost a fortune to fabricate, it makes incredible use of prime real estate, turns shopping the basement into a positive experience and reinforces the futuristic positioning of the Apple brand.

If Apple can use design to make it cool to shop the basement, think about what design could do for you. And there's even more to be said about interior design, but Apple isn't the only one with limited space—mine is, too. So that will have to wait for another column. In the meantime, if you are planning to use design any time soon, please start the rigorous problem-solving process now. ■