What is Visual Merchandising?

You will get a variety of definitions, so let's just keep it simple.

It is that which enhances products, supports brands, increases traffic and sales, adds visual excitement by way of strategically located and illuminated focal destinations in an environment, typically businesses and stores, defines and advertises overall personality and image.

1. TOO much clutter or too busy of a display.

Displays should be easy to read with the human eye. Far too often displays get too involved and become confusing, telling too many stories or getting out of focus.

Start with a simple message. For example, are you telling a casual, athletic or dress shoe story? Are you delivering a single gender, or multiple gender messages.

There is a lot of merit to the statement, Keep It Simple.

I have sent under separate mail a copy of a seminar handout on the basics of visual merchandising displays that you can reference here.

2. Start out slow and build big.

Creating great displays really starts with a comfort level to develop and then leave it alone. Start out creating smaller displays and as you feel more comfortable about displays, add more items, thus bigger display areas.

3. Where do ideas come from?

They come from everywhere and anywhere. Inspiration comes from all sorts of areas and encounters in life. Use your imagination and be very open minded. Just try to not offend anyone.

For example, animal prints on shoes. Head for the ZOO. Take pictures, buy souvenirs.

Visit locker rooms at a local school for athletic backgrounds, buy metal lockers, benches, pom poms, bleachers, etc.

Hiking boots, the great outdoors, trails, hiking, mountain ranges, etc…
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Make regular visits to local department and specialty stores. Visit the regional mall and look at everyone. Some of the best ideas will come from outside the shoe industry. Remember that design principals always apply, not the different merchandise types other than shoes.

4. Prioritizing display areas in stores.

Placing displays everywhere sends confusing messages to the customer. Prioritize locations to build visual focal points in stores. Place them at key sight lines, endcaps, entrance tables to the store or a department. Break up large wall display areas with a visual statement or graphic.

5. Cross merchandising.

Telling a complete story with other complimentary merchandise offerings is a great way to increase impulse and add-on sales. For example, if you sell handbags, hats or scarves, including these other items with shoes adds visual excitement. It is quite different than simply using shoes or one type of merchandise item.

You can display athletic or walking shoes on a wall or endcap with comfortable socks on one side of the panel.

If you sell designer hosiery, place it with dress shoes.

6. Incorporating props.

For added interest, you can add materials most commonly identified as props. For example, with work boots, use cement blocks, lumber, orange cones, power tools, etc… For summer shoes, use sand, beach towels, beach toys, umbrellas, etc… There are many options. Use your imagination and have fun.

7. Use of mannequins or forms.

Even if you don’t sell clothing, the use of mannequins and display forms add a different dimension to display areas. Everyone relates to the human factor in life.

8. Use of videos, monitors.

The use of video monitors to tell a story, compliment a brand or quality of the item or display offers movement and interest. It is also a way to educate the customer about something new about products.
As with the use of graphics, monitors can be used to simply offer a lifestyle imagery and not be design or brand specific. For example, showing a video of a fashion show, models on a runway to compliment new season styles.

9. Informational signage

Utilizing messages and informational statements about manufacturers, products, materials, technology, benefits and more in displays is a great idea. It is a positive approach to completing a statement. You would of course have a combination of the shoes in mention, props supporting the directional message, add lighting and more to make it perfect. Or the other option is to make it very simple and clean based on the product attitude or price points.

10. Making a brand statement

If you have strength and positive imaging from brands available in your store, use this to your advantage. Remember that with multiple stores, the actual store also becomes a brand to consumers.

11. Use of Vendor fixtures

The use of vendor supplied fixtures is acceptable as long as they are used promotionally, compliment the store environment and image, add to the aesthetics of the store, can be strategically located for all of the above reasons.

All fixtures require the best flexibility and function as well as design.

12. Focal fixtures with visual excitement.

A focal display can be a major fixture piece. For example, a children’s focal display unit may be a cut out or wooden and painted like Winnie the Pooh or a Dr Suess character. This too is visual excitement. And the fixture should have casters so you can move it from location to location within the store.

13. Using lighting, the final touch.

Surveys have long proven that displays that are well illuminated sell more product. This is because light attracts attention. It doesn't require much, just a couple track heads strategically placed. Aim higher than lower. Keep it brighter at eye level and slightly above.

Lighting is a completely different topic that we can discuss down the road.
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Don’t let the displays get old. Keep in mind that your regular shoppers visiting the store often needs to be exposed to new displays, new products, etc.. Move them around still in keeping with the proper merchandise assortment department and mix.

15. Maintenance.

With in-store displays, they will always get messed up by customers touching them and not returning product properly. Keep an eye on display areas and make sure that they are always kept in good condition.


To ease tensions and make sure that you have everything you need in order to develop, a display, plan ahead. Using a calendar, identify the key times of year around holidays or seasons, new lines, etc… This allows you to make a checklist, obtain all the equipment and hardware and then begin. It also allows you to anticipate costs that may be involved.

Do quick little sketches of your ideas on paper to get started and better define the display needs. You don’t have to be an artist, just have to understand what you drew on the paper.

17. Who is responsible?

In most store situations it is best to have one specific person responsible for the creation of display areas. This better insures that they will have a consistent focus, compliment the store image and personality, stay maintained and improve. Everyone in a store will have an opinion about good or bad displays. Remember that everyone has opinions on almost anything. Nobody’s right or wrong.

The most important points to keep in mind when developing display areas are to relax and have fun.