

creative thinking: getting “outside the box”

It Begins with Creativity

Visual merchandising is a creative occupation. Success in this field depends on a person's ability to infuse creativity into every part of the job. The discussion of creative thinking that launches this text should set a mood that encourages you to explore and internalize the creative retailing methods and strategies introduced in each chapter. Your ability to absorb and adapt the information presented in this book to your own practical use on the job is just as important as memorizing rules about color, fixture use, or department layouts.

Psychologist Mihály Csikszentmihályi, writing in *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, describes creative people this way: “Creative persons differ from one another in a variety of ways, but in one respect they are unanimous: They all love what they do. It is not the hope of achieving fame or making money that drives them; rather, it is the opportunity to do the work that they enjoy doing.” Consider that well over one-third of your time during your career will be spent working in your chosen profession. If you are passionate about what you do, those around you will notice and interesting doors will open.

The Creative Process in Visual Merchandising

In nearly every retail store there are a few people who seem to have an unusual flair for presenting merchandise. They coordinate trend-right fashion looks effortlessly, set up attractive displays without seeming to think about what they're doing, and arrange effective department layouts with precision and speed. They are highly valued employees because of their special talents. When they “set the floor,” merchandise moves and profits grow.

What do these talented retailers have that others may not? They have a solid understanding of retail design principles and of company presentation standards, and

“Everybody is talented because everybody who is human has something to express. Try not expressing anything for twenty-four hours and see what happens. You will nearly burst.”
Brenda Ueland, author of *If You Want to Write*

“Creativity is like a muscle. The more you exercise it, the more it grows.” Jerry Allan, professor of design, Minneapolis College of Art and Design

AFTER COMPLETING THIS CHAPTER, YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO

- Discuss a variety of processes for creative thinking
- Develop strategies for overcoming creative blocks
- Identify a variety of resources for idea development
- Explain the process of getting new ideas accepted

"Working is not grinding but a wonderful thing to do; creative power is in all of you if you just give it a little time; if you believe in it a little bit and watch it come quietly into you; if you do not keep it out by always hurrying and feeling guilty in those times when you should be lazy and happy. Or if you do not keep the creative power away by telling yourself that worst of lies—that you haven't any."

Brenda Ueland, author of If You Want to Write

they use a creative approach to merchandise presentation. Design principles and company standards can be learned, but what about creativity—that extra twist or new approach which is, in effect, a unique signature?

Creativity is not a gift that belongs only to a few individuals. It is true that some people have more creative ability than others do, but all people can further develop their creativity. What creative people do is open their minds to idea generation through various brainstorming processes. The more often these processes are used, the easier it will be to find creative solutions to problems.

Most dictionaries use the word *productive* as a second meaning for the word *creative*. Being productive means getting results. If your creative work produces results that meet your merchandising objectives, you are on your way to developing your creativity at a professional level.

A One-of-a-Kind Creative Merchandiser

Gene Moore, vice president and display director at Tiffany & Co. for nearly 40 years, made an art form of creative thought in his company's world-famous store. When he died in November of 1998, he left a rich legacy of window design that included wit, brilliant merchandising savvy, and notoriously unconventional methods for getting people to stop and enjoy his visual merchandising creations. In fact, Moore's windows themselves became tourist destinations.

In a *Women's Wear Daily* tribute to Gene Moore, writer Sharon Edelson wrote, "While the jewels on display at Tiffany's were precious, Moore's window designs were not. He injected his work with unexpected juxtapositions [pairing unrelated or unusual visual elements]; a diamond resting on a piece of lettuce, or a brooch embedded in a watermelon made of gumdrops." According to the article, "nothing was sacred to Moore."

Text author Kate Ternus remembers a series of Moore's winter windows featuring diamond-studded snowflake pins (Figure 1.1, left). Moore propped the store's small shadow-box windows with artist's drawing boards, barber scissors, and folded construction paper done in stark white against a powder-blue background—to show the grade school student's method of folding paper into tight little triangles and then snipping away pieces to create one-of-a-kind snowflake designs. Anyone who'd been to an American grade school knew immediately what the windows were all about. Moore let the paper snippets fall to the windows' floors and pinned a half-finished, partly folded paper snowflake to the board. After taking all that in, the viewer would notice a single diamond snowflake pin—the artist's still-life model—artlessly stuck to the top of the drawing boards—as if only a third-grader might have such an elegantly jeweled model to work from!

People viewing the windows chuckled as they stood there and commented to one another about how clever the displays were. Ternus thought they were more than clever. She thought they were inspired. What else would make absolute strangers speak to one another on a New York City sidewalk?

At the time, Ternus couldn't afford tuition to study visual merchandising formally, so she studied Moore's windows. She was out there for every window change. It was an amazing way to learn, and he was a superb teacher. Later in her career, they corresponded. He was pleased to know he'd helped her and flattered to have been thought of as the best.

Another Moore admirer was quoted in the memorial article: "Gene Moore's boundless humor and creativity gave anyone who passed by his windows a smile, a surprise, or a moment's pause," said William R. Chaney, chairman of Tiffany's. "His talent gave people a wonderful window on Tiffany's. He was a magician, pure and simple" (Figure 1.1b.)

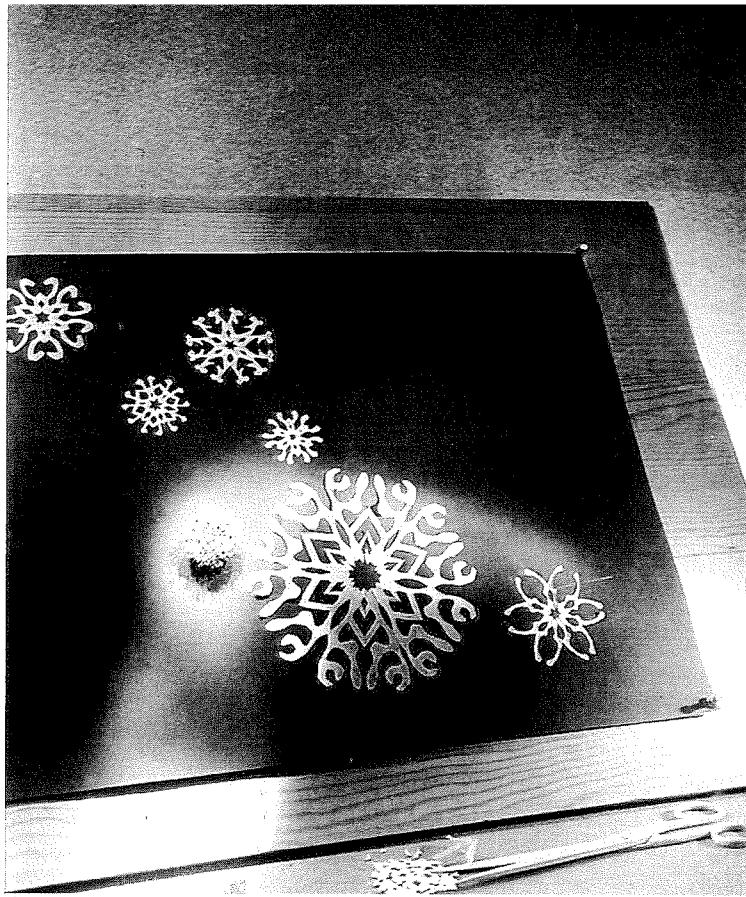


Figure 1.1 Gene Moore's snowflake window used simple creative elements to tell an elegant wintertime tale about Tiffany's diamonds (left). In this Tiffany window by Gene Moore, a flower brooch blossoms beside a planter (below).



According to writer Edelson, "Moore saw his talent a bit differently. 'I'm crazy,' he told a *Newsday* reporter in 1990. 'I don't know how else to explain it. But I'm glad I'm crazy.'"

"What else could account for his prolific output?" asked Edelson. "Over the course of his career with Tiffany's, Moore designed about 5,000 windows." Although Gene Moore made many contributions as a designer for the arts—designing major projects for art museums, dance companies, theater—and, in 1988, his own jewelry designs for Tiffany, "his first love was windows," says Edelson. "Prior to his arrival on the display scene, store windows were fairly lifeless."

In the same *Women's Wear Daily* article, Edelson interviewed Simon Doonan, who was then creative director for Barneys New York. He recalled that Moore used to say, "Windows should be polite because they talk to strangers." Doonan, however, disagreed with Moore's comment. "That belies the real oomph that went into his work," he said. "When you

look at the body of his work, he was a total innovator. He was the first to use objects like hammers and broken glass with high-end merchandise, and the first to bring artists like Andy Warhol into the window display arena."

Outside-the-Box Thinking

The term outside the box has found its way into today's business language as a buzz phrase that describes thinking creatively. Another phrase—coloring outside the lines—means much the same thing. "Stay inside the lines!" Remember hearing those words? Your kindergarten teacher wanted your earliest artistic efforts to conform to those of your classmates. Coloring inside the lines was your behavioral task, and development of eye-hand coordination and following rules were the teacher's learning objectives for you.

Once you had those basic skills under control, you'd be allowed to advance to more creative freehand artwork. By the time that happened, though, you may not have felt

"Being clever is the key, but it's much more than just putting merchandise in the window. Display needs to reflect the company's philosophy to make a true brand statement, yet do it in a way that makes the CEO smile. Even more than that, it has to be compelling, so that shoppers simply have to have the product."

Christine Belich, former executive creative director, Sony

much like being creative because the desire to do unique things had been "schooled" right out of you. As a five-year-old, your wildly creative urges—curbed for the sake of orderly learning in the classroom—may have been temporarily inhibited.

For a retailer, creativity means you must color outside the lines again in order to find new solutions for merchandising problems you encounter. Being able to move beyond your usual way of thinking about things is essential in today's competitive retail environment. Look at Figure 1.2 (on pages 6–7) for some examples of creative thinking.

According to Kurt Hanks and Jay Parry (*Wake Up Your Creative Genius*), "Creation isn't making something out of nothing. Instead it's organizing existing elements into new and different wholes." That should be good news, especially if you see yourself as a noncreative

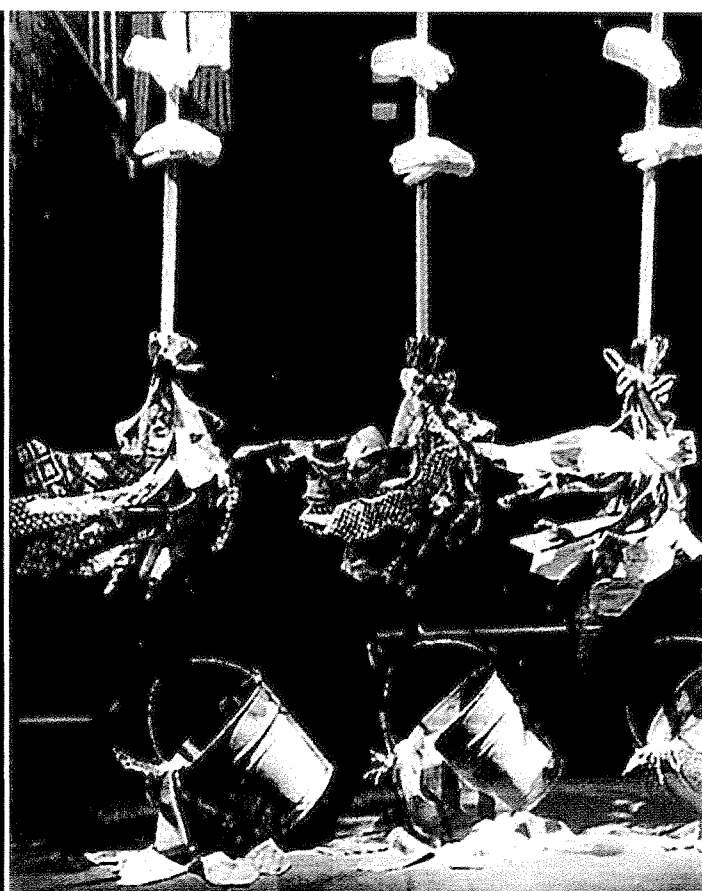
person. It implies that you don't have to come up with totally new ideas, provided that you do some "editing" along the way.

What is editing? It's a term borrowed from the newspaper industry. Newspaper editors don't normally write the stories you see in print. Instead, they assign and oversee the work of staff reporters who actually gather information, interview people, and write the news articles you read. Just before the newspaper is printed, editors inspect their reporters' stories and edit, or fine-tune, them for content, accuracy, grammar, spelling, and length.

Sometimes reporters feel their original story is ruined by editing, but most will admit that editorial changes—shortening a sentence here, changing a word there—make the resulting story or article clearer, tighter, and better overall. This is similar to the process that



Figure 1.2 A window display that exemplifies outside-the-box thinking. "Who would expect vegetables and technology to go together?" asks Christine Belich, Sony's former Vice President of Visual Merchandising, referring to Sony's "Couch potato" window.



A window designed by Tom Beebe when he was Creative Director for Paul Stuart, the men's wear retailer, illustrates his philosophy: "The goal of a Paul Stuart window is to stop people in their tracks and get them to look at the window."

takes place when visual merchandisers modify ideas they've gotten from other retail sources. Presentations become more focused, more dynamic, and more effective. New (and better) ideas can come from the ideas of others.

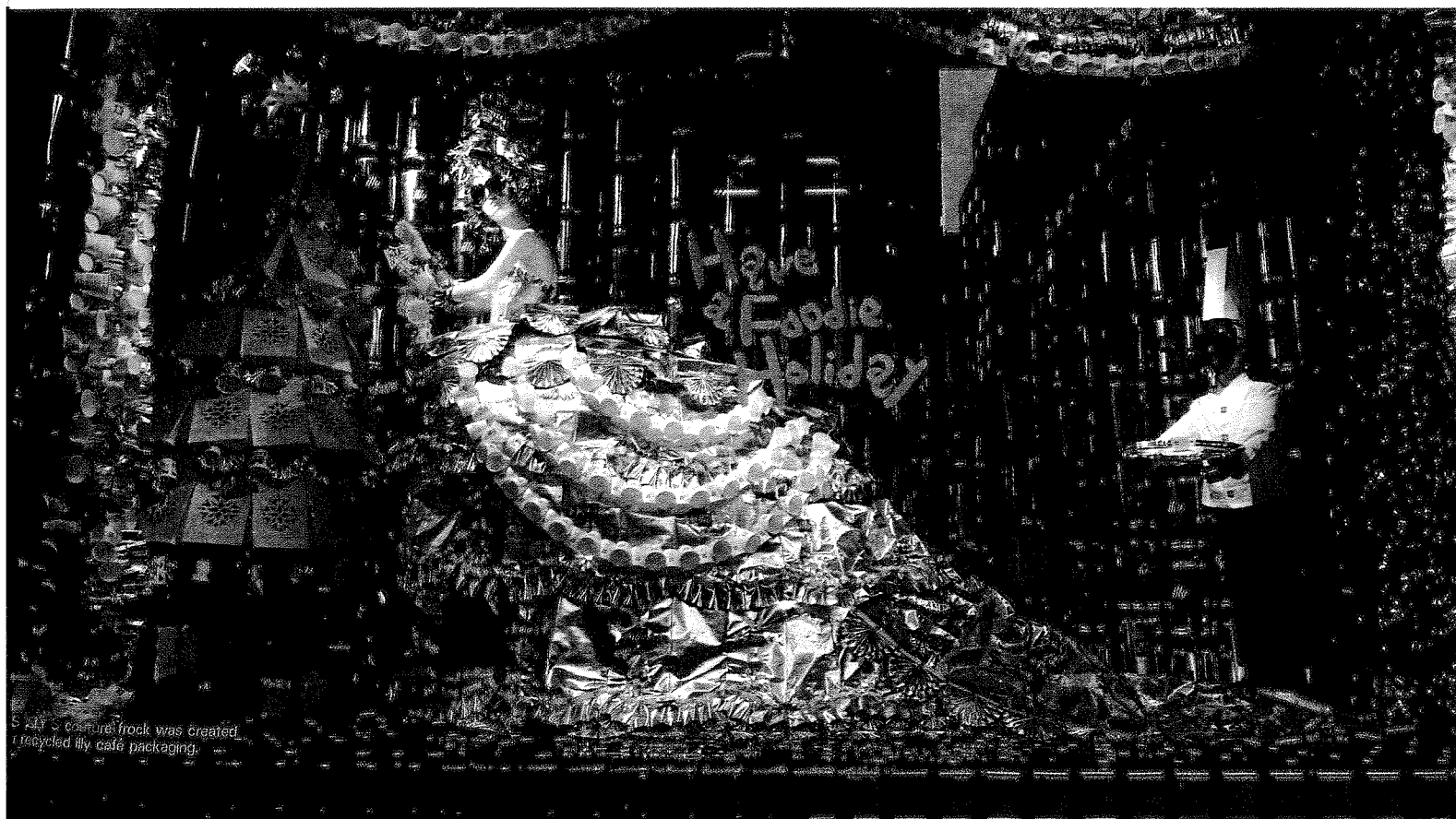
O'BRIEN'S VIEW OF CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

Tim O'Brien, corporate trainer and columnist for Knight Ridder's *Tribune News*, offers five ideas for looking at old problems in new ways. In a syndicated article titled "The Value of Foolish Questions: Develop New Approaches to Problem Solving," he writes:

- **List and counter list.** When you have a problem to resolve, quickly list the first five ideas that come to mind for solving the situation. Now write out five approaches that are the opposite of the first five you

wrote down. Do any of them make sense? Do any of them sound more possible than the first group? What about combining the two approaches—is there any merit to this?

- **Use both sides of your brain.** First, think about the situation in analytical terms only. Then, think about it from an emotional point of view. Does either of these approaches lend more insight than the other? Again, what about a balanced approach, using the strong points from both sides?
- **Convene a panel of experts.** You can do this in two ways. You can actually invite several people to brainstorm or mastermind with you about the problem. Or you can assemble an imaginary group of the geniuses from history. Then ask the real group for ideas. Or ask yourself, "How would Sir Isaac Newton solve this problem? What would Madame Curie have done in this situation?" Allow



Simon Doonan brings attention to Barney's windows with his unique, eye-catching use of mannequins. "Mannequins are the high-octane gasoline that fuels the throbbing of my window dressing Lincoln Continental," he says.

"Learn the rules so that you know how to break them properly."

Dalai Lama

your mind to flow with thoughts influenced by your impression of these major figures of the past. This can produce unique insights.

- **Be a consultant.** Approach the challenge as if you are a hired consultant. Assemble the facts. Ask questions of yourself and others involved. Identify the causes. Determine the desired outcome, define the solution. Based on this information, list the techniques to use that will lead to the final goal.
- **Ask children how they would solve the problem.** Then sit back and let them tell you. This can be an amazingly fun and revealing exercise. What we want to do is to generate creative solutions. And, that often takes a free-flowing imagination. And when you ask a child, you've gone to the source of imagination. They don't even know there is a box to be inside, unless it's a refrigerator box that's now a fort.

The first and only rule to remember when trying these suggestions is: There are no rules. Anything and everything is appropriate in the thinking stage. Don't limit yourself to what you're familiar with. In fact, that is the point of this exercise. Break out beyond the self-imposed bounds you've placed on yourself. Add your own ideas to help you think young and fresh, and you now have the tools to see problems and challenges as opportunities. Just get started, and then, never quit.

BELL'S APPROACH: LOOK, COMPARE, INNOVATE

To text author Judy Bell, thinking outside the box consists of three simple action steps that

can jump-start creativity and enable you to explore, edit, and expand on current ideas and practices.

Look

The first step is to look at what your retail competition is doing. If you see that your retail competitors are doing something right with their store's merchandise presentation strategies and techniques, you will have a head start on doing something even better with your own.

How will you know what works for your competitors? You might watch their customers and note how they react to displays in those stores. You can observe which displays appear to be ignored and which seem to have "stopping power."

Compare

The second step to thinking outside the box is to compare. Once you gather ideas from your competition, you're ready to compare them with your own company's presentations. For example, you might compare a presentation at your competitor's store entrance with the presentation at your own store entrance. You might observe whether the competitor used any mannequins or props to draw customers into and through the store. You'd read the directional signing and determine whether it assisted customers to locate departments. You'd read signing on merchandise fixtures and ask yourself whether it seemed to encourage customers to make buying decisions. You'd ask yourself about the effectiveness of the merchandise displays. You'd ask whether merchandise presentation overall seemed to give customers fresh ideas about how fashion or home apparel products could be combined or coordinated. You'd make note of what types of lighting were used to spotlight items or add to the overall atmosphere of the store. You'd wonder about the general feeling of the store—whether it

Retail stopping power makes casual passers-by focus attention on the visual presentation and really consider the merchandise. Once focused, they become potential customers and the presentation becomes a "silent seller."

“felt good” to be in the store or which specific merchandise areas invited you to stay and browse.

Innovate

The third step, innovate, will be much easier as a result of your observations and comparisons, because it's in this phase of the outside-the-box process that you become an editor. You start planning your store's next merchandise presentations based on effective things you've seen elsewhere. However, instead of just copying what you've seen, you'll put your own spin, or interpretation, on the strategy or technique. You'll be able to look at the original competitive presentation and analyze it—compare it to an ideal display (evaluate its strengths and weaknesses)—and, finally, innovate by creating some new alternatives to the original.

THE SCAMPER MODEL

You often see visual merchandisers carrying toolboxes as they go about their duties. They may need rubber mallets, screwdrivers, pins, and wrenches—the mechanical tools of their trade—as they set up shelving and fixtures, hang signs, and dress mannequins. What you won't see is the “mental toolbox” that visual merchandisers reach into for inspiration every day—the creative tools that they've acquired as they've developed professionally.

In retailing, the creative thinking process can follow several useful problem-solving models. You've already learned about two in this chapter. The important thing is finding the outside-the-box method that works for you.

Some visual merchandisers use Robert Eberle's creative thinking model SCAMPER (a mnemonic for ways to brainstorm for an unusual solution) to solve the merchandising problem at hand. This model for creative thinking offers seven options to give your thinking a creative boost. These options are explained as follows:

bell's thinking outside the box

1. Look. Visit two or more competing stores and look at the merchandise presentations.
2. Compare. Compare the merchandise presentations.
3. innovate. Combine the best presentation techniques from competing stores with those in your own store, and modify them to create a unique presentation that fits your store's brand image.

BOX 1.1

SCAMPER MODEL

SUBSTITUTE

COMBINE

ADAPT

MODIFY, MINIFY, MAGNIFY

PUT TO OTHER USES

ELIMINATE

REVERSE OR REARRANGE

SCAMPER

MODEL CREDIT:

(Eberle, Robert. SCAMPER:

Games for Imagination

Development. 1977. DOK

Publishers, Buffalo, N.Y.)

Substituting strategies involve exchanging one expected element of a visual idea for another.

It might mean borrowing an accessorizing strategy from the fashion department for use in the home furnishings area. A fully accessorized fashion mannequin might wear several layers of fashionable clothing, plus jewelry, hosiery, shoes, hat, and handbag. To use a substituting strategy in the home furnishings area, you might apply the fashion accessory strategy to create a formal-occasion table top in the housewares department. Showing fine linens (tablecloth, placemats, and napkins), place settings of fine china, crystal stemware, silver service, candles, candleholders, a centerpiece, and handwritten place cards in sterling holders for each guest at the table creates a strong—and fully accessorized—home fashion statement.

Combining strategies may mean seating a pair of elegantly dressed and fully accessorized mannequins at the table mentioned above.

cross-merchandising
refers to moving merchandise across traditional department or classification lines to combine elements in a single department or display. For example, books of poetry, romantic novels, candles, bath salts, terry cloth robes, and oversized bath towels could be brought together in a single display.

Substitute Valentine cards for the place cards and the scene is set for a romantic Valentine's Day dinner party for two. The fashion and home furnishings tie-in also gives you a presentation with **cross-merchandising** impact.

Adapting strategies will find the visual merchandiser taking the rainbow-hued progression of colored merchandise used often on women's fashion department walls and applying it to a wall of bedding or bath linens, a display of shower curtains, or an assortment of children's toys. Or, adapting might involve using a stepladder, paint buckets, and brushes, as props to display half a dozen pairs of brightly tinted tennis shoes. You simply take an item intended for one use and adapt its purpose to suit your sales presentation.

Modifying strategies—magnifying (making something larger) or minifying (making something smaller)—provide an imaginative counterpoint to otherwise routine presentations of any merchandise. One effective display employed a G.I. Joe action figure to prop a jewelry display window featuring cultured pearl necklaces. Dressed in full scuba diving gear, he appeared to be swimming underwater (the backdrop and sides of the window were covered in sea-blue fabric). The pearl necklaces became a trail of bubbles streaming toward the surface of the water in which the figure swam. Using the miniature made the small pearls seem much larger and more important in scale than they would have been in a conventional display window. That's an example of minifying. Using a gigantic golf ball and wooden tee in a men's sportswear display surely attracts attention—if for no other reason than making shoppers take a second look at what magnifying a prop 50 times does to perspective and scale. That second look is the visual merchandiser's opportunity to focus customer attention on the merchandise.

Putting something to other uses is a strategy that finds the visual merchandiser

dressing a mannequin in a crisp white apron but inverting a stock pot on its head in place of the chef's traditional white toque. This is a fun, eye-catching way to focus shopper attention on a cooking vessel. The pot's general shape and undeniable link to the professional cook could make shoppers stop and rethink their cookware choices! The unexpected "other use" can be entertaining, thought provoking, and attention getting—three good elements to employ in any display.

The eliminating strategy is an amazingly useful tool to prevent a creative visual merchandiser from becoming too clever. It is always a good idea to "quit while you're ahead" in a presentation. In the stockpot example, you could easily get carried away with the fun of it all and keep on reaching for even more obvious tie-ins to the chef concept. It might be tempting to dangle cookie cutters from the mannequin's ears as another kitchen-related accessory, but it would be far better to use restraint and retain the impact of the inverted cooking pot.

The reversing or rearranging strategy is another method of presenting merchandise in an unexpected way. Mannequins that normally stand on their feet can stand on their heads (if you have a sturdy and reliable way to suspend them from the ceiling grid in a display window). Things normally arranged from smallest to largest can be reversed in order. Mannequins dressed back-to-front can stop traffic. You can have a great time devising new ways to do the opposite of what's expected.

Best Practices and Practical Applications

Retailers worldwide use creative thinking strategies. Some very competitive (and successful) retailers actually hire individuals whose principal assignment is to look at what other retailers are doing and develop new presentation concepts based on industry trends and the best current practices.

Highly professional visual merchandising managers make local comparison shopping a regular part of their working week, with occasional trips to different locations in the country to look at the latest store **prototypes**. Visual merchandisers, at any point in their careers (from window design specialist to vice president) must use their powers of observation to build professional skills and creative muscle. In all cases, the ability to look, compare, and innovate should really be part of any visual merchandiser's formal job description.

VISITING COMPETING STORES

As you begin this course, visit your favorite store's direct and indirect competitors. If you currently work for an independent "junior fashion" store in a local mall, you'll want to keep an eye on other junior shops in the mall. In today's fast-paced junior fashion market, you'll also want to shop for presentation ideas in national chains like Gap, Old Navy, Express, J.Crew, Abercrombie & Fitch, and Club Monaco, if they are located in your community. You always want to know what the leading specialty and department stores in the retail industry are doing, whether they are your direct competitors or not. Recognized leaders are usually the trendsetters for product presentation.

It is also a good strategy to keep in touch with noncompeting stores that have interesting themes, décor, or merchandise. If your store carries only junior apparel, for example, you may find ideas at stores like Bath & Body Works, Steve Madden, and Urban Outfitters that feature other products targeted to the junior customer.

One-of-a-kind stores often provide a wealth of creative ideas. They can quickly develop and implement new ideas without dealing with the top-down bureaucracy that sometimes slows change in a larger corporation. The one-of-a-kind store can

often quickly change direction and react more immediately to a developing retail merchandise trend. You may find more highly innovative ideas for merchandise presentation there than anywhere else. Once you make store observations part of your retail routine, you can begin to compare and improve upon the techniques you see to create new and more effective methods of presentation for yourself and your employer.

TRENDSPOTTING

As you explore applied creativity and other topics in this text, you will notice that there is a recurring theme throughout. It refers to **trends**, the direction in which things like demographics, finance, and fashion are moving. Trends drive nearly everything we see, do, and think as we go about the business of being human.

The term is introduced here under the umbrella of additional creative resources because it is going to appear again and again in this text and in your life. Retail language uses the word—trend—as a noun, a verb, and, sometimes, as an adverb or adjective. You'll want to add it to your professional vocabulary right away.

To be successful in recognizing and then analyzing trends as a retailer you must understand something about people—who they are, how they live, what they value or believe in, and what they want versus what they need. To a retailer, every trend relates to people and the things they buy in some way. Consequently, you must become aware of trends in:

- **Demographics**—age, sex, income, geographic location
- **Lifestyles**—how we live, spend our time at work, home, leisure, entertainment, etc.
- **Psychographics**—attitudes, habits
- **Cultural or social influences**—political preferences; ethnic or minority issues; and people's values, beliefs, and behaviors

A **prototype** is the original model on which later types are based. For example, before rolling out a dozen retail stores, a prototype is built so that design features may be tested and refined if necessary. The same process is used in the development of custom merchandise fixtures and visual fixtures.

trends are the direction in which things like demographics, finance, and fashion are moving. Can also include merchandising, politics, lifestyles, etc.

"Creative people are playful people. It's literally impossible to create effectively, and consistently, if we're unable to let ourselves play. Why? Because creativity and play need each other."

Kurt Hanks and Jay Parry, Wake Up Your Creative Genius

Professional retail trend analysts make brave predictions that translate those factors into behaviors that you see at work in your world today . . . or tomorrow, if they're correct. Faith Popcorn, author of *The Popcorn Report* and *Clicking* is one of the better known (and easiest to read) trend analysts working today. In 2000's *EVEolution: The Eight Truths of Marketing to Women*, her book with Lys Marigold, Popcorn calls trend analysis "Brailling the Culture: monitoring cultural signals—magazines, newspapers, books, videos, movies, TV, music, events, food, fads, the Internet, shopping channels—in order to feel out the Trends." Visit Popcorn's corporate website faithpopcorn.com to explore her version of trends for the current year for a forward look. You may also go to google.com or ask.com to search for some of her trend predictions from earlier years to see which of her predictions has been bulls-eye accurate and which may have been misses . . . and which are still in process.

In *Clicking: 17 Trends That Drive Your Business and Your Life*, Popcorn writes: "One question reporters often ask is, 'Can you personally start a trend?' The answer: 'You can't create a trend; you can only observe it. And you can't change a trend. You can only change people's minds about believing in it.'"

That's what well-prepared visual merchandisers can do.

READING TRADE WEBSITES AND PERIODICALS

Don't limit yourself to visiting retailers to find ideas for what's new and exciting in current practice. You have many additional sources of information available—as close as your computer, mailbox, bookstore, or public library. For example, some retail stores even offer tours on the Internet, virtually walking you through their entire store. Subscribing to monthly trade magazines is an excellent way to "visit" other retailers and compare. The magazines *DDI*, (*Display and Design Ideas*) and *VMSD* (*Visual*

Merchandising and Store Design), can keep you updated on the latest visual techniques and fixturing trends because they are focused on retail design and presentation professionals. In addition to detailing current trends and strategies, these publications offer the addresses of hundreds of fixturing and display manufacturers nationwide. They also offer information on seasonal market weeks in New York and Las Vegas, where manufacturers and representatives gather to display their products each year.

To see international stores without the travel expense, subscribe to the *German Style Guide* (www.style-guide.biz) magazine. It offers beautiful full-color photographs of the latest in-store design and presentation. Another excellent international resource is www.echochamber.com. To subscribe to this free service, simply register your name, address, and place of employment or school at the website. Their home page reads: "We love retail. We travel the world in search of the greatest stores. We feed retailers and designers with the latest trends. Welcome to a snapshot of what we have found and what we think."

EXPLORING LOCAL COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Closer to home, other resources for visual merchandising ideas are community events and local traditions. You can get ideas for retail signs from parade banners, ideas for lighting from theater productions, and inspiration for retail themes from seasonal events. Tapping into local celebrations, ethnic and cultural events, plus local lore or historical information can also trigger ideas for creative retail visual tie-ins. You can find visual ideas everywhere and anywhere, so it is important to be open and receptive to inspiration in any form.

FOLLOWING SOURCES ABOUT CURRENT EVENTS

Knowledge of current events and cultural trends can also trigger creative solutions. The

New York Times Style section, published on Sundays and Thursdays, features articles on consumer trends, photographs of in-the-street fashions, and the hottest new products from New York City shops. The *Wall Street Journal* offers the latest buzz in business, plus articles on new gadgets and technologies. *USA Today* runs surveys called "USA Today Snapshots" on the cover page of each section that can be helpful in determining consumer insight. *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines are packed with in-depth articles about the major news stories. Television news programs like CNN are well worth tuning into every day. On Sunday mornings, *This Week*, *Face the Nation*, *Meet the Press*, and *CBS News Sunday Morning*, all provide an excellent overview of the week's events, along with the opportunity to see and hear the people in the news. Review these resources and others, choose your favorites and build them into your routine. The more you see, hear, and read, the more ideas you will generate.

RESEARCHING RESOURCES ABOUT HISTORY

Books and movies (new and old) will show you what the world looks like today and what it looked like in the past. They can tell you what people wore, what they looked like, and how they lived. Because fashion is cyclical in nature—and what goes around *does* come around—a working knowledge of fashion history and lifestyles from other eras can be a treasury of adaptable ideas. Don't overlook college-level electives—history courses, art history courses, fashion history courses, and other valuable insights into the past from which you can develop a view for the future by looking, comparing, and innovating!

Sometimes the best preparation for the visual merchandising of "retro looks" (the retrospective view from previous decades or eras) is cultivating friends from your grandparents' generation. They'll tell you

stories about fashions, values, and lifestyles from their youth that will put the present into better perspective for you. Ask to see their scrapbooks and copies of old magazines. Photographs from prior generations will give you valuable visual information about why, how, and when people wore the fashions of the day.

Seven Top Innovative Thinkers

"Successful innovators," says business writer Peter Drucker, "use both the right side and the left side of their brains. They look at figures, and they look at people. They work out analytically what the innovation has to be to satisfy an opportunity."

As a visual merchandiser, it is critical to have a vision that includes not only what you will create, but also the business implications of that creation. Your goal in any presentation of merchandise is ultimately to sell products, and that goal should always be foremost in your mind. An artistic approach to visual merchandising will be much more effective if balanced with a business approach. Knowledge of the latest information on both creative thinking techniques and business strategies will not only help you to innovate, but it will prepare you for management positions. Whether working for a small specialty store or for a major corporate retailer, you will advance more rapidly if you have a point-of-view that focuses your creative activities on a productive end result.

To help you develop a well-rounded style, you can find a list of Business Best Sellers in the *New York Times* Sunday business section. An even more comprehensive list is available through www.forbes.com. Click on "lists" and pull up "Business Books of the Long Boom," for the top twenty best books in the past 20 years. When you look over these lists and have a basic knowledge of the titles that are most current, it is also interesting to spend time

browsing through the business section shelves in a bookstore. This is a practice that is wise to continue throughout your career. The insights you will gain and the techniques you will learn will help you to think outside the box and become a true innovator.

A summary of books from some of today's top innovative thinkers follows. Included are four business books and a wildly popular children's book series. While seeking innovative ideas, it is best to look at a wide variety of books, whether they cater to adults or children.

JASON JENNINGS AND LAURENCE HAUGHTON

A brilliant book that exudes excitement on every page is *It's Not the Big that Eat the Small . . . It's the FAST that Eat the Slow* by Jason Jennings and Laurence Haughton. New technology and global communication have resulted in a world in which everything is moving faster, including the marketplace. For those who wish to embrace the aggressive pace, the book lays out strategies to help them think and move faster than their competition. Anticipating trends is a key ingredient and nine ways to spot them are discussed, including listening to music, using the Internet, and reading the streets. "The H&M design staff never attend fashion shows. Instead, they hang out in the pubs, bars, and clubs, attend sporting contests, watch parents with their children, go to rock concerts, eat in restaurants, and study the streets for their next season's line of merchandise."

A chapter on innovation talks about THINK® (The Innovation Network) at Charles Schwab's Intranet website. The site has four zones, one of which is called Idea Central, where ideas are accepted from everyone in the company. Those who submit an idea are asked to answer questions that determine whether their new concept fits with Schwab's guiding principles. Questions include: who would support the idea, who would it upset, will it reinvent the

business, and will it create and nurture a spirit of innovation?

It is easy to see how the methodology used in a financial service firm can be applied to retailing, or any other type of business. The book has a far reach and is best described by one reviewer, Guy Kawasaki, "This book is jammed with tactics for eliminating speed bumps along the road to changing the world."

JIM LOEHR AND TONY SCHWARTZ

Another book that discusses the rapid-fire pace of the workplace takes a different slant on the subject and offers a system to manage personal energy both on and off the job. *The Power of Full Engagement* by Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz is a scientific approach that was developed during twenty-five years of working with many of the world's greatest athletes. At the core of the approach is The Corporate Athlete® Training System, which has a wide range of users, from dozens of Fortune 500 Companies to stay-at-home moms. The system focuses not on time management, but on energy management, helping individuals to establish rituals that can actually generate energy and allow them to consistently perform at the highest level. It also recognizes the importance of both activity and nonactivity: "Periods of recovery are intrinsic to creativity . . . sounds become music in the spaces between the notes, just as words are created by the spaces between the letters. It is in the spaces between work that love, friendship, depth and dimension are created."

ANDREI G. ALEINIKOV

A book filled with puzzles and quizzes that will engage and stretch your imagination is *Mega Creativity—Five Steps to Thinking Like a Genius* by Andrei G. Aleinikov. The main premise is that everyone is innovative and that you can learn to increase your skill to a level more powerful than that of someone

with natural genius. The author describes his book in this way: "This book is for those who dare to dream and dare to act, those who revolve the earth, those who are shakers and makers. *Mega Creativity* offers you a new way of thinking as well as methods for expanding your mind, giving you the power to create more powerful and more plentiful ideas. The process is easy and difficult at the same time. However, the system works—it has been tested on audiences all over the world, and these people have learned to expand their creativity."

TOM KELLEY

Another book that stands out among a multitude of books on creativity is *The Art of Innovation* by Tom Kelley. Whereas many other books simply teach innovation, Tom Kelley actually does innovation every day as general manager of IDEO. With a staff of over 300, IDEO is the world's leading design firm, famous for the development of the Apple mouse, and the handheld Palm. *The Art of Innovation* gives the reader a sneak peek at the company's strategies and secrets behind developing a consistent chain of cutting-edge products.

One of the strongest emerging themes in the book is the importance of teamwork: "If you distrust the power of teamwork, consider this fact. Even the most legendary individual inventor is often a team in disguise. In six scant years, for example, Thomas Edison generated an astounding four hundred patents, producing innovations in the telegraph, telephone, phonograph, and light bulb—with the help of a fourteen-man team."

Another highlight is a five-step method that is refined for the specific needs of each project in progress. One step repeats the action cited earlier by H&M in the staff's pursuit of new ideas for the design of fashion apparel and accessories in pubs and bars. "Observe real people in real-life situations to find out what

makes them tick: what confuses them, what they like, what they hate, where they have latent needs not addressed by current products and services."

J. K. ROWLING

The Harry Potter book series is brilliantly imaginative; filled with fantasy and fun. The writer, J. K. Rowling, takes you on a journey far outside the box of your everyday life. From the minute you set foot into Hogwarts alongside Harry, you are dazzled by the magical architecture and surprised by the portraits hanging in the corridors with characters that speak, sleep, and sometimes even snore. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Rowling writes:

There were a hundred and forty-two staircases at Hogwarts: wide, sweeping ones; narrow, rickety ones; some that led somewhere different on a Friday; some with a vanishing step halfway up that you had to remember to jump. Then there were doors that wouldn't open unless you asked politely, or tickled them in exactly the right place . . . it was also very hard to remember where anything was, because . . . the people in the portraits kept going to visit each other.

You may have to wait to find just the right time to make creative suggestions. Even when a company has strict presentation standards that may seem to stifle all visual merchandising creativity, it is still worthwhile for team members to present their best creative ideas. If ten people offer ideas, one or two that couldn't stand alone might be edited, combined, or changed (SCAMPERed) to become one totally brilliant idea. Sometimes good ideas do not gain acceptance initially, but when presented at a later time or to a new audience, they may be more enthusiastically received.

A **flagship store** displays the highest ideals of a company's brand image. Every detail from fitting room hooks to floor coverings reflect the company's brand. Stores built after the "flagship" is developed are usually modified for cost effectiveness. Examples of flagship stores are Niketown in Chicago; Prada in Soho, New York City; and both Levi's and Old Navy in San Francisco.

Guidelines for Implementing Ideas on the Job

If you are employed by an independent retailer, you may have a measure of flexibility to follow your own instincts and try new presentation ideas. If you are working for a multiple-unit retailer, (e.g., Express, Banana Republic, Old Navy), you must maintain the company's guidelines for presentation.

There is a good reason for following company guidelines correctly in every store. Formal guidelines are established to create a consistent image of the store throughout the chain. This is particularly true of **flagship stores**, where the overall appearance of the store is its main identifier in the eyes of its targeted customer (Figure 1.3). Some flagship stores actually become destinations—people simply have to visit them. In fact, "destination retailing" has become a concept in itself. Promoters at Bloomington, Minnesota's Mall of America can attest to the number of international flights and national tour buses that bring guests to shop in its hundreds of retail stores, play in its indoor amusement park, and dine at its many unusual restaurants.

Multiple-unit retailers expend great effort (in marketing research and budgeted dollars) to be certain that overall store and selling space designs, merchandise presentations, and displays are efficient for store staff to install and safe for customers, have visual impact, feature the merchandise effectively, project the desired company image, and contribute to sales and profit.

No matter which of their stores shoppers enter, the multiple-unit retailer wants shoppers to feel familiar with the store layout so that their shopping experience feels easy and familiar. Providing a consistent store identity to shoppers has the effect of reassuring their belief that they will receive the same quality product and service regardless of store location.

Even in one-of-a-kind stores, merchandise presentation should have continuity; but in this instance continuity refers to consistency between merchandise presentation and the store's brand image. For example, a store with a country image making use of hand-crafted wooden tables and reed baskets to feature its products, would not want to introduce gold-leafed French Provincial fixtures to its décor

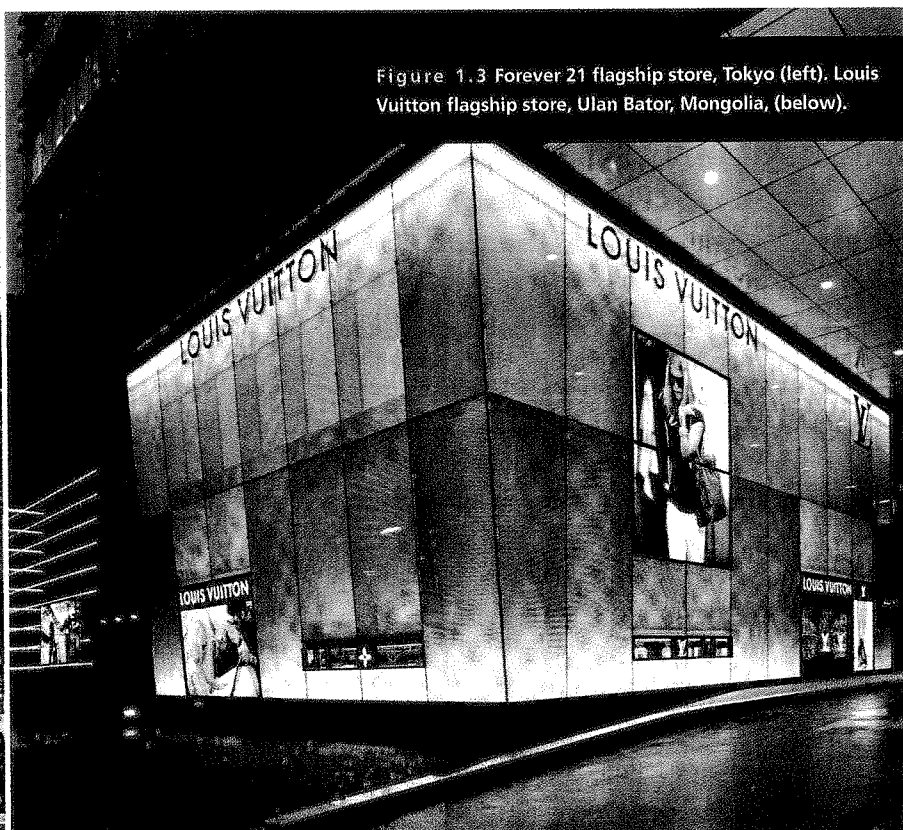


Figure 1.3 Forever 21 flagship store, Tokyo (left). Louis Vuitton flagship store, Ulan Bator, Mongolia, (below).

mix. Inconsistent messages do not inspire confidence on the part of the shopper. When the shopping scene is confusing or conflicting, shoppers tend to disappear.

Also keep in mind that the idea you think is brilliant may not be. That's when it's time to practice critical thinking. Be willing to evaluate your ideas as objectively as you possibly can. To be objective, you have to stop listening to your ego.

"The time invariably comes," according to Hanks and Parry, "when you need to stop collecting ideas and start judging them. All good ideas must be evaluated under the harsh light of critical thinking. The difference between just a good idea and a creative success is the ability to judge an idea and then to apply it. However, the judgment shouldn't be totally cold and uncreative," they add. "Creativity is as important in judging an idea as it is in coming up with one in the first place."

Building and Sustaining a Creative Work Environment

In a retail environment, it's not enough to have creative ideas, or even to be supportive of others' creativity. You must also be able to prevent idea stoppers. Idea stoppers, according to management consultant Karl Albrecht (author of *The Creative Corporation*), are critical statements (he calls them "verbal bullets") that shoot down creative ideas. Comments like, "We've already tried that," and "I don't see anything wrong with the way we're doing it now," or "Are you kidding?" are negative—Albrecht says they're "toxic"—statements that are guaranteed to stifle creativity. Think about it. Would you have enough courage to offer another idea after being put down like that? Wouldn't you rather develop a reputation for being what Albrecht calls an idea helper—a person who is open-minded, who actively listens, and who writes down every idea for later use?

People may assume that you are naturally creative because your job title says visual merchandiser. With effort and dedication, you can live up to those expectations. Albrecht believes that creative thinking abilities are learned, not inherited. He also says that anyone can think creatively "once you know how to go about it and once you decide you want to." He cites five characteristics that make the difference for innovative and creative thinking:

- **Mental flexibility**—being free of preconceived interpretations and fixed opinions
- **Option thinking**—willingness to give problems further thought and having a reluctance to jump on the first idea that seems to be a solution
- **Big-picture thinking**—taking the "helicopter view" and rising above the landscape of everyday ideas to see all the factors involved at once
- **Skill in explaining and selling ideas**—being able to develop a concept and connect the facts and ideas involved so that others can understand and accept them
- **Intellectual courage**—willingness to advocate an idea or a course of action that you believe in, but which is unpopular with your peers

As a visual merchandiser, you are in an ideal position to be one of Albrecht's idea helpers—not only because you're constantly searching for new ideas yourself, but because the company needs to hear and use creative ideas from all its employees in order to remain competitive. If the only thing constant in retailing is change, then only those individuals best equipped to respond well to change will maintain their employability within a retail organization.

As an idea helper, you don't need to agree with every idea that's presented. But just as

"Don't be tainted by any preconceived notions that you are introduced to. Start every project fresh as a new challenge or change from the norm. It can always be toned down."

Greg Gorman, vice president, new business development, Triad

"Creativity is so delicate a flower that praise tends to make it bloom, while discouragement often nips it in the bud. Any one of us will put out more and better ideas if our efforts are appreciated."

Alex F. Osborn

there are statements that are idea stoppers that devalue ideas (or the people who offer them); there are statements that can facilitate an exchange of ideas. Prefacing your ideas or the ideas of those around you with comments like, "I'd like to get your help on an idea I'm trying to work out" or "Before we make a decision, let's review all our options" can help

those around you to react more open-mindedly to any ideas—including your own. In *The Creative Corporation* Albrecht says the ideal is "someone who realizes that ideas, in and of themselves, are fundamentally valuable; they represent intellectual wealth. In contrast to the idea killer, the idea helper actually helps other people have and express new ideas."

Shoptalk "Thinking Outside the Box" by Judy Bell

Early in my career as a visual merchandising director for a chain of women's apparel specialty stores, a vice president of the company made an unusual request. He asked me to look at our competitors, decide which had the

most inviting presentation at their store entrance, and then copy it in our stores. I had a difficult time with the idea of copying someone else's ideas; not only did I want our stores to be fashion leaders, I knew that the presentation must fit our own brand image. But I made a trip to Southdale Shopping Center in Minneapolis to see what I could learn. Many of women's specialty stores had positioned a table with value-priced sweaters in their entrance. I watched as nearly every female customer who passed by the store stopped at the table to look at the sweaters. Many also entered the store.

I compared those presentations to what we were featuring in our store entrances: two-way and four-way basic chrome fixtures with full-price fashions. These same types of fixtures filled the store, in addition to many simple round racks. I thought about how eye-catching the tables in front of our competitors' stores were because they were different from the basic fixtures in the store. I also thought about the appeal of showing a value item purchased in-depth at the entrance to the store to engage the customers' interest as they passed by.

With those two ideas in mind, I met with a fixture manufacturer, and together,

we designed a unique fixture for the store entrance. It fit the stores' brand image, was flexible and could handle both folded and hanging products, and it fit into my budget. Next, I met with a few of our company's merchants to discuss moving value product to this new fixture and then worked with them to write signing copy. I presented the concept to the VP who had requested the action, and he approved a 2-month test in a few stores. I was glad I had decided not to interpret his request to copy our competitors' presentations too literally, and instead, took the opportunity to innovate. What was the end of the story? Sales went off the charts, and we ordered the new fixtures for every store in the company!

After this experience, I was sold on the idea of looking at the competition before developing any new idea. The inspiration was invaluable. I still use the process of looking, comparing, and innovating every day of my career. I have broadened my base of research to include the Internet, the media, restaurants, and a wide variety of resources. I always begin with a direct look at my competition. I believe that in order to lead, you must be aware of what everyone else is doing. And I never, ever copy!

Outside-the-Box Challenge

Comparison Shopping for Advertised Items

Directions:

1. Collect newspaper or magazine ads from at least two different stores that sell similar (or identical) items.
2. Visit the two stores and draw a sketch of the advertised items featured in each store's presentation.
3. Answer the following questions for each store.

LOOK

1. Are the advertised items easy to locate within the store?
2. Are the advertised items signed?
3. Are the displays neat and orderly?
4. Are the displays exciting or eye-catching? Why? Why not?

COMPARE

1. Which store's presentation do you like better and why?
2. Can you predict which presentation will sell the most merchandise? Explain why you think it will be more effective.

INNOVATE

1. What could you do to innovate each of the presentations?
2. Once you've added your own innovations, how much of the original idea will still be evident?
3. Did you use any of the SCAMPER model's elements to edit the original ideas? Explain which element(s) you used. Describe your creative results.

Shopping Style Comparison

Directions: Customers respond differently to various types of information offered in the displays and merchandise presentations they see. This exercise is about reaching a target

customer through visual presentations of merchandise.

LOOK

Interview three to five different people (try to vary ages, gender, and occupation or lifestyles) and find out what information they expect from a visual merchandising presentation in a store. Be sure to include descriptive information about the person you are interviewing (e.g., the person's sex, age, interests, occupation). Here are some sample questions for your investigative interviews:

1. Do you notice merchandise displays when you shop?
2. How do you use merchandise displays to help you make buying decisions?
3. When you shop, what type of information do you look for in displays?
4. How would you feel if retailers didn't present their merchandise in any other way than storing it on shelves and hangers? Would other nondecorative approaches affect your decision to buy?
5. Do you have any "pet peeves" about merchandise presentation methods currently used in your favorite stores?

COMPARE

Summarize the results of your interviews and analyze what they mean in terms of shopping behavior and response to visual merchandising techniques.

INNOVATE

Based on your findings, what general recommendations can you make about creating more effective merchandise displays?

Critical Thinking

Activity 1:

Discovering New Books by Creative Thinkers

1. Go to the library or an Internet bookstore site (for example <http://www.amazon.com>

or <http://www.barnesandnoble.com>) and do a search for books or magazine articles on creativity or creative thinking.

2. Write down the titles of five books or articles. Include one creative children's book in the five that you select.
3. Select three titles and identify the general objectives of each book (Internet books may have been reviewed on the website, or at least have brief descriptions so that you can get an idea about their contents).
4. Choose one title that most stimulates your interest, visit your college or local library, and sign out the book. Write a one-page report on the key concepts. (If the Internet titles are not available in your college or local library, the librarian may be able to access at least a full text copy of a book chapter or article that interests you.)

Activity 2: **Finding Inspiration through** **Cultural Trends**

The goal of this activity is to encourage you to increase your awareness of cultural trends and to begin to use this knowledge to create engaging, timely, visual presentations.

Directions

- Visit your favorite newsstand/bookstore/library and write down the top cultural cover stories from a wide range of magazines. Examples: wellness, religion, happiness, etc.
- Indicate the number of times these same cover stories are repeated on other magazines. List the magazine titles next to each story.
- In class share the most common stories and discuss which may indicate cultural trends. Your discussion should also include what you and your classmates have seen or heard in the news and on the Internet.
- On the whiteboard, choose two or three trends and create a list of products that

could be displayed together to reflect each of the trends you discussed in class.

- Write sign copy for each product grouping.

SAMPLE SOLUTION

Magazines, newspapers, and other media indicate that aging baby boomers are increasingly interested in "brain fitness." Related products could include workout apparel and gear, brain-support vitamins, games like "Scrabble" and "Concentration," brainteaser books, crossword puzzles, and self-taught foreign language kits. Sign copy: "Mind & Body Workouts."

Case Study **Looking, Comparing, and Innovating**

THE SITUATION: PHASE ONE

Her first day on the job, visual merchandiser Jane Bartlett is notified by Susan Howard, the Millville store manager, that each of the company's six metro area specialty stores will receive 150 hand-knit sweaters in the following day's shipment. Susan tells Jane that the sweaters are an important fashion item and that customers have been asking for them.

Until Jane was hired to travel among the six stores, Susan had done the visual merchandising for her busy store. She loved doing the store's creative work and often spent more time doing displays than she did doing managerial paperwork. It was corporate headquarters' idea to hire a visual merchandiser to free store managers from merchandising tasks so that they could handle their administrative duties and meet important paperwork deadlines. The company's other objective was establishing a consistent store brand image in the metro area.

Susan still thinks that hiring Jane was unnecessary. She lets Jane know that she will need to be convinced that a full-time visual merchandising person will make a difference

to her store's sales figures. "I'm expecting to see a creative and exciting presentation for those sweaters, Jane," says Susan. It's clear to Jane that she needs to prove to Susan that her ideas and methods can add consistency and value to the store's current presentation strategies.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

PHASE ONE

1. How do you think Jane should begin the process of delivering a creative and exciting merchandise presentation that will satisfy her supervisor?
2. What does Jane need to find out about her competition? To what elements of their retail operation should she pay particular attention?
3. How can Jane be confident that her presentations will have an impact on sales?

THE SITUATION: PHASE TWO

Jane used the look, compare, innovate method and toured her store's most direct competitor, another upscale specialty store. She found their sweaters neatly stacked on shelves in the first wall section to the right of the store entrance. The massive presentation of sweaters made a dramatic impact and anyone passing by the store would be likely to notice them.

In a department store, Jane found sweaters in several different areas of the casual department. A few were shown on a fixture with denim jeans in the rear of the department; some were shown with casual pants in the front of the department; and there was one sweater shown under a coat on a wall presentation.

The outfits that were coordinated with the sweaters were unusual and exciting, but because the sweaters were integrated throughout the department, she thought it would be difficult to find a customer's size.

Jane also noticed that one fixture holding sweaters had a conversational sign telling how special yarns were used in the sweater for added warmth.

Jane compared the presentations she had observed in the two competing stores. She decided she would get the greatest impact in her store by positioning all of the sweaters in one area, as she had seen in the first store. She liked the idea of featuring coordinating items with the sweaters to create multiple sales as she had seen in the second store. Jane also thought teaching shoppers about special product features with a conversational sign was a good idea.

In her own store, Jane decided to position the sweaters near the entrance to the store. This was a departure from the norm; casual apparel was normally merchandised toward the back of the store, and gifts were normally positioned in the front. She believed the prime selling space at the entrance should be used to feature "hot items," and the sweaters definitely qualified. She stocked the sweaters on a four-tiered table, featuring one size (small, medium, large) per shelf. This left the top shelf open, and that is where Jane took advantage of her store's gift strategy.

She presented each sweater in an open, tissue-lined gift box along with a coordinating shirt. The sweaters came in bright colors, so she found some small gift books with brightly colored covers, and matching bookmarks. She placed one in each box, and tied a string of bright raffia around the sweaters and books. Then she added a conversational sign to the shelf.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

PHASE TWO

1. List at least three things that you think Jane did right.
2. If you were in Jane's position, how would you "sell" your presentation strategy to the store manager?