## Retail as Runway

By John Wilkins

MILLER ZELL, INC.

f you stand at the end of many center-store aisles in grocery, mass, and drug (even without squinting) you might notice that they look a lot like the design work of a late 19th century librarian. Painstakingly arranged cans, boxes and jars look like they are all tidily arranged by "subject and author," executed and ordered according to the highly-structured system of Melvil Dewey in 1876.

Dewey's is a system based on logic—with an operational underpinning. Many center-store aisles today look like they are based purely on retailer

Left-brained brands should take a cue from right-brained retailers.

operational logic as well, and unfortunately the leftbrain dominance of center-store layout often leads to a dull, linear expression of the "come, find me" approach to merchandising and product presentation.

At the same time, many brands still take a very scientific and sophisticated approach to the center store. This is crucial, but often falls short of "activating" shoppers to full potential.

The growing focus on shopper marketing is helping this situation, but many marketers still have a tough time taking learnings and strategies beyond packaging, product and assortment. These are of course critical, but really powerful shopper engagement requires a physical environment and visual framework to create excitement and even add a little inspiration.

It's not enough to rely on mass communications and brand development through traditional channels like television (and even through new channels!). There must be something about the aisle in center store that creates a pull into the aisle and then provides an environment that drives trial and interaction. The current paradigm just doesn't do it well enough.

## UNLEASH PROJECT RUNWAY

To help this situation, packaged-goods brands can follow cues from the right-brained fashion industry. The fashion industry is a master of creating in-store inspiration, experience, visual draw, and environments that encourage interaction between shopper and product.

It is also very adept at many additional aspects of merchandising and in-store design. Many of these approaches serve as good models for packaged-goods companies as they develop in-store category design solutions (and potentially cross-category solutions).

Take a page from the glamour of the runway and apply it to in-store trial and events. The fashion world creates an environment that puts product combinations front-and-center, and almost on an altar. That the brand is the "hero" is not in question at all.

Consider how much more effective in-store trial and sampling could be with environments and three-dimensional elements that truly elevate product trial and make it exciting. There is plenty of evidence already showing that when high-impact graphics are combined with trial, purchases can be driven significantly.

What might happen to sales and brand equity with trial stations that really come to life and embrace design, rather then relying on a folding table with a plastic tablecloth? What if in-store sampling and promotion occasionally had some of the attitude of the cosmetics department at Lord & Taylor?

The fashion industry is also brilliant at showing



## La Choy's Fashion Sense

e recently designed and executed an in-aisle category destination for La Choy's family of packaged Asian ingredients and meal solutions. This 3-D solution has fashion sense, yet maintains a serious respect for the heritage of the brand and category.

The three-dimensional décor elements create a "pull" into the aisle for the shoppers who normally shop only the perimeter. Once there, the need states-based communications and experiential bamboo background, softtoned woods and stylized characters engage them in the category and drive incremental sales.

A hierarchy of blades and shelf-level communications provide decision-making navigation by meal-solution type, and a series of meal suggestion cards add inspiration. These integrated, eye-level messages and graphics further engage the shopper and promote trial and purchase.

The outcome of the solution was a double-digit increase in sales for the previously declining brand as well as a significant increase in total category sales. Everyone benefited — the brand, the retailer, and even complementary products and competing brands.

pride and passion for its work—passion that comes through not only on the runway, but also in its instore display work with powerful graphics, threedimensional presentations, and "take me to another world" environments. Think of the Ralph Lauren store on 72nd Street in New York, Abercrombie & Fitch, or Fred Segal in Los Angeles.

This is not to say that there are not any examples of really good retail design elements that evoke the fashion spirit of passion for product. One of these is the shelf illumination that is now built into some gondolas and aisles at CVS. This use of lighting

really does add a dimension of excitement to the presentation and elevates product as hero.

Crayola and Hallmark have also both done a great job of creating three-dimensional in-store destinations and environments that show real passion for their work and respect for product.

In a redesign of the Wal-Mart Vision Center we executed recently, we followed many of these cues. Before our redesign, frames and contact lenses were displayed by brand and in separate sections in neutral cases on neutral walls with little to no graphic communication or personality.

In the new stores, we redesigned with bold, high-impact lifestyle graphics, added color, and remerchandised according to lifestyle and lifestage rather than by manufacturer brand. We also blended frames and contact lenses in the presentation instead of keeping them apart, and developed a new lighting plan to further support an inspirational feeling as well as to assist in navigation.

## Envision the Possibilities

Several retailers, knowingly or not, are taking the same track that many apparel retailers followed in the '90s as they transformed themselves from being merchants with a small assortment of private label goods to becoming truly integrated fashion-design firms.

As part of turning their private label programs into real brands, they also brought fashion talent inhouse and hired fashion designers, sourcing managers, and pattern makers. In addition, they focused on telling the story about their new brand identity in the store with three-dimensional design work, high-impact graphics, and other elements that focused on lifestyle, life stage, and other demographic dimensions.

They also focused on creating a draw and a reason to enter the store. They emphasized (and still do), how the parts and pieces work together to create an entire outfit. In doing so, they drive higher tickets.

Aeropostale is one example of a retailer that made this transition, and Abercrombie & Fitch is another. Currently, Trader Joe's is a wonderful example of a retailer that "gets it," that is following a similar path and "tells a story," with every aspect of its merchandising, product development and store design. It's a bit reminiscent of the stories that Banana Republic used to tell, and that retailers like Ruhl and Hollister communicate so clearly through their environmental design work.

Of course, as retailers in grocery and other channels develop their private brands into "real brands," they do create a challenge for traditional consumer packaged goods companies—especially since they also control the real estate and have the direct ability to shape the environment in which their developing private brands are being showcased.

There are quite a few categories that could benefit from this approach right away, and several retailers would do well to allow their suppliers to take a bold, push-the-envelope lead in redesigning these areas of the store. One category that comes to mind is hair accessories (hair care products is another).

Since products in this category really are—or can be—fashion items in their own right, this opportunity looks like low-hanging fruit. It's an aisle that can be very hard to navigate and that is often completely lacking visual cues, color, graphics, or lighting to drive incremental sales.

Another category is office supplies and stationery. It is often a jumbled mess and lacks inspiration; it often is missing navigation as well. That's too bad because some manufacturers have done a great job in product development in this category and have actually turned some commodity products into fun items like multi-colored paper clips and sticky notes.

Health and Beauty has made a move in the right direction but could still use a boost—especially in grocery. Here, one of the skill sets of the fashion industry that is really applicable is credibility and confidence that it exudes through environmental design and graphics (*i.e.*, "if you come to us in this aisle you will learn and can be completely confident in your choice").

It would be great to see brand teams and shopper marketing teams hire some graduates of FIT, Pratt, and SCAD—or to see them add to their bench strength with a few hires from some of the apparel or accessories sectors.

They understand that helping a shopper make the leap from the accustomed to the new with an environment that supports the decision to try something new by helping her envision the possibilities.

Even though the economy is in bad shape, we still live in a surplus society, and the winners will be those who deliver experience as a significant dimension of their interaction with shoppers. Make the environment do the work (there is no labor law against making the environment work 24/7) and it is the one asset that is consistently present around the product.

Show the passion. We'll see you on the runway. ■



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