CHAPTER 6
IMPLICATIONS OF THE VISUAL MERCHANDISING IN THE MENSWEAR RETAILING

Introduction:

Visual Merchandising and its Implications to Apparel Retail Industry

Visual merchandising including store design, attempts to make optimum use of that site in terms of both exterior and interior potential. The store is the package, which contains the merchandise. Just as many product manufacturers spend as much or more effort on the package as they do on the actual product, the retailer should take special care in designing the store. If the package (the store) does not attract, entice, or at least interest the customer, the product (merchandise) will not sell. A good design helps to sell the product and a poor design stacks slow moving merchandise.

Exterior Design

As noted above, store design falls into two areas – exterior design and interior design. Exterior design is examined first since the first visual impression is given by the store’s exterior. Included for consideration under this topic are signing, marquee, type of entrance, windows, and overall appearance.

To be effective, the sign for the store must serve its identification function. It should identify the store by name and by type of store. The traditional balls on a pawnshop sign have identified this type of store for hundreds of years. The sign in front of the store should contain the name of the store and its logo and how store name is written or any symbols, which will be used to identify the store. The name of the store is very important to its success.

Consistency is also important with the logo. A message board may also be included with the sign. Many retailers who feel that they create customer interest have added these. In an appropriate situation such as for a motel, dry cleaner, or gas station located on a main traffic artery, message boards can be beneficial if handled well.

For one thing, enough fonts (sets of letters and numbers) should be purchased to spell out various messages. Second, the message should be kept current. If a message board is to be considered, policies must be developed as to how it will be used.

Marquee; a store should always have a canopy or other form of shelter over the front of the building. Such an addition will protect shoppers from the elements as well as the merchandise in the window if windows are in use. The real problem with marquees is to make them an integral part of the building—not something which appears to be bolted on as an afterthought.
One other factor is that the marquee should be high enough off the walk level so as to permit a sign under the marquee with at least an eight-foot vertical clearance. A marquee, which is too low, can be a hazard to shoppers and a problem for the retailer.

**Type of Entrance:** what type of doors and entrance area should the store have. One good rule of thumb to follow is to have only one door if at all possible; two or more entrances mean security problems and difficulty in developing an effective traffic pattern within the store.

Every door should be considered as important as any other the back exterior should be as well planned as the traditional front door.

In an interior mall location, the store can have the option of having no physical storefront with chain or glass doors used to close the store during hours of no operation. An open front gives the feeling of complete openness, which encourages the shopper to come inside and look around. Many stores today do not take advantage of what an interior mall can offer in terms of openness. Care should be taken to design the store in such a situation so the customer can see in, or better still, go in.

In a normal location, a recessed front can attract people into the store just as an open front can attract customers in a mall. The recessed front will allow passers by to look in the window without interfering with customer traffic. A recessed front is particularly helpful to an apparel store or other shopping-goods store since it gives more window area for display per store-front-foot. In addition, by having the door recessed, less congestion is created when the door is opened than if it opened into the pedestrian traffic area. The recessed front also gives weather protection when marquee is not used. One drawback to a recessed front is that it will, by its nature, serve as a place that attracts litter blown in off the street. If a recessed entrance is planned, regular cleanup should also be planned.

**Display Windows:** Windows are very important to shopping-goods stores; not as important to others. The retailer has three choices: no windows, closed-back windows and no-back windows. For some types of merchandise no windows might be appropriate such as for a high-fashion store which deals in originals.

Closed-back windows form glass-enclosed display rooms for the presentation of merchandise. Nothing in the background distracts form the items on display. The interior wall behind the windows can also be used as any other wall in the store. The opposite is true for no-back windows. The interior of the store itself becomes part of the display. Display especially designed for the window shopper may or may not be used. In addition, the no-back window is
good for security. Such windows open up the store for observation. Finally, such windows put more natural light into the store thereby giving customers a more open feeling.

**Overall Exterior Appearance:** The overall exterior of store must be tasteful and eye-catching, as well as functional. In planning the exterior, several considerations are:

6. **Size** – The building should convey the size of the business and the range of merchandise and services offered by the store.

7. **Permanence** – The exterior should project trust and dependability.

8. **Definition from its neighbors** – A unique exterior different from other firms on the block should be sought.

9. **Nature of merchandise and customer** - Everything about the store should convey the message that the store is what that particular target market is searching for.

10. **Store character** – The exterior should convey the appropriate store personality.

11. **Regional or community characteristic** – For example, if the store is located in an historical area, the exterior should be in keeping with the character of the surrounding area.

The Indian industry is still in the stage where it needs to define visual merchandising. Though visual merchandising has emerged on the international scene as one of the most important arms of retailing, it is still struggling to establish an identity in India. It is still mistaken for the art of window displaying. Contrary to popular belief, visual merchandising is not the equivalent of window display. But window display is just about eight per cent of visual merchandising. Visual merchandising is a perfect understanding of one's business strategy filtered into highly creative solutions. Everything can be perceived that meets the eye of a customer as a part of VM. The way merchandise is displayed, SKUs (stock keeping units), colours and sequence blocks, different density levels – everything is VM. It includes not only the products on sale but also the décor of the outfit, the shop flooring and ceilings, the restrooms and trial rooms, staff uniforms, lipstick colour of female personnel, and tie-knots of male personnel. It is also inclusive of the attitude of the personnel who interact with customers. Hence, everything that makes a visual impact on the prospective customer is part of VM.

**Implications of Visual Merchandising:**
VM is the most useful creative art as far as retail business is concerned – be it a department store or a specialty store. It gives a business an edge over competition. It is an essential tool of retail business.
Strategically used, VM can even create a brand identity. It establishes a connection between merchandise and fashion. The right kind of VM boosts the sales graph rise upwards by projecting a true brand image. This is achieved by creating an environment not only to attract a customer but also to retain his/her interest, create desire, and finally augment the selling process. It is better to be called as investment because its benefits reflect on the balance sheet. A wise investment can boost the profits while a wrong one can impair business prospects. So, to make it work in the retailers’ favour one need to strategise first. Facts like purchasing habits, buying power, and patterns of the clientele have to be researched in advance. The retailers also must take into consideration the product-line, its quantity, and the cost. Based on all these a concept should be worked out. And then the retailers should do the costing and allocate funds to achieve the desired effect.

The purpose of VM is often lost if budgets are fixed first and then a concept is worked out within the given monetary constraints. The compromises made in such cases make for a bad investment.

Another aspect of VM is training and maintenance. These two go hand in hand. A good concept will start withering if not maintained. Since regular maintenance is entrusted in the hands of the staff, it is imperative to impart them the requisite training. Unlike other departments, the accountability factor is not attached to VM. If this field has to grow, ways must be devised to weigh the efforts that go into it and the results accrued. VM is an ongoing process. One needs to change constantly. However, intervals can differ from establishment to establishment. International standards support a 30-45 day cycle. The reason is that repeat customers usually visit an establishment after a gap of about that many days. However, there are establishments that follow seasonal or fashion cycles. For example, in India a seasonal cycle is the one that is usually followed. Hence, VM is at its peak during festival seasons like Diwali and Dussehra. Essentially, visual merchandisers can be grouped in two categories – the profound kind, and the cut-paste artiste.

A good visual merchandiser also has the sourcing skills, knowledge of raw material, and skilled artistic labour at disposal. This calls for creative management. And, to bridge the gap between creativity and availability one needs to export, import, fabricate, and manufacture. This is the area where a VM studio plays a crucial role.

Unlike the West, where VM receives the highest priority in commercial planning of a product, Indian industry’s understanding and practice of VM is rather rudimentary. We are still stuck
with the mannequin in a welcoming, namaste posture. It has been even noticed that due to the paucity of trained professionals, institutes hire people with little knowledge of the art. This, on one hand, results in incompetence and on the other affects promoters’ faith in VM in general and in Indian visual merchandisers in particular. It is believed that the Indian retail industry gave birth to VM, but left it an orphan. It has been observed that the retailers creating window displays with absurd briefs and within ridiculous budgets resulting in utter absurdity and incoherence. And then there is this amateur lot that still gets away with thermocol butterflies, and believes that dressing a traditional namaskar mannequin in a miniskirt will attract the right kind of people. There are some big retailers who are beginning to realise the need of VM and allocate healthy budgets to attain results. In the recent times Indian retailers like Shoppers Stop, Pantaloons and Westside are doing their VM maintaining the international standards.

With the expected phasing out of quantitative restrictions, the textile industry will have to compete purely on basis of the competitive edge of the products. VM can serve as a helpful tool in projecting the uniqueness of products and thereby augment market access and sales. It is high time that the Indian textile and clothing industry understands and adopts scientific and professional systems of VM.

It is about time that industry changes its mindset and realises the importance of VM. Promoters need to have an inclination and reasonable budgets. They should try to make an organised effort in VM that should effectively help in strong brand building process.

**Conclusion**

Visual Merchandising sends the message to the targeted customers of the retailers about the product offerings and the merchandise range reflecting the positioning strategies of the marketers. But in most number of cases it has been found that the retailers could not reflect according to their business model through VM.

When the shoppers were asked about their likings of the visual display most of them expressed satisfaction regarding retailers like Pantaloons, Shoppers Stop and some EBOs. Although Wills Lifestyle claims that they change their VM every fifteen days but in the reality it seldom happens. The retailers mostly lack in theme of display.

With globalisation and impending free trade policies, the Indian retail industry has no choice but to wake up to the need for VM. Already, Indian society, attaining an international outlook is subconsciously creating demand for VM. The consumer now demands state of the art service, global standard of the product, and international level of shopping experience. This
changeover is compelling Indian promoters to meet the demand or give in to international competition. These are the following observations were made during the research on the Visual Merchandising in the Kolkata apparel retail market:

*Decrease in the use of formal window presentation:* Except for the downtown flagships, where the parallel-to-sidewalk window configuration still is prominent, the new retail structures leave much less formal window space.

*Greater attention to interior visual merchandising:* Instead of just relying on formal interior displays to attract attention, more retailers are paying close attention to the way in which the merchandise is featured on racks and counters. At the end of the apparel racks, they are featuring the merchandise the rack holds and are accessorizing the clothing to give shoppers a better idea of how an outfit will look on it. Also in around store entrances, escalator landings and elevator stops, displays are used to quickly show the shoppers what are awaiting them in the adjacent sales departments.

*Return to traditional Mannequins:* While abstract and stylized forms have been successful in recent years and are still used in some retail operations, the traditional mannequins are returning to windows and interiors of the vast majority of upscale fashion emporiums.

*Increased use of low-voltage lighting:* Without having to sacrifice true colours, low-voltage innovative types of lightings have become the increasing choice of visual merchandisers because they give off less heat and result in energy or maintenance savings. With operating cost continually increasing, using low-voltage lighting is one way the retailer can minimise expenses without loosing the benefit of traditional light sources.

*Significant use of Graphics:* With their minimal costs and ease in production, retailers are turning to a variety of graphics for their visual programs, available in all almost every size, including the larger than life types. Many major retail construction sites use these oversized graphics to announce the impending store opening since they are weather proof and can be seen from great distances. Retailers are also using more backlit transparencies to give the graphics the benefit of twenty-four hour lighting and to make them seem more lifelike.

*Point of purchase fixturing:* The selling departments in most major fashion retail operations are becoming increasingly popular as venues for point-of-purchase displays. Replete with interactive video, gondolas, and closed circuit video and counter top cases, these displays brings all type of fashion merchandise to the shopper's attention.
Vendor participation in retail visual merchandising: Many brands are giving retailers special fixtures and display materials to distinguish their collections from the others in the store. In this way, they can control the visual merchandising of their own lines. Retailers are receptive to their own arrangements since it reduces their own expenses.

Role of VM in Promotion of Fashion

Throughout the planning of the entire retail process, it is important to keep in mind that a continuing promotional program should be established and executed. The best stores, with the best policies and goods, can succeed only if the customer knows the store is there and has a good current idea of what merchandise is available. No area of retailing is more dependent on promotion than fashion product like menswear. Following are some of the specific objectives of fashion merchandisers and sales personnel through visual merchandising:

1. To communicate the store image to its target customers
2. To establish the store as a distinct fashion authority
3. To build long-term customer loyalty
4. To generate interest that will bring a steady flow of regular and new customers to the store.
5. To disseminate timely fashion information and become a source of news of innovations.
6. To remind customers of their desire for new things.
7. To encourage customers of their desire for new things.
8. To persuade customers to make purchase decisions.
9. To sell the merchandise to customers
10. To achieve reasonable profit.

Basically, fashion promotion is a process carried out so that people can learn where to purchase the supporting artifacts of life that will make them into the individuals they want to be. Timeliness is the essential ingredient of fashion promotion, accompanied by good taste and high drama. Fashion promotions should be exciting because they depict the newest, the latest, and the very “now” tangibles. Fashion promotion in its best manner persuades the customer to enthusiastically embrace the new.