

A New Generation of Graphics

In-store applications are critical to retail marketing



Good Guys stores feature a decorative design package that informs customers of the merchandise mix.

There is a revolution going on. It's a different way of thinking about designing stores and communicating a brand message. This approach is being spotted in all categories of merchandise and types of stores.

While not entirely new, it's an intensified focus that retailers need to consider: utilizing graphics as decor in place of architectural details, and relying on features and benefits signage to replace sales staff.

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Whether driven by reduced construction and operating budgets, or simply a vehicle to accomplish a strategy, the trend seems to be spreading. Industry surveys show that 30% of respondent retailers expect to expand their use of in-store graphics.

Target Stores greet customers with multi-part banners carrying the same messages as current advertising. Select departments create an entirely new visual presentation by installing thematic backdrops to typical gondola shelves.

Sporting-goods retailers Foot Locker and Finish Line are using die-cut panels

of colored stock attached to wall fixtures through which display hardware is attached. In a simple operation of re-merchandising a fixture, an entirely new mood can be created. During the recent holiday season, a West Coast Sephora store adhered pastel-green graphics on half the surface of its fixtures, creating a striking green-and-white decor package.

Good Guys stores have incorporated a decorative and highly consumer-focused communication package that informs the shopper on the comparative advantages of different products. The features and benefits messages and signholders perfectly complement the high-tech merchandise.

As traditional signage is too often ignored by the customer, each of these examples is intended to make the store easier to shop. The use of effective graphics is emerging

as an important element in the designers' toolbox of techniques.

It also is apparent that retailers have embraced the notion that graphics should be installed or updated by store staff; self-installation usually is done by the 'last guy hired.' Therefore, print media and print-production companies are working with designers to make the installation of their graphic ideas easy, even with a minimum skill level. Savings are being realized in implementation budgets by the use of attaching devices or self-adhesive printing stock.

Coincidentally, store footprints are

becoming more rectangular, lacking architectural focal walls and feature areas usually necessary to create emphasis in a store. Godiva's Beverly Center store started out as a plain box, and then added Art Nouveau-inspired wall graphics to reflect its ornate wall fixture design. Apple stores' clean design is only interrupted by eye-catching perimeter wall murals and see-through scrims in the windows, which attract customers to the range of products available.

In existing stores, graphics can tie together diverse architectural features. The award-winning store at the San Diego Zoo created a soffit in front of the many different wall sections constructed during the store's lifetime. This soffit then reintroduced a mural of the store's thematic green bamboo over-printed with quotes from the world's great environmentalists, reflecting the zoo's conservation mission.

Contributing to this revolution are significant advances in material and printing technology, intended to reduce constraints on designers' creative capabilities. What is envisioned for a creative message can be realized with today's technology. Paper stock, durable inks and finish coating can be assembled in any number of combinations to fit a specific application.

"Mass customization can occur," says Tom Black, director of business development for 3M Graphics Products. "You don't necessarily have to have a standardized message, size or volume."

"With digital printing, a retailer can manipulate the message per store," Black adds. "Per-unit costs go up, but

per-unit return is much higher because it's not just a standard piece, which doesn't attract customers' attention in some markets. The presentation can be customized to fit local needs."

Developments in silkscreen printing also have contributed to target messaging, and increased cost-effectiveness in large and smaller quantities. From a comfort zone that mostly involved outdoor banners, the newest generation of print equipment in the hands of a top production company, combined with designers' desire to explore the limits, is resulting in projects that rival the best high-end printer jobs. They could be

cific products to demonstrate promotional activity.

Traditionally, small products have difficulty enticing passers-by. Retailers are finding that oversized images of small merchandise exposes the product best. Shirley Litman, senior project manager, Vomar Architectural Signage, and judge of several Institute of Store Planners design competitions, has noted an increase in innovative signage used by contest entrants.

"In order to make an impact, these retailers use large graphics, maybe a lifestyle image, very bold, as an antithesis to the small size of the product.

This acts to entice the customer, as well as tell a product story as silent salespersons," says Litman.

In the end, retail designers need to embrace the new generation of graphics and partner with in-house or consultant graphic designers and innovative production firms, to the advantage of the retailer and the customer. As evidence, professor Raymond Burke, speaking at the recent NRF convention, shared his research on "Creat-



Good Guys' signage helps shoppers compare the features of the chain's high-tech products.

seen in projects as diverse as home improvement centers and outlet stores, trendy fashion chains and sporting-goods retailers.

Content in graphics also is changing, focusing on communicating the message that best fits the retailers' theme or purpose. Once again, market customization can be useful as it is estimated that up to 50% of distributed POP isn't used because retailers believe it is not locally relevant. Also disappearing are lifestyle photos of nameless people using generic products. Today, some retailers, with the help of regular updating, feature spe-

ing the Ideal Shopping Experience," which reveals that customers want information and direction in the shopping environment (whether they leave the store when in-store communication is missing currently is being researched).

In-store graphic communication provides cost-effective, yet highly sophisticated, solutions to branding the store and entertaining the customer. Best of all, the visual solutions are entirely up to the theme you choose—active, historical, high-tech, etc.—so graphics are one of the few universal solutions available to every retailer to solve all their presentation and branding needs. ■