

AS SEEN IN  
enLIGHTenment  
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# THE MIX MASTER

Lighting is the perfect complement to the variety of appliances offered by this Northeast retailer for the past 92 years. BY MARK OKUN



It's the Friday before Labor Day weekend and the weather is beautiful as I pull into the parking lot of Yale Appliance + Lighting's new showroom in Framingham, Massachusetts. My first impression is a good one, as I immediately notice the attention to detail given to the exterior. The parking lot is clean and the outdoor display area features a vast selection of Weber® gas grills. I'm glad I had time to take a look at these beauties!

This location – along Route 9 in Framingham – is a heavily travelled thoroughfare featuring some of the best and brightest retailers regionally and nationally nearby. Yale is definitely in good company here.

Since I'm roughly 20 minutes early for my scheduled appointment with CEO Steve Sheinkopf, I spend some time walking the outside of the building. As a lifelong retailer, I know the parking lot and entry make a major impression on the customer. I'm happy to report that when you arrive at Yale, you immediately realize you are about to enter a store that puts thought into, and takes pride in, the way they want customers to feel.

square feet of showroom space between the two locations (the original store is in the historic Boston neighborhood of Dorchester) plus a mammoth strategically located distribution center, it's clear Yale is ready to do some business.

Over the years their customer has changed in many ways, most notably becoming more price-conscious and brand-aware. Yale has kept pace with consumers' desires and taken steps to provide the service and information they demand, making YALE the brand.

### NEW WORLD, NEW APPROACH

Steve says the old "word of mouth advertising" customers have done in the past has been replaced – and in fact is now supercharged – by Web sites such as Yelp and Google Reviews. Remember that old rule of 250 people that a customer may tell about their shopping experience with you? It has been blown up by the Internet to be more like the rule of "250 million views."

Review sites can be a tough gauntlet to navigate; I know some of the best companies in the retail business world and they all address negative posts

**OPPOSITE PAGE TOP:** When customers enter Yale, they are warmly greeted at the reception desk by Liz.

Within each vignette, accessories such as artwork, casual furniture, area rugs, pillows, and a complementary background wall help the customer envision the styles on display in their home.

I can sum up how Yale keeps its staff hitting consistently high marks with customers in one word: **Communication.**

As I walk in, I am greeted by Liz at the reception desk – and by the smell of something delicious being baked! Liz, who has a smile as bright as any of the lights in the store, lets me know that Steve would be with me as soon as he wrapped up the morning management meeting with the staff. This was yet another clue as to why this retailer grabbed two industry awards in 2015.

Steve comes over to me with a big smile and insists that I have a hot chocolate from their automated beverage dispenser. The hot chocolate was good, too. Baked goods and hot chocolate: These are great touches that make a memorable impact on the client!

To me, it's plain to see how this business – which was founded in 1923 – has grabbed ahold of the 21st Century and is leading the way as a customer-focused destination. With a combined 45,000

on review sites. It is now a given, a known rule. What impresses me is that Steve himself – and not a designated staffer – addresses the complaint immediately with the goal of creating a satisfied customer. Hold on, it gets better. Steve often addresses the positive reviews as well, thanking the customers for their review. This is a magic moment you rarely see occur from any retailer large or small – taking the time to thank the *happy* customer. You must applaud senior leadership at Yale for being hands on and pro-active in these situations. By doing this, Yale is setting the service standard in the retail sector that their competition must follow if they want to stay relevant in this customer-centric environment.

I can sum up how Yale keeps its staff hitting consistently high marks with customers in one word: Communication. They hold sales meetings several

**OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM:** When browsing a store full of lighting fixtures, it can be hard for customers' eyes to focus on each style. Yale created a bookcase-like arrangement that gives each fixture emphasis. In showrooms with high ceilings, it also keeps the selection at a perfect viewing height for the customers.

Pendants aren't the only lighting on display in the customer-friendly beverage and snack area. The working kitchen is also ideal for demonstrating accent lighting under the range hood, toe-kick, under cabinets, and under a countertop ledge.

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days a week to convey various messages to their workforce. Whether it is a new idea or product information, they keep their people engaged and informed. The result is a better overall customer experience.

The positive message at Yale is shared in other ways, such as the motivational quotes painted on the hallway walls in the employee areas. From my perspective, Yale appreciates everyone on staff and understands that all of them are equally important when creating a phenomenal 360-degree customer experience.

**SHARING KNOWLEDGE**

There is more than communication that contributes to the success of Yale Appliance + Lighting. The sales team also assumes the role of educators for

their targeted consumer. Yale puts this initiative into practice through short YouTube videos or by updating their blog with posts that drive potential customers to their Web site. These videos and blogs are deliberately produced in a manner that positions the Yale team as experts in their respective categories.

As a side note, in a recent article I wrote for this magazine about the changing sales process (i.e. rapport building), I am happy to report that Yale “gets” it. They are building rapport with the shopper before they enter the store by sharing information that is wanted and needed by the customer before it is ever asked for.

Yale sales associate Jessica Petrino tells me how the impact of creating and sharing knowledge makes a positive impression on clients and how these actions have propelled her to great success — including being selected in 2015 as a member of the NKBA’s “30 under 30” young people to watch in the industry.

Basically, every time a client or potential customer interacts with any Yale team member, the goal is to provide education and an extraordinary customer experience. And I do mean every team member, too. Each sales associate must produce relative content for the store’s blog at least once a month. Creating blog content helps new associates with the learning process plus builds their confidence when presenting products to customers.

Yale employees understand that the items they sell have longevity in their customers’ homes and that most of their customers want to be educated about the products they are buying. To further that effort, in addition to the blogs the sales team produces, Yale offers 25 “buying guides” that cover the categories and brands they have available. Each of these buying guides can be downloaded from the Yale Web site by the customer, which then generates leads for the sales team. The buying guides are another way that Yale reaches the client and builds a bond before he or she ever enters the showroom.

**APPEAL TO THE SENSES**

With all this work to attract the customer into the stores, Yale doesn’t stop there. It keeps the bar high when they visit. Customers are offered a beverage from a state-of-the-art hot beverage machine (hot chocolate) or chilled drinks from a cooler. While some retailers provide coffee and cookies, Yale sets the bar higher with baked goods and professional



**ABOVE:** Besides isolating individual fixtures, there are also vignettes that group certain “looks” together to help customers envision a particular motif. For example, Industrial-style lighting is underscored with background walls featuring corrugated tin and wooden pallets.



**RIGHT:** Steve Sheinkopf, CEO of Yale Appliance + Lighting



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“My goal has always been simple: I want Yale to be the best retail experience anywhere. I have tried to create a compelling environment for customers and employees.”

— Steve Sheinkopf

Clean, contemporary lines in wall sconces are emphasized in this enclosure, which minimizes other visual distractions in the showroom.

chefs who prepare delicious food in the demonstration kitchens, which are set up with working appliances and lighting. The customers see the appliances they want in an atmosphere lit with lighting they like; there's no need to stretch the imagination.

Sheinkopf says, “My goal has always been simple: I want Yale to be the best retail experience anywhere. I have tried to create a compelling environment for customers and employees.”

For the most part, lighting as a category is displayed separately from the appliances. Even the way lighting is displayed is indicative of the thought process at Yale. Vignettes of fine cabinetry are the backdrop for the displays which show off the decorative lighting.

From a pure business perspective, I admire the selection of products Yale has on display and from a merchandising point of view, there are three points I would like to drive home.

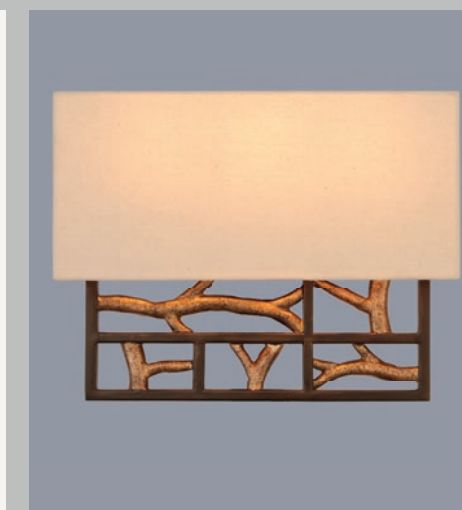
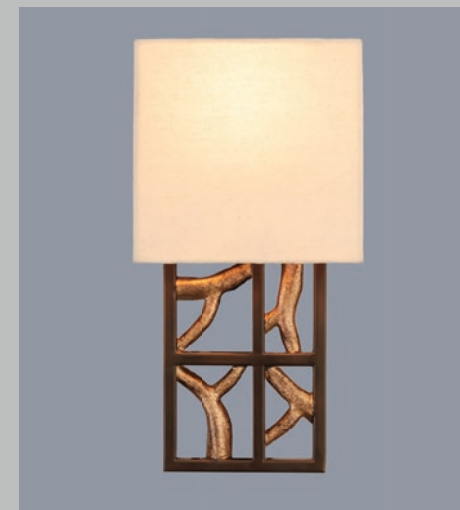
One, the lighting is displayed in a way that allows the customer to not only see each lamp or fixture, but to feel how it will be in their home. Yale has embraced display as an art form — and it does not mean less is more, it means that the thought and effort put into the displays is more aligned with the great window displays of Macy's or Gimbels, or the famous window dressers of the past such as

Armani and Warhol.

Two, while Yale has dedicated great space to leading industry brands, you will be hard pressed to find any brand names on the displays or on the product information easels. Instead, Yale is the brand, the associate is the guide, and with the up-front trust the company creates with the customer they are not focused on who makes the light. They know if Yale carries the line, it must be great.

Three, Yale utilizes their digital dexterity in a way that most do not — through the growing process of inbound marketing. This hits home with me. Through marketing and advertising, they strive to have (TOMA) top of the mind awareness for the customer when their products and services are needed or for referral. Yale has grabbed this idea and blown it up. The message Yale subscribes to is educating the customer to make the best decisions they can with the help of a skilled and knowledgeable professional. The inclusion of the digital aspect has taken that practice and brought it to hundreds of thousands of people each month.

When you look at all the effort and work put in by the Yale team, it is no wonder they are industry award winners and recognized by some of today's greatest marketing gurus as a leader not only in appliances and lighting, but in retail as a whole. ❖



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