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Owned by the Whitfield family since 1984, Magnolia Lighting has grown from its original 800-sq.-ft. showroom to an 8,000-sq.-ft. flagship plus two additional locations.



BY MARK OKUN

# MAGNOLIA Blossoms

It was cold and raining when I approached the massive building that houses Magnolia Lighting in Hernando, Mississippi. As I entered, I was kindly greeted by a wonderful woman, Cheryl Ward, whom I can only describe as a lovely woman who embodies the dictionary definition of Southern charm and hospitality. Her greeting was accented by the warm and welcoming appearance of the showroom.

Magnolia Lighting is a family-owned business operated by Pam Whitfield and her staff. Established in 1984 as a small showroom, the company has since blossomed into three distinctive locations in Mississippi: Hernando – which also contains the central distribution warehouse – plus one store in Oxford and the other in Tupelo.

Each store has its own distinct flavor and character while still reflecting Magnolia Lighting’s personality, and each features vignettes that allow customers to see and experience how the fixtures complement a home’s interior design. The displays vary in size as do the showrooms, but they pack a pop. The themes stay consistent as Midge Smith goes from location to location, keeping the design feeling flowing.

Hernando is the flagship store and home base for Magnolia Lighting, with its warehousing and operations located here in addition to the 8,000-sq.-ft. showroom. Understandably, this showroom is largest of the three and displays the most product.

The Oxford store is laid out well and offers the best of the best within its 2,000-sq.-ft. display space. It makes the best use of the large computer monitors, simplifying the use of its online catalog which lets the customer see the coordinating pieces for the items on display.

It was there that I met Jay Roberts, who is passionate about the store, the company, and the customers they have. The merchandise fits well within a small space, which is done in a way that allows customers to see everything without the presentation looking crowded.

Opened in 2015, the Tupelo location is the proverbial “new kid” on the Magnolia Lighting block, occupying 6,000 square feet in a former NESCO showroom. Stephanie Hester has been in this showroom for many years prior to Magnolia Lighting taking over, and she says the changes have been very positive not only for her, but also her colleagues Kim and M.J. as well as the Tupelo community they serve.

With showrooms that range in size, it takes a tremendous amount of work to maintain the Magnolia theme throughout each. This is where Whitfield and her team have grabbed technology and used it for all it has to offer. For example, those large screen monitors that are connected to the store’s e-catalog are a simple, easy access tool that lets the salespeople provide immediate images of coordinating families and complementary fixtures.

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1: The entrance to Magnolia Lighting exudes a “warm” feeling with its brick reception area and wood plank flooring. 2: Merchandise is carefully placed into vignette sections to keep customers from feeling overwhelmed by the selection. 3: Pam Whitfield (left) and Cheryl Ward are proud of their Hernando showroom, which is the company’s flagship store. 4: Keeping the brand visible is important. 5 & 6: These vignettes are just some of the many examples of how a fully accessorized presentation helps to sell additional merchandise.

By essentially expanding their displays electronically, each location has the opportunity to let the customer see at least one physical sample while being exposed to the whole collection. Whitfield says this tool has led to multiple-item sales, a better overall customer experience, and improved sales performance.

When the company expanded its footprint by purchasing the former NESCO showroom in Tupelo, Magnolia also broadened its product offerings to include door hardware. “The rekindling of the economy has set our sights on growth,” Whitfield states. And with that growth comes the need to be structured and to incorporate systems and processes.

Magnolia Lighting uses their ERP system to create a variety of reports, including its back-order report, which not only provides them with super results but also builds confidence with their customer base.

One of Magnolia’s goals is to ship orders 100-percent complete. That can be a tall order when showrooms face just-in-time inventory models from vendors, container ships on the water, and the general flow of merchandise – but this team is very successful as they proactively track down the status of the goods their clients ordered. While the follow-up with vendors can be tenacious, the customer benefits by having a partner who is proactively getting their goods, and – at the worst – letting them know when there is a delay in having an item ready for delivery and offering solutions.

It is all about the service you get at Magnolia Lighting. As Operations Manager John Wylie notes, “We thrive on customer service, and we want to treat each customer like family.”

While the Whitfields take great pride in their family business, they also take pride in the people who work for them. Some employees have been with the company for years, like Chase McNatt who has been with Magnolia Lighting for 17 years. I met Chase as I was walking through the warehouse; he is a vibrant and pleasant man who exudes positivity. The warehouse of any type of business is a powerful indicator about the company and Magnolia’s is clean, neat, and organized. The space is very well-lit, making it easy to locate products on the multi-tiered warehouse racking.

Having good systems in place is a must for lighting retailers and Magnolia Lighting has one of the



(At left) Jay Roberts welcomes sales representative Marcus Appel, from Lighting Sales of Memphis, to the Oxford store.



Staff members at the Tupelo location are eager to help customers.



best RGA systems in place I have witnessed. The system keeps the process moving and is designed with the purpose to keep this fiscally important aspect of the business in check. The goal is to get the merchandise back onto the warehouse shelves quickly and efficiently for customers to purchase.

In the world of physical and digital lighting showrooms, there are many that look alike. What separates Magnolia Lighting from the pack is its commitment to the way they interact with people – both customers and their staff. Respect and pride come to mind as I witnessed the customers being attended to and how the staff interacts with each other.

The next distinctive quality that Magnolia Lighting has is the effort put into the displays. The magic that drives traffic to a brick and mortar showroom in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the promise of an experience, and those displays deliver. Themes of the displays span from “Tastefully Traditional” and “Urban Chic” to “Mountaintop Manor.” Customers can pick out a complete vignette, move it into their home, and be delighted with the way it looks.

Lights are not just hung from the ceiling and mounted on walls; the displays have been set up with meticulous forethought and planning. The attention to detail given to the coordinating furniture – down to the smallest of accents such as pillows, mirrors, and decorative accessories – make it easy for customers to want it all. You can even find jewelry and CeCe Caldwell’s Paints, a line that is in high demand according to Whitfield. When attracting customers to any lighting store, it may take more than lighting to get them in. I have seen many lighting stores provide associated items for sale, but I have never seen a specialty paint line offered. It is a big draw; each location has CeCe Caldwell’s Paints and when I visited, customers were in the stores for that specific item.

What also separates Magnolia Lighting from the competition is its tremendous commitment to having stock in place for the customers’ immediate needs. “We commit to our vendors as we do to our customers,” Whitfield states. This is demonstrated by being loyal to suppliers and supporting them by display and stocking in depth.

Then there is the Semi-Annual Sale event that Magnolia Lighting holds. I am not a fan of the word “sale” as I feel it is overused – except when a sale truly is a sale, and that’s how sales are done here. People line up at the door, waiting to get in



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because Magnolia doesn’t scream Sale or discount all year. The Semi-Annual Sale is a special event, a true sale. The only time customers can purchase items at these discounted prices is when the sale is in progress, and it only lasts for three days, twice a year.

There is one word that best describes all the great things that happen at Magnolia Lighting, and that word is “consistency.” It is the consistency in which the displays throughout their showrooms are set up, the consistency in the desire of the staff to best serve their customers, and the consistency of communication that Magnolia has with its people.

The Whitfields and their lighting family go to Markets with the expressed desire to serve their customers. Likewise, their customers make the trip to come into Magnolia’s stores over and over again because of the feeling that they get when shopping there. In sort, Magnolia Lighting offers more than lighting, fans, and home décor – they offer inspiration. ❖

Owner Pam Whitfield demonstrates the effectiveness of having large computer screens throughout the showroom so customers can view complementary items in each collection.