

AS SEEN IN
enLIGHTenment
MAGAZINE
AUGUST 2017

Are You Keeping Up With Retail Trends?



It's not just product styles that are continually changing; the way consumers are shopping for goods is also evolving.

BY MARK OKUN

One thing is certain, the world of retail is still changing at a rapid rate. Every day the news reports that a shopping mall is closing or that near death is imminent. The familiar big box names we grew up with – Radio Shack, Sears, J.C. Penney, and more – are closing locations at breakneck speed.

When the “overstored” retail giants are not closing locations, they are shuttering operations altogether, such as The Limited, Wet Seal, and American Apparel.

So, what does the demise of these retail mammoths have in common with most lighting retailers? Not as much as you may think. Once you pull back the curtain of products on display in their big box setting, the advantage of the niche retailer is apparent.

GET ON THE B.U.S.S.

I see four trends in the way showrooms interface with clients; as time moves forward, these core functions will be advantages to niche retailers.

The current trends in retail bow to the lighting stores' strengths: **Boutique**, **Unique**, **Specialized**, and **Social**.

As for the rationale that supports these distinct retail trends, there have been seven solid years in which customers have been able to find detailed product-specific information online.

For that reason, lighting showrooms *must* become attractive to customers, and the B.U.S.S. makes that happen.

BOUTIQUE

There are several differences between a boutique and a standard retail store; the first is size. Boutiques take up a smaller physical footprint, and this makes an impact on the items displayed as well as the inventory held.

If you own or are in a long-term lease of a large format store, it is important to address the size issue head on. I'm not suggesting that you close your large store to open an intimate boutique-style business; instead, I propose that you make mini-boutiques within your current location.

Sometimes we must think small to be big. The future trend is for smaller retail footprints with a curated appearance and are niche-focused on the market being served. This is a result of the digital age coming into bloom.

These spaces can be focused on either a vendor or a category, but they must be curated with a boutique feel. I recently visited Nebraska Furniture Mart in Dallas; it's a huge showroom, and one thing they did well was to create a boutique feel when you entered various departments or vendor-specific areas.

Business publications buzz that specialty stores are better than the big box stores because of their agility; they have a concentrated niche that they are expert in and they can be on trend with their offerings quickly. This will give lighting stores the advantage as we continue into the second decade of digital changes.

Online shopping (a.k.a. hours of digital discovery) has provided the client with the ability to pare down in-store shopping time. Narrowing down their selection digitally has reduced the amount of people aimlessly walking through displays of

merchandise that do not appeal to them and consumes their precious time. Thus, a smaller store provides time-conscious clients with an easy-to-navigate floor plan of specific selections.

With so many legacy businesses in the lighting industry unable to re-create themselves in a smaller footprint, what is a large format store to do? Divide the space to create mini-stores inside the larger one. Dedicate an area that is focused on the lifestyle enhancements that a product or category can provide.

The ability to present items that are peripheral to the main categories and can be cross-sold is an additional opportunity. Think of BBQ grills and Adirondack chairs accenting the lighting designs in the outdoor lifestyle display.

Both small showrooms and sectioned, larger footprint stores provide a more comfortable and personal environment for the client, making it easier to build a relationship with them, too.

UNIQUE

Your space should include categories that you are passionate about. This is the place to show off the unique product niches of our industry and that complement your store's personality.

Take a chance on displaying some cutting-edge technology or fashion-forward designs. Assertively promoting the uniqueness you bring to the market is a real benefit; it delivers potential customers the message that you are different than the competition around you and online.

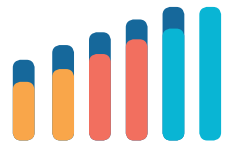
Implement a unique way to attract clients. The methods of the past – print, TV, and billboards – have lost their punch in the digital revolution. Old strategies do not work in the battle for people's attention in social news feeds.

People will scroll by your sales-y ads as quickly as they drive by the billboard they didn't see.

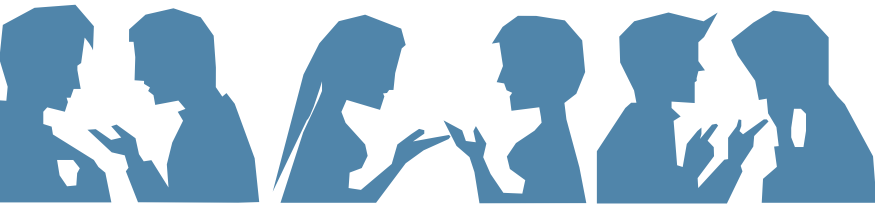
SPECIALIZED

Industry expertise is an area that lighting retailers can stand out. Whether it's control systems or the latest advancements in SSL, as an industry, we stay on the cusp of specialized lighting knowledge.

Clients know little about the details, regardless of the number of Web sites they visit. This is an opportunity to stake your claim as the local expert. Specialized knowledge extends into the way we communicate. It is said, “You can't see the forest for the trees,” and this applies to the everyday lighting “emergencies” we face.



The future trend is for smaller retail footprints with a curated appearance and are niche-focused on the market being served.



Digital media has crept into every part of our lives, making the ability to interact face to face with clients a required skill set.

For example, customers would return to our store because they thought a 3-way lamp was “defective,” however, they did not realize the 3-way was energized based on a mechanical toggle — one firm twist to the right and presto, the “defective” lamp was working. Similarly, when LED tape was installed with reverse polarity, the resultant house call to the DIY’er was a flip of the wires. Each time, the client was embarrassed for not knowing what seemed so obvious. This is the time to be empathetic. When you deliver this type of lesson to a customer with the correct level of compassion, they look to you as an expert resource.



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Family conversations can be directed to discover who the family members in the home are and how the home is used. If the client hosts parties or holidays at home, talk about the memories being made there under a new chandelier or the benefit of good task lighting.

Occupational questions give insight into the person you’re speaking with. The simple act of being interested in the other person’s life will build rapport with them, which is a goal for every client encounter.

As an example, if the customer responds “I am a chef” when you ask “What do you do?” some of the insights available to continue to build a conversation are:

- The restaurant
- The type of food served
- The training they had (either school or on-the-job training)
- Any questions that focus on their experience or career will tell you how lighting impacts their professional life

Recreation and leisure activities are close to every customer’s heart. Find out what they enjoy doing and if you have similar interests, it is another rapport builder.

Like “**occupation**,” this side conversation has little to do with selling and everything to do with discovery and demonstrating to the client you are a human being just like them.

A personal bonus for you is when you build a conversation around activities that you and the client enjoy.

Dreams of my customer or, more aptly stated, “What is their vision?” The easiest way to find out is to ask. When you know their view, you can present all the details of your products, services, and a company that fulfills the client’s dreams.

THE CHOICE IS YOURS

To follow or not to follow trends is a choice. The battle for the retail dollar is being spread across multiple lines of distribution — and those lines are blurring.

To survive, showrooms must stand out and the only way to do that is incorporate new actionable strategies. Every trend may not resonate with you, but one or two just may. Put your unique spin on these modern trends and make them yours to help you differentiate your business from the crowd. ❖

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