

AS SEEN IN
enLIGHTenment
MAGAZINE
AUGUST 2019



Store Experience or Experience Store?

The word “experience” has been over-used in describing successful retail practices, but how does it apply to lighting showrooms? BY MARK OKUN

Over the last few years, there has been much discussion on the topic of the in-store “retail experience.” Many of us have come away with more questions than answers. For example, What is an in-store experience? How is an experience created that drives traffic into your showroom? What is the re-defined role of the showroom in 2020?

One crucial point to express early in this article is that there is a place for brick & mortar showrooms in the marketplace in 2020 and beyond. As the consumer relies upon – as well as demands – more and more from the internet as part of their overall shopping activity, the role of the physical showroom must adapt to the digital influence that is part of our everyday life.

Let’s re-evaluate strategies and processes to take advantage of the power the digital platforms provide. If the customer wants to go to a store, buy the item they want, and leave with no hassles... they only need the online resellers. When they visit a showroom, they want to be entertained and educated.

STORE EXPERIENCE

I think the vagueness of the term “Store Experience” has caused many showrooms to avoid engaging in the hard and different work it will take to create memorable customer impressions. The differentiating factor between the “good old days” and today is the moment in time that the showroom becomes a factor in the overall clients’ journey. In the past, their first experience with our products and services was when they entered the showroom. Today, customers can have hundreds, if not thousands, of product and lifestyle impressions without leaving their homes. The showroom has been ousted from the primary position in the buying process to a “possible” point in the buying process.

The convenience provided by our digital devices has caused a shift in both the time and place that the showroom can become engaged in the buying process. There is a caveat that must be addressed. There are many experiential models that can be followed, and it is increasingly more difficult to be everything to everybody. By selecting one to three areas of experiential focus, you can directly relate to a broader client base.

Our showrooms and featured products are

taking on the characteristics similar to that of the jewelry and fashion industries – and I suggest taking a cue from the leading retailers in these areas: get emotional.

While technology plays a significant role in the way we go to market, it is the emotion we evoke in potential clients with our displays, our level of service, and the energy that is generated inside the showroom. These three qualities will anchor the feelings a client forms about the business.

Not so long ago, jamming our floors, walls, and ceilings with products for clients to browse through was the norm. Now the phrase “Less Is More” is the mantra of top retail merchandisers. Why? There are distractions and demands for our attention in every aspect of our lives. By creating simple, attractive displays we provide a less-complicated way for the client to shop.

As consumers, we are continuously fed a variety of digital imprints designed to attract and sway us. If we follow this model of operation to build our showroom’s experiences, we meld into the mind-numbing clutter that the customers’ brains have become quite adept at filtering out.

How do we cut through all that clutter? Create a shopping environment that is curated from the human connection at the initial greeting to engaging/informative displays, all the way through the delivery of the merchandise plus after the sale care.

Highlight the products and categories that push the client’s hot buttons. While those items will vary from showroom to showroom and region

“If you want people to know who you are, you have to do something different, and that’s not cheap.”

—Almira Cuizon,
VP/Retail Operations
at Roots



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by region, one tenet holds: eliminate clutter and confusion.

Confusion develops when the information that the client has gotten from their online education conflicts with the presentation by the sales team. To be successful, every salesperson is expected to know not only the minimum necessary product knowledge of a category, but to dip a bit deeper into it. The sales team must provide facts and information that is not readily available to the customer. Think of it this way, every time clients silently say to themselves, "I know that," they are also diminishing the need for the expert in front of them.

As an example, LED has many features and benefits to talk about — in fact, the majority of websites and salespeople parrot the same points. I have found knowledge-sharing about the process of how LEDs are grown and that a strict LED binning process provides a better product and why is more memorable. Clients hang on every word of this new information, and that reinforces your expert status by more than just speaking of lumens per watt.

EXPERIENCE STORE

Flipping the positioning of these two words makes for an exciting dive into the other compelling ways showrooms can attract clients. For hundreds of

years, the showroom stood as the only shopping experience customers had, and today, it is only *part* of the shopping experience.

Clients are entering showrooms at a very different point in their buying journey, and the reality is that there are restraints intrinsic to the digital experience. With subjective products, customers still want to see and touch to confirm what they might already know from their digital education. Since 80 percent of the public still want to go to a showroom, we must give them a reason to select ours. So, I pose this question: "How do you leverage the showroom experience to close more sales?"

There are a few unilateral actions needed to make any strategy work. The first tactic to come into play is to broadcast the experience that your showroom can provide on every digital platform you're comfortable with; the second is to not be afraid to try something new and out of your comfort zone; and the third is to keep evolving the process.

EXECUTE, EVALUATE, ADJUST, REPEAT

Host unique events that resonate with the demographic you're targeting. These events are either a social component of community involvement or an educational one relative to your business model. Both types of gatherings provide memories and an

introduction to your showroom. Vary the events to match the many types of customers you have. Your goal is to create a buzz about your showroom as the "right place" to find what they need.

DISPLAY AND HUMAN EMOTIONS

Think of the showroom as the entirety of the display, with each detail painstakingly selected for both its visual appearance as well as its impact on the client. The goal is to increase dwell time in your showroom. The more time they spend there, the more likely they will buy something.

Construct exhibit quality and styled vignettes that truly demonstrate features, such as a cut-away wall to show the "inner workings" and connections not ever seen in a real-life situation. Set up lifestyle vignettes that are emotionally captivating using either a traditional residential setting or something that is an artsy juxtaposition to stir conversation and possibly an impromptu Instagram shot.

The most crucial factor in providing an outstanding customer experience is the human-to-human interaction. Clients must feel welcome and extremely confident in the people they will work with. Staff members must be educated to provide more information than what is available publicly on the internet. This information will come from the efforts of brand-recognized vendors and a collection of actual experiences that can be shared across platforms, including face-to-face interactions to help guide the customer further.

Humans are emotional creatures, and it is the responsibility of the sales and marketing teams to establish and foster emotional connections with every type of client engagement. This requires that we be observant and attentive to the clients who come in the door and those who discover us online. The human being in an active engagement is the determining factor that will provide success for the showrooms that embrace a bricks-and-clicks strategy.

Empathetic listening is the foundation to build each client engagement no matter the realm. The listening activity goes hand-in-hand with the formulation and use of correct questions. These questions solidify expert status, and listening shows the client you care while providing the baseline for side selling and upselling.

Sometimes the client's showroom visit does not result in a closed sale; the secondary goal is

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to create a "Raving Fans" experience that clients want to share. The first obvious benefit is some word-of-mouth marketing, but in the bricks-and-clicks world, we must set the customer up to purchase from us by using our online e-commerce platform. Don't have an e-commerce solution? Now is the time to get one.

SERVICE FIRST WHEN SELLING LUXURY

In either digital marketing or face-to-face selling, we must convey to potential customers that the showroom focuses on service first, then sales. Delivering a "service first" message must be incorporated into your story —and it is critical. I remember a comment from my first mentor Roger Shyer: "If you don't talk about it, it does not exist."

While most people and companies scream about a product message, to clearly stand out you must weave a service/expert status message early and often into your USP* (Unique Selling Proposition). Train your teams to deliver and demonstrate experiences that are personalized to the client.

Take the time to invest and review. The best customer-facing employees are made, not born. Therefore, invest in their professional development in both sales and emotional intelligence. Revamp store policies that make it difficult to buy from you. Give team members the authority to make customer-centric decisions, set parameters, and let them help.

Lastly is the importance of technology today. Don't shirk away from it, embrace it. Look for products that help the client on their journey, smooth out the sales processes, and aid in organization and management. It might seem like a tremendous amount of work to do, but it is necessary to stay relevant in these changing times.

As Always Happy Selling!



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