

Tips on Determining When to Refresh Your Store's Interior

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Probably the two most-asked questions owners have about store interiors are:

> **How often should an interior be freshened up?**

> **How much should a retailer spend on a facelift?**

My answers vary, but the guidelines are clear.

"How often" depends on several factors, primarily 1) location, 2) target market, and 3) product price points.

For instance, if retailers are located in a trendy area on the East or West Coast, selling a higher end product to a more sophisticated clientele, then they should be updating their interior every two-three years, with a major redo every six-seven years. If they're located in small-to-medium-sized communities in the Midwest, their target market is middle-of-the-road, and their price points are competitive but not discount-oriented, then ideally a facelift every four-five years is good, with a major redo every eight-nine years. If they're super-discount-oriented and their target market is basically just looking for a good buy, then a facelift every five-six years and a major redo every ten years will suffice.

"How much" is simpler: As much as you can afford without putting the business in jeopardy. The cost and extent of the makeover is directly related to current sales volume and margin, projected sales, and expectations of your target

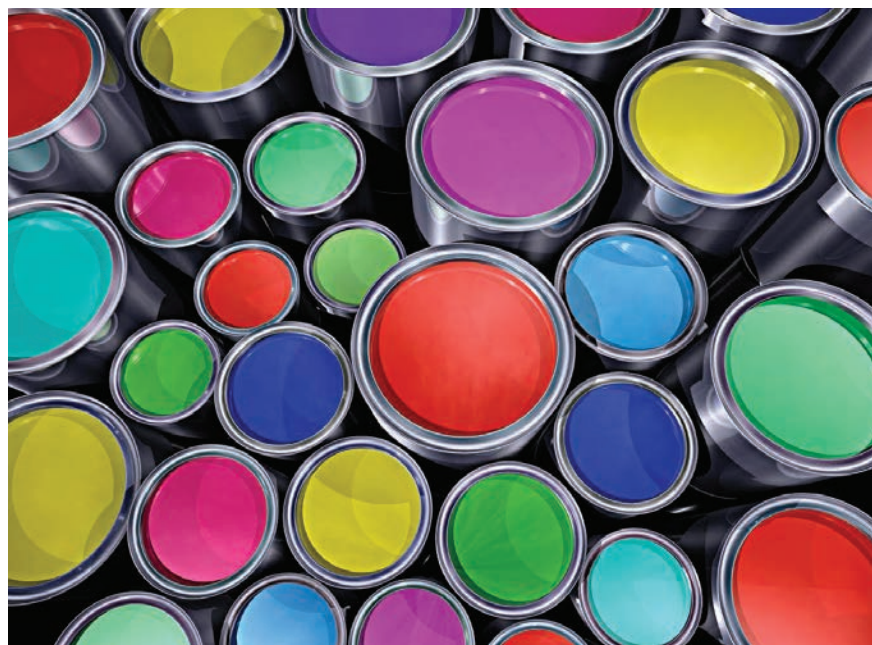
market. As soon as you finish one "refresh," or complete a larger renovation, start saving for the next one. Ideally, the cost of the facelift should be paid for well before the next renovation, hopefully with an increase in sales.

Within those clear parameters, the next question is usually: What are the five most cost-effective ways to freshen up a store?

1) Color! Adding a fresh coat of paint to the walls can make a world of difference. Those who know me know I'm not a fan of all-white walls. Color speaks volumes. It brings warmth and personality to a space. I rarely recommend painting every wall a different color, but at least **one** accent color should be seen on key focal point walls to engage the eye and draw customers in. And why not devote one wall each year to the "color of the year" or the "trend of the season"? Paint is relatively cheap and makes a big impact.

You'd be surprised how painting the walls can make a difference in the overall feel of the store, not to mention on your storefront. It can improve the attitude of the sales staff and make the customer think you did more than "just" paint. Of course, selecting the right color is key – it needs to match your store's brand color palette, support your product lines, and appeal to your target market. If you're not a color expert, be sure to consult with one before you buy the paint.

2) Reworked Layout. Reposition a few fixtures and see how customers find products they didn't "see" before. Swap the location of two departments and measure whether sales go up in one or both areas. Change out a few old fixtures – you know, the ones you've been hanging on to for too long. Rehabilitate others that still have some life left in them. Bring in a couple of new ones that



Color can make a world of difference.
(All photos courtesy of Retailworks, Inc.)



Simply changing out the finishes on a “communications board” can bring visual pop to a focal point wall.

can sit at the front of a department to capture attention. Of course, make sure they coordinate with the other fixtures in the department. Fixtures need to complement one another **and** support the merchandise. They should never be a visual distraction.

3) Lighting. Highlight a display wall or brighten up a department with a strip of track lighting. Add a floor lamp or table lamp to attract attention and create more ambience within a display area. If you have yellowed prismatic lenses over your 2x4 drop-in fluorescent ceiling fixtures, replace the lens covers with new ones. The yellowing of the plastic lens reduces light output dramatically. You’ll be amazed how much extra light is delivered to your selling floor.

4) Re-faced Front for the Service Counter. Relocating a checkout counter can be problematic due to power and phone cords, and data lines; however, updating the vertical face of a counter can be the inexpensive “pop” that enhances the entire checkout area. Generally the largest piece of “furniture” in the store, and what I think of as its “heartbeat,” your service counter should always look **great**. Fix any nicks and repair the chips. If you can replace the countertop, all the better – but if you’re just looking for a quick fix, then paint the front, or re-face it with a material that works with your “brand” – such as corrugated metal, fabric or wall covering. Heck, I’ve even put textured vinyl flooring on the front of a counter! The



Don't be afraid of color. Above: Outpost Natural Foods Cafe, Bay View, WI.

point is to have fun with the front – you’ll be surprised how many customers will touch the new material and comment positively on it.

5) Cleaning, Repairing and De-Cluttering. These actions should certainly be taken on a regular basis, but more effort should be put forth during a refresh. Polish a hard or resilient floor, or steam clean a carpet. Customers often evaluate the overall cleanliness of a store by the condition of the floor. Replace or fix damaged furniture. Re-upholster chairs if fabric is faded or worn. De-clutter your service counter – remove or consolidate impulse merchandise. Remove old signs, or ones that no one reads any more. Clean scotch tape remnants off windows, and wash the windows. Repair ripped outdoor awnings. Replace burned-out light bulbs.

And finally, if products are overflowing on fixtures, and there are no real clear traffic aisles, then it’s time to remove some product – and maybe some fixtures as well – from the sales floor. This can be difficult for retailers to do, but it often is the most effective way to get customers to see more products – and thus, buy more.

Rent/Lease Considerations

Retailers who rent space also need to consider their leases when thinking about updating. Will you get a return on your investment before the lease is up? If there’s a chance that you

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will not, are you assured you will be able to renew your lease for another term? If you are thinking about moving, will something you do to the interior of the space have to be returned to its “original” state before you move out? Will you be attaching anything to the walls, or changing lighting, that may become property of the landlord?

In some cases, retailers thinking about leaving a space may get lucky enough to have some of the renovation costs covered by the landlord, that is if they

are key tenants in the building and the landlord doesn’t want them to leave. With today’s competitive real estate market, retailers sometimes have the advantage during negotiations – but it pays to look over the fine print.

Planning

Be sure to **start planning your facelift at least six to eight months ahead of time**, whether it’s a simple “refresh” or a larger renovation. Put it into your overall business plan as soon as you complete the current one. This will allow for creative thought, smart decision making, landlords to be alerted,

costs to be gathered, and staff or hired help to be scheduled. Allow some extra time for “hiccups” that are bound to happen along the way – deliveries can be late, people can need unexpected time off, the weather may become a factor. And finally, include a contingency fund to take care of those hiccups. Proper planning will ensure a smooth facelift. ■

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