



WORDS BY KATHY CISAR

VISUAL MERCHANDISING

BACK TO THE BASICS WITH BEST PRACTICES

“Display is only one component of a successful retail business,” says Lyn Falk, president of Retailworks Inc. “A bad display can negatively affect all of the other good things you are doing in your store.” Falk recently helped cultural commerce retailers at the 2006 Museum Retail Conference & Expo in Louisville, KY, grasp both the basics of design and display, as well as the latest trends in display merchandising techniques.

But let’s be realistic. Merchandising is just one of the perks that creatively inclined store managers get to do for fun, right? Just how important is display? According to Falk, good visual merchandising can increase sales from 10 percent to 15 percent. Those are numbers that should make you sit up and take a good, hard look at your current store displays. ►



Understanding the difference between merchandising and display

Many people think that the terms “merchandising” and “display” are synonymous. There are, in fact, distinctions between the two techniques of which to take note.

“Basically, I like to think of merchandising as ‘good housekeeping,’” explains Falk. “It’s presenting your products on fixtures in an organized fashion, the goal of which is to help customers view the merchandise and then be influenced to purchase something.”

Falk has several tips for merchandising. First, retailers should understand that in the

United States, consumers tend to read merchandise from left to right and top to bottom. Good merchandising will help the customers’ eyes roam over your products, not hinder their lines of sight. Group products according to size, style, color and type and be consistent with your signage. Don’t forget to rotate your merchandise periodically. Placing products in different locations

can add new life to old merchandise.

Displays, on the other hand, are well-coordinated focal points that are strategically placed throughout your store and are changed regularly. “Position your product purposefully throughout your store and your customers’ feet will fol-

An effective display is simple, incorporates a theme, uses props and has good composition.

Unique and eye-catching displays were the subject of Lyn Falk’s (right) talk during the Visual Merchandising session at the MSA Conference.

low their eyes, bringing them further into the store and closer to your merchandise,” says Falk. “I can’t stress negative space enough. It’s critical for making focal points stand out from their surroundings and drawing customer attention. Thoughtfully placed focal points entice customers to shop the entire store without even thinking about it.”

An effective display is simple, incorporates a theme (whether it be color, shape, style or a category of product), uses props and has good composition. “In addition, displays should attract and hold the attention of your customers,” adds Falk. “A display should stimulate interest and tell a story – especially in museum stores where retailers have worked so diligently to showcase a product mix that

relates to their institution's mission and collections."

Another crucial element: displays should create desire for the product. "Displays can move the customer to action," says Falk.

Best practices start with the basics

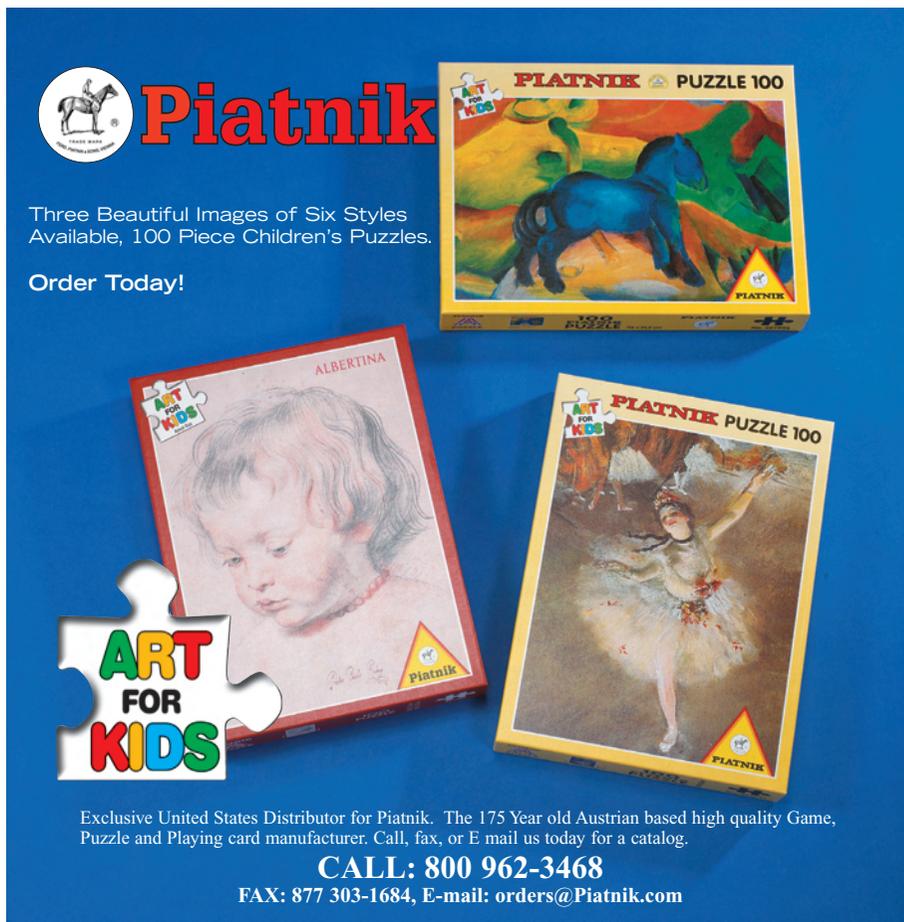
Even seasoned merchandising professionals know to always refer to the basic elements and principles of design when creating displays. The overall goal of good display is good composition. And that includes putting the principles of contrast, repetition, movement, symmetry, proportion and dominance to best use.

For example, Falk describes a window display she saw in which colorful children's pinwheels were displayed beneath a ceiling fan. The air flow caused the pinwheels to rotate and move. "Creating motion and momentum is great design," says Falk. "Lining up the pinwheels also exhibited the basic design principle of repetition, making for a strong visual statement."

"Another design rule of thumb I follow is placing items in groups of odd numbers – three, five, seven or nine," explains Falk. "Merchandisers need to remember to create the unexpected, using principles such as illumination to create interest and eye-appeal. And I've always found lifestyle displays to be rewarding – they evoke emotional appeals that are often followed by a purchase."

It may seem simple, but another tip for great displays is knowing your market. Know the demographics, psychographics (favorite colors, music, vacation spots, etc.) and shopping behaviors of whom you are trying to sell to. "One exercise you can do with your staff," says Falk, "is to pick 10 to 20 of your bestsellers and brainstorm all the reasons why these products appeal to your customers, then figure out how to use these ideas when marketing your products. Go deep into your customers' minds – are they browsers? are they tour participants who are rushed for time? – and then come up with display ideas that cater to their desires and needs."

Finally, your display should reflect your product's price point. For example,



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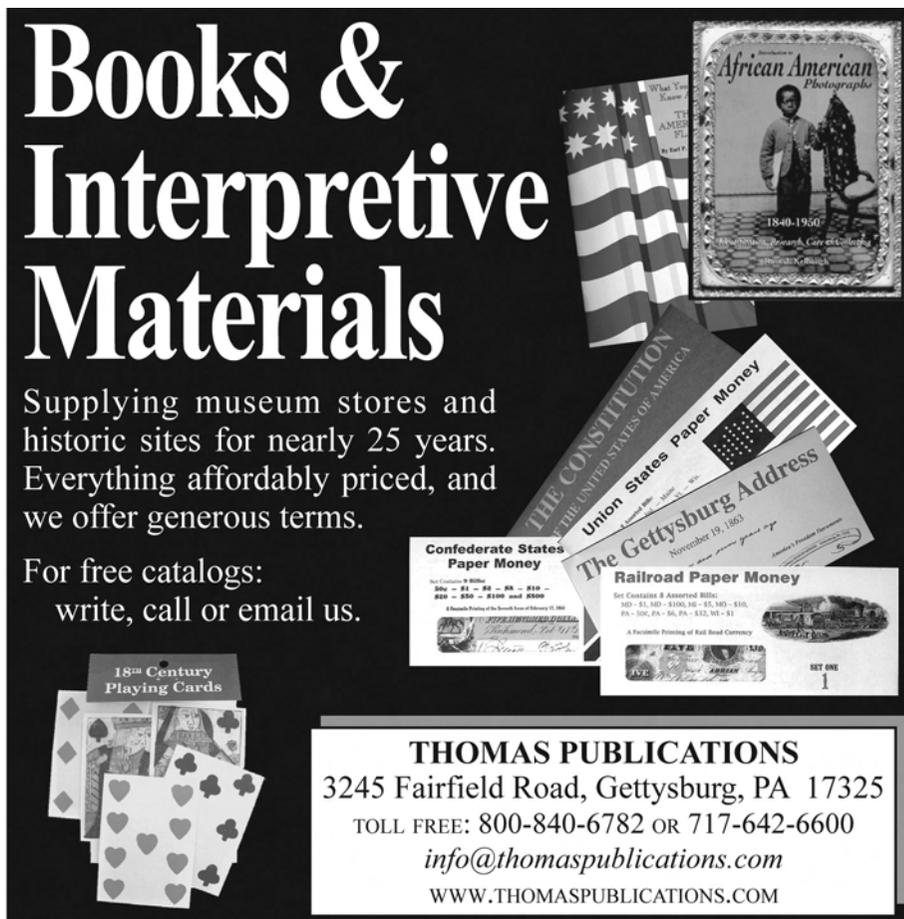
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“consumers need elbow room when shopping for high-end products,” explains Falk. “And keep the props you use of a quality consistent with that of your product – don’t use cheap fixtures to display luxury items.”

As the saying goes, less is more

Chaos and the lack of a coherent theme detract from the effectiveness of a display. For backdrops, solid colors are usually better than patterns. “And don’t become a warehouse of vendor fixtures,” says Falk. “Be consistent with the materials and colors you use throughout your store – they should reinforce the institution’s brand and the store’s signature look. Retain and enhance your store’s identity through well-coordinated and unique fixtures and props, but don’t overdo it.”

“Merchandisers need to remember to create the unexpected, using principles such as illumination to create interest and eye-appeal,” says Falk.

Providing information and interaction is very important, so make sure you keep signage at eye level. “It’s all about communicating your message quickly. Signs should be descriptive and attention-getting. Avoid hand-made signs if possible, unless your penmanship is excellent and you have a consistent style,” says Falk. “The signs should adhere to predetermined sign design criteria, and reflect your store’s or your institution’s branding. Again, too much of a good thing goes awry and can result in sign pollution.”

But it’s possible to have too much negative space. The quantity of products displayed can be as important as the quality.



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"Keep your shelves stocked, or at least make your displays look like they are fully stocked," adds Falk. "Critical mass is very important in communicating a professional, credible image to the customer."

"Some people have the knack for merchandising and some don't, and it's okay if you're not born with that talent," ends Falk. "Many of you can learn and develop those latent skills. If you're still struggling, turn to a volunteer or other staff member who does have the gift. Your store — and your sales — will reap the rewards." 

This article is based on the educational session "Visual Merchandising Series," which was presented by Lyn Falk, president of Retailworks Inc., at the 51st Museum Retail Conference & Expo in Louisville, KY, in April 2006. The following individuals supplied products to help illustrate merchandising challenges and answered questions at the end of the session: Angie Fleitz, director of retail operations, Kentucky Derby Museum; Debbie Noward, merchandise buyer, The Toledo Zoo; Marie Napoli, museum store buyer, Austin Children's Museum; and Kimberlee Riley, director of sales and marketing, Jefferson National Parks Assn.

Planning and Budgeting for Displays

- Create a calendar at least six months out to prepare for upcoming displays
- Note all major events for which you need to plan display changes (i.e., holidays, seasons, traveling exhibits, special events, sales and promotions)
- Determine product lines and themes to be featured
- Define a budget for each major display change
- Schedule staff members to 1) determine and create signage, 2) find props and 3) create and assemble displays
- Evaluate the success of the display and make notes for future display planning sessions

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and Mugs

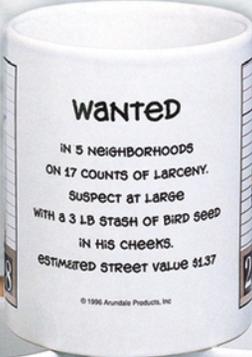
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