

Lighting – The Single Most Important Design Element... Yet The One Most Don't Get Right

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Lighting – it can make or break the success of a retail environment. It can be the difference between good sales and great sales. It is a powerful design element that every retailer should take seriously.

Because a good lighting plan costs money and is often misunderstood, it takes the back seat to other items that are easier to manage and procure, like flooring and fixtures. What many retailers don't understand is that you'll earn your money back, and then some, with a properly designed and implemented lighting system.

And yes, lighting IS complicated – because it's technical. To truly understand how to properly illuminate a room, one must understand watts, lumens, foot-candles, voltage, photometrics, Kelvin temperatures, life expectancies, and color rendering indices, just to start. Then there are diffusers, dimmers, and tunable features to understand. With rapidly changing technology, it can be challenging to keep up with the latest versions of LEDs, much less updated lighting controls.

So where do you start when considering new or retrofitted lighting for your shoe store?

Find an Expert

Don't rely on a general contractor or electrician to make your lighting deci-

Decorative light fixture made with leather straps to reflect the leather watch straps sold at Noah Gabriel Jewelers in Wexford, Pa. Photo by Noah Gabriel Jewelers.



sions. Find a lighting consultant who knows the retail industry. I've seen too many uneducated individuals in the building field, this includes store owners, simply guess at the type and placement of light fixtures, and then find inexpensive bulbs at the local home-building store to put in them. STOP this. Now.

Or, Become the Expert

Learn about layering your light levels. Understand how to use natural light and supplement with artificial lights, in a way that makes for a pleasant shopping experience from morning to night.

Get familiar with watts/lumens, Kelvin temperatures, foot-candles etc.

When it comes to artificial lights, con-



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sider them in three categories: ambient, accent, and decorative. Find out what foot-candles you need on your selling floor (hint: between 30 and 45) and then look for fixtures that will provide that amount of ambient light throughout your store. If you work with a lighting rep, they will often run photometrics on a digital layout of your selling floor showing what their light fixtures can provide.

Selecting Ambient, Accent, and Decorative Fixtures

When selecting light fixtures for your ambient lights, keep in mind where the light is being emitted. The more light emitted out the top or through the "shade" of the fixture the less that is getting to your selling floor. There shouldn't be a reason to illuminate your ceiling so look for fixtures that either send all the light directly downward, or is reflected off the top of the light fixture (known as indirect light). This latter version is good

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if you want a softer light without the glare of an exposed bulb.

Once you have your ambient lights selected, then it's time to find a light that highlights your focal point displays, such as window displays, key fixtures, seating, signage, and transaction counters. These areas should be illuminated three times brighter than the surrounding ambient areas. Accent lights are generally provided by track lights, but some recessed cans do the trick as well. When selecting the light bulb for your track or cans, consider the Kelvin (K) temperature (see the next section, below), lumen output, and light spread. For instance, a spotlight (25 degrees) is for highlighting something smaller like a single shoe display, a hanging sign, or a photo on a wall. A narrow flood (40 degrees) would be used to wash an end cap or short fixture run, and a flood (60 degrees) for washing a 5-to-6-foot swath of product or wall.

When looking for decorative light fixtures, have fun! These don't have to provide "working" light, unless they need to in the area you are placing them. They are meant to bring visual delight to your space, whether it's an elegant statement, an artsy punch, or a unique branded element. They come in the form of chandeliers, pendant lights, table lamps, floor lamps, wall sconces, and string lights (think patio lights). Here's the catch – don't order them unless you can specify/select the light bulbs that go in them. Too often, I've seen beautiful decorative fixtures in a space, only to quickly see the light bulbs give off a light that is strikingly (and often disturbingly) different from the lights in the rest of the space.

At Road America Gift Shop in Elkhart Lake, Wis., pendant lights provide the ambient light, track lights highlight displays, and the decorative light fixture in the upper right is simply for visual fun. It's made from car engine parts. Photo by Tricia Shay.



Accent Light: Adjustable Recessed Can



Accent Light: Track Head



Ambient Light: Indirect LED Light



Ambient Light: Pendant Light

Coordinating the color temperatures of your light bulbs in all your light fixtures is critical to creating a shopping experience that works well.

Stay Alert to Lighting Changes

By now, most of you should be illuminating your store with LEDs. If you're

still using fluorescents, MR16s, or metal halides, see if your state has a rebate program to upgrade them to LEDs. Just keep in mind that most of these programs are designed to provide energy-efficient lights and not necessarily to find lights that will create the ambience you are looking for. And no one should



have compact fluorescents in his/her store as I've yet to see one lately that provides good light.

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For years we have been told that being in light where colors are their truest, means light that is similar to natural light (outdoors). This is true, however, what we are exposed to outdoors is different than the light we are accustomed to, and feel better under, indoors.

The term, "daylight" on a box of light-bulbs has everyone thinking that's what we should be illuminating all our spaces with. They have made their way into our homes and now our retail stores, making light-colored skin look grey, and product colors looking unnatural. These 5000K temperature light bulbs should only be used to illuminate diamonds in a jewelry showcase, and in clinical settings. What's worse, is electricians are starting to buy and install cheap "integrated" fixtures with these 5000K bulbs. These don't allow you to remove the bulb to replace it with another – you must replace the entire fixture – \$\$\$\$. To avoid the overly bright look of these bulbs, find a Kelvin temperature of 3500. They are especially good for stores selling fashion such as shoes, apparel and accessories.

Another element to consider is the color rendering index (CRI) of the bulb. The scale runs 0-100. The higher the number, the truer colors will appear under the light. Since customers want to see the color of your shoes in the truest light, select a CRI of 85 or higher. You'll find plenty of 3500K options with high CRIs.

You Get What You Pay For

Most of the stores I visit are either under-illuminated, over-illuminated or

improperly illuminated. A properly illuminated store is one that:

- > **Illuminates the store to a level where it is comfortable for customers and employees to be for extended periods of time.**
- > **Directs your customers around your store by illuminating focal points three times brighter (the feet follow the eyes).**
- > **Shows your product lines in their best and richest colors.**
- > **Keeps your employees from being fatigued at the end of the day.**

You must have the right lumen output and the right Kelvin temperature in your light fixtures. If you have high ceilings and dark wall/ceiling colors, you're going to need light bulbs with higher wattage and lumen output, which means a significantly more expensive fixture. But retailers tend not to want to pay for expensive light fixtures, so end up opting for less expensive alternatives and paying for it in the long run in reduced sales. Invest in good lighting and it will pay for itself.

Tunable light fixtures are now available where you can change the Kelvin temperature of the light bulb, as well as dim the bulb for different occasions/events taking place in the space. These are currently very expensive and only necessary if you are conducting events in your store that require different "mood" lights. They will, no doubt, come down in price in the next few years.

Know Where to Place Your Light Fixtures

Laying out your light fixtures to provide ambient light is straightforward as you're trying to cover all of the selling floor in an even manner. To get the wattage/lumen output right, have that lighting rep run some photometrics of different types and placements of light fixtures so you can see what you will be getting on the selling floor. It will save you a lot of time and money in the long run. And these photometrics will also take into consideration the height of the lights off of the floor as some may need to hang at 10 feet and others 15 feet to get what you need.

Additional Thoughts

Buy lamps that are made in the U.S. or be sure to get a good warranty on those you purchase elsewhere, particularly from China.

Audit your lighting every year. Is it all still working for you? If you're a lighting novice, or simply don't have time, then look into hiring an experienced lighting designer to assess what you have and to provide specifications for new lights if/as necessary.

In summary, don't underestimate the power of lighting. Do it right and you'll see the results in your bottom line. ■

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