

SHAPE UP YOUR SHOWROOM

By using some simple display strategies co-opted from retail, your showroom can be an effective way to teach clients more about your company, your sales team and the tactile power of your products.

BY TY YU

One of the aspects of the promotional products industry that makes it so special is a continued emphasis on forging and maintaining in-person, one-on-one client relationships. In spite of the nearly all-encompassing push to go digital throughout the business world, numerous suppliers continue to maintain and enhance their physical product showrooms. A website or digital catalog's ability to display every single product offered by a supplier can serve as a double-edged sword, potentially overwhelming or confusing a client. Something as seemingly simple as choosing a polo shirt for an event can become infinitely more complicated when every possible cut, color, material and printing option is displayed to the customer.

The best showrooms improve their company's bottom line by serving as an important point of interaction between your clients and your sales staff, and the best suppliers strive to serve as a resource for their clients, educating and guiding them toward promotional products that will optimize their brands' image.

You can capitalize on the sheer amount of advertising specialty product choices available to customers by incorporating a well-designed, consistently updated showroom into your overall sales strategy.

"Yes, you may sell multiple brands, but the experience of being in your space, talking with your staff and learning about

and purchasing products from you, is something you can control from beginning to end," says Debi Ward Kennedy, a veteran retail design consultant. The showroom is an important point of interaction that you can use to gain a better understanding of your clients' wants and needs, and that starts with a good design.

Touchy Feely

One opportunity the showroom provides for clients that no website can match is the opportunity to see and touch a variety of products in person. Even though a website or digital catalog could out-stock even the largest physical showroom, what the showroom lacks in scope it makes up for in authenticity. Showrooms provide a real visual/tactile experience for your customers, allowing them to see, feel and interact with the exact product they will be ordering before they order it.

Glenn Oyoung, COO at *Counselor* Top 40 supplier Tri-Mountain, points out that making an informed decision about a promotional item can require more information than just a photo and a few short lines of copy. "We've always invested in our showrooms because we feel that there's no replacement for being able to feel a fabric, look at textures in person, or try on a style to see how it fits and how it drapes on your body," he says.

The ability to physically examine different options also gives clients a far deeper understanding of the interaction between



In the Tri-Mountain showroom, items are displayed as you would see them in a retail store.

What Every Showroom Needs

According to Debi Ward Kennedy, a veteran retail design consultant, here are some tips for making your showroom a compelling display space to entice clients and prospects to buy your products.

Utilize a spacious, open floor plan with clear views of separate product lines.

Use display fixtures that do not clamor for attention – the products are the point here.

Take advantage of great lighting – both natural (windows, skylights) and artificial. Make sure there is warm or full-spectrum light as well as overhead fluorescent fixtures, as your product colors will appear truer.

Create signage that sells for you. Include pricing, special offers, order minimums, limited availability, etc. Think of making this information a visual tool within the showroom to help you sell – people remember what they see better than what they hear.

Make sure your showroom is a comfortable temperature. Stuffy rooms make people sleepy, agitated and less likely to stay very long.

Color sells, period. Use trending seasonal colors on focal walls, and add coordinating or contrasting color merchandise to really wow your customers with strong visual presentation, especially at the entrance.

the promotional item itself and the various imprinting possibilities available to them.

“A photograph of an item can entice the client’s interest, but how will that garment perform in regards to printing or any other embellishment technique?” asks Elyse Bonner, a wholesale showroom representative for *Counselor* Top 40 supplier American Apparel. “In the apparel industry, it’s important for clients to have a hands-on experience with the garments they will potentially be investing in.”

The showroom can also serve as a window into the personality of your company. “Besides just the product or the services we offer, our showroom is a great way to bring to light our team and let our customers put faces to the names of the people they’ve been working with for years,” Oyoung says.

Lighting Strikes

In addition to being a great way for suppliers to display their wares, the best showrooms introduce the customer to the unique capabilities of an organization.

“If your primary function is selling pens and squishy balls, then your showroom needs to be very different from that of a company that sells items with higher perceived value,” says Malcolm Gilvar, executive vice president at The Trade Group, an organization that designs and markets trade show displays. “A showroom is a way to instantly display your professionalism and your credibility.”

For example, Tri-Mountain has integrated its showroom space with its warehouse, creating a unique ‘behind-the-scenes’ feeling that instantly connects with customers. “One of the big ‘wow’ moments of every visit to our showroom is when people sit down to our conference table and look out the big windows into the warehouse,” Oyoung says. “We’ve had people literally gasp at all the inventory we keep on hand. Integrating the other parts of your company, whether it be the decoration facility or the warehouse, is always a nice idea because those are big reasons why people choose to work with you as a supplier.”

Kennedy points out the way a showroom’s design sets the mood: “Think about the impact you can have visually – from your name to your carpet color, wall color, logo placement and display style – and you can create a lasting impression that no other showroom or supplier can. If you have a temporary booth at shows, you can echo the entire experience there, as well.”

The kind of lighting you choose should reflect your products and your purpose. The first and foremost objective of a showroom is to let clients see what they are buying, so in general, a showroom should be brightly lit. Remember that the



Counselor Top 40 supplier Tri-Mountain maintains an extensive showroom in its Irwindale, CA, headquarters.

type of lighting used can affect the way the human eye perceives colors – natural lighting should be taken advantage of whenever possible. Even if the ambient lighting in your showroom is on the dim side, this can be remedied with relatively inexpensive spot-light systems that throw light on essential areas.

“Effective lighting includes both natural, such as windows and skylights, and artificial light,” Kennedy says. “Make sure there is warm or full-spectrum light in addition to overhead fluorescent fixtures – your product colors will appear truer. Light from above and also in front of products on display shows them off best.”

In terms of overall layout, make your showroom easy to move around in. A cramped showroom will discourage clients from browsing, but one that is too open can make clients feel lost. Keep products at or near eye level as much as possible; clients should not need to bend down or climb a ladder in order to handle a product. The type of

display case you use will dramatically affect the mood of your showroom; for example, stainless steel or glass displays project a sleek, modern appearance, while stained hardwood invokes a more classic, higher-end feel.

“Easy access to all products and fixtures that do not detract from the products are vital,” Kennedy says. “All fixtures in a display should coordinate – all glass cubes for wine accessories, or all wire shelving for kitchen goods, for example.”

The organization of your showroom should guide the client. “Using a ‘zone’ concept in a showroom allows wholesale customers to focus on segments of your product lines: Delineating areas devoted specifically to office/kitchen, general use, wine & beverage, helps them shop effectively and efficiently,” says Kennedy.

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– GLENN OYOUNG, TRI-MOUNTAIN

Maximize Your Merchandising

Creating groups of items to display together, either broken up by season, product type or into specific product pack-

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age ideas, helps your clients locate and focus on the products they need. “Having garments merchandised by style, gender, age and seasons save time by allowing clients to go directly to the section that pertains to their specific project,” Bonner says.

Product rotation within your showroom is also important. As more suppliers work on a national level, a smaller percentage of their client bases will get to see their showrooms. In spite of this, the showroom remains a powerful selling tool because the clients who do see your showroom will most likely see it over and over again, meaning that they will be looking for what’s new and what’s next each time they visit.

Kennedy recommends that whenever you introduce a new product line, you should also update your showroom with the new product. Bonner, for example, continuously refreshes the styles and colors on display in the American Apparel showroom in between the launches of product lines. She maintains that an ever-evolving showroom “helps create a new experience for customers, as a stale display can become monotonous.”

Gilvar notes that the showroom presents a unique opportunity to provide more targeted, specific product ideas to clients, stressing that most of the time, you shouldn’t try to display your entire line. “With promotional products, it can be a mistake to show every single product you sell,” he says. “It tends to look cluttered and just be overwhelming; customers are looking for us to guide them, and if we have to show them everything, we aren’t doing a good job. We know what works well for our customers, and we need to show them.”

Incorporating digital media into a showroom environment can be helpful, but it’s important that it’s integrated into the experience naturally – otherwise it just seems like a gimmick. The use of QR codes on display placards is relatively unobtrusive, and makes indexing products and the information that pertains to them quick and painless, but make sure that a hard copy



In the showroom of Counselor Top 40 supplier American Apparel, the items on display are constantly rotated out to showcase the latest new colors and styles.

of the information is available to your customers who choose not to use a digital media device.

If your company’s showroom is not up to snuff, a few simple steps like streamlining the products displayed, rethinking the room’s organization, or just having a few well-placed spotlights installed can totally reinvigorate it. By combining a bright, spacious, well-organized space with a fantastic product line, your sales staff will be able to use your showroom as an important tool to enhance the purchasing experience for your customers. “I think the leaders in our industry still put a huge value on maintaining a physical space and a place where people can touch and feel their product – whether it’s apparel, bags or caps,” Oyoung says. “For those of us in the industry who take pride in product design and innovation, we will always prefer for people to experience, touch and feel our products in the flesh.”

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