

Merchandising the Museum Store with COLOR

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Many of us can remember as kids the excitement of sitting in front of the TV as the NBC Peacock displayed its multi-hued plumage signifying the following program was in “living color.”

We may also recall the thrills of anticipation we felt every time we got our hands on a new box of 64 brilliant Crayola crayons. The mind raced with limitless creative options.

You may feel a similar state of euphoria today as you review a set of paint colors, or visit your local

decorating center and see all the options available to help you re-charge, re-invent or re-create your store’s environment.

But you have a much bigger responsibility now than simply selecting a color that makes you feel good. The colors of your perimeter walls and presentation backgrounds should draw the museum visitor into your store, encourage them to interact with (inspect) the merchandise and entice them to buy.

But which colors can do all that?

Let’s set the record straight right now: The answer is inconclusive. While many merchandising experts say that 60 percent of a consumer’s purchase decision is based on color — and while knowing which fashion colors are “in” can help capture the customers’ interest — a direct connect between specific colors and the impulse to buy are a dotted-line relationship.

In researching the psychology of colors and which ones help to sell merchandise, you must first uncover known facts and then attempt to interpret them into the color background that will be most effective for your situation.

You should also realize that every individual’s perception of color is based on his or her own personal history and experience. For example, traditionally brides in the United States wear white, signifying purity and innocence. But in China, white is a sign of mourning. Yellow is another good example. In

Brightly colored merchandise stands out against the neutral finish of The Museum Shop at The Art Institute of Chicago.



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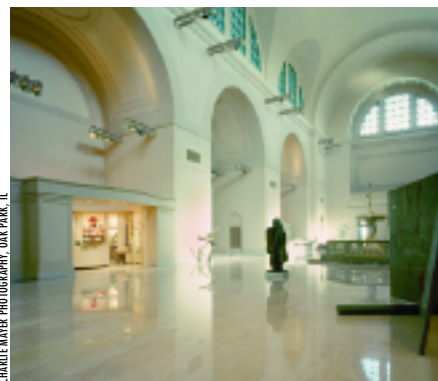
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design theory and merchandising philosophy that contrast is an important technique — and it also applies to color selection.

What overall impression does your museum give and how can your store establish a mood different from (or in contrast to) that experience? Are exhibits displayed in environments that recreate historic or pre-historic periods? Is there an abundance of natural light and colors?

Or is the entire museum monochromatic, with only limited artificial illumination? Take a visual audit of your museum to define the presentation theme, so you can develop a strategy that establishes a logical contrast.

For example, a natural history museum store may want to use primary colors as backdrops to displays if the museum has accurately recreated the hues observed on earth. A store in an



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aquarium may want to select colors that are reminiscent of the seashore, rather than the water in which the aquatic exhibits are viewed.

Using the complementary color theory

Conversely, it may be more appropriate to select colors that are in keeping with the visual appearance of your museum in order to maintain a sense of cohesion. The space or science museum store may want to select a white or silver color theme as an extension of the clinical living laboratory feeling that the exhibitions convey. This method is appropriate in the scenario of selling products to a budding scientist or would-be astronaut.

Using colors as visual cues

Perhaps the most important use of color in a store is to direct the shopper around the space to help them find desired merchandise. Whether used in

Complementary lines and colors are used in the Saint Louis Art Museum Sculpture Hall Court and shop.

signage or focal walls, color provides an obvious visual cue of where merchandise is located. Some of the most common applications are primary colors used in the kid's zone and pastels employed in baby areas. Reds and orange often signify food areas — think checked tablecloths and fast food restaurants along the roadside. And speaking of roadsides, don't be afraid to mimic the yellows, reds and greens of traffic signals and signs to draw shoppers around your store. It's second nature to everyone.

A final word on fashion colors

For a variety of reasons the most fashionable colors may be too risky for

use within most museum stores. Fashion trends happen so quickly and change so dramatically that today's hottest color might be the most hated one in your store tomorrow. While it is useful to know what colors illicit which responses from humans, when it comes to designing your store, it may be best to choose a neutral background and allow the fashionable colors to come out in the merchandise you offer. That

way, shoppers will take home the trendy colors and you can continually make a fresh fashion statement with the products you sell. **M**

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Gender Preference for Colors

Women are from Venus. Men are from Mars. Women prefer tints. Men have a tendency to prefer stronger chromas. As psychologists and sociologists have recorded the genders' reactions and choices of colors, museum store operators and designers need to be aware of these differences. While women are more likely than men to have a favorite color, men are more likely to say that brown is one of their favorite colors. Men prefer blue to red,

and as you would expect, women prefer red to blue. At the online Men's portal, AskMen.com, men are encouraged to consider colors carefully for different purposes. For example, the site says that "women tend to be at ease with and trust those who wear blue." In contrast, yellow can be used to send a message that they desire a "just friends" relationship. One final physiological gender limitation to consider: current research suggests that between 15 and 25 percent of men have some form of color recognition deficiency which makes it difficult to distinguish red from green, brown from green and purple from blue.

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