



what's your **FEELING?**

To customers, such as myself, 'ambience' is the touchy-feely stuff that puts us at ease. For retailers, it's just plain common sense.



OPPOSITE PAGE: Soaring ceilings, gleaming tiles, elegant drapes and flattering lighting welcome customers to the change rooms at HD Tightrope in Willis Street, Wellington. ABOVE LEFT: Absolute Essential has created three aromatic essential oils tailored to retail environments that especially encourage customers to take time to browse in a store. ABOVE CENTER: Minimalistic elegance and spacious surrounds provide customers with the opportunity to focus on the merchandise whilst being soothed by subtle classical music in the new Barqueuse premises a floor above Willis Street in Wellington. ABOVE RIGHT: Viewed from the street, this store would only attract a dedicated and determined customer and not many from mainstream foot-traffic.

Babies can teach us a lot about how we shop. Given a toy, they use all five senses: they look, touch, then put it in their mouth to gauge how it tastes or smells. And they love toys that make sounds.

The fact is, even as adults, we're a sensory bunch.

We like to feel comfortable in our surroundings and we do that by subconsciously noting details. When in a store, we gather instant impressions from the way staff look and how – or if – they greet us. We avoid gloomy shops. We walk out if the music's too loud or the merchandise can't be touched.

It's very easy to lose sight of how your customers feel as they enter your store. You go in there every day, so the place is as familiar as an old jersey. But how would it seem to someone coming in for the first time?

The good news is that creating a successful ambience needn't be difficult or expensive. What it really requires is practical thinking – and the easiest way to tackle this is to follow in your customer's footsteps.

MAKING AN ENTRANCE

Window displays are hugely important in creating a mood and tempting customers inside.

"A teaser works well," says Reece Jordan of Jordan International Visual Merchandising. "That's usually represented by a higher dollar-value item than people are necessarily looking for."

Consider, too, the actual access

to the store. "More and more retailers are realising that doors are a physical barrier to people's store experience," says Sarah Webb of Retail Research Consultants. Webb mentions a favourite store of hers where push and pull doors always frustrate her. "I get it right around the fourth try," she says. "Why not just put up a sign on each door? Determined customers will persevere, but many won't."

Webb has noticed some stores bumping up the heating rather than keeping doors closed and says this can create a further advantage. "It's really important to have the store at a comfortable temperature. I stayed longer in a pharmacy recently because it was so nice and warm."

Automatic doors might seem a good answer but will they suit your shopper?

"A toy store recently replaced their automatic doors with an open entrance because they found children were wary of going through. There's no absolute model for everybody, so knowing your customer is vital," adds Webb.

However, it's safe to say no one likes to enter a poorly-lit store. A dim interior is positively threatening. Not only that, but the shop may appear shut.

"That's not to say you want metal halides blasting light out over the customer's forehead," says Jordan. "We don't want to feel we're under the searchlights. Soft mood lighting is the answer – with focus lighting to guide customers to certain areas."

In terms of cost, that may be as simple as changing light bulbs from cold to warm.

Kevin Cawley at Total Lighting recently completed a retail studies tour of the US and Europe (see NZ Retail July 2004). He returned convinced we have a lot to learn – particularly in the way we treat our customers. "I was looking at how we can adjust to experiential retail," he says. "US stores are definitely concentrating on using the five senses."

Cawley also found that Americans treat customers like royalty, and that's not just in top-end stores. "At Best Buys, an enormous whiteware and computer store, they have greeters to welcome and assist you."

This method only works, says Cawley, if staff genuinely care. "I hate the idea that people have merchandised the store in a way that will trap me into buying. That's not what retail is about. I'll only buy if I feel comfortable, relaxed, welcome and wanted."

FREE FLOW

Once inside the store, customers like to have a clear path ahead. Think how anxious we feel when we're unsure about where to go. Flooring plays an important part here and retailers should also consider how inviting their floor is. Industrial-style concrete may be fashionable, but is it right for your market – and is it comfortable?

Robb Donze, president of the

Retail Interiors Association, recently attended a US seminar on understanding today's retail consumer. A key issue, he says, is that the modern world makes us feel "hassled, hurried, bombarded, confused and frustrated". As a result, the need to make people feel more comfortable is driving retail ambience.

"We need to keep things uncluttered, and make it easy for people to see what's being sold," says Donze. "There's not enough thinking about back-of-house storage."

Your target customer will dictate how fast or slow you want them to shop. According to the seminar, says Donze, there are two types: the 'love them and leave them' and the 'to have and to hold'. Both are equally valid, he stresses, and both need to feel comfortable in their own way. This comes down to the tangible stuff – the flooring, the fittings, the lighting – as well as to the intangibles, such as the music.

"The ambience is equally important for the love-them-and-leave-them type, who are there for an impulse buy. They've still got to feel comfortable," says Donze. "The shop has to be clear and uncluttered for them to make the purchase."

In other words, ambience is not just for the top-end giftware store wanting to create the warm and fuzzies. Look in the dictionary and ambience just means 'surroundings'. It's something every store has, and every store needs, says John Lenihan of Retail Consulting Group. "A price



promotion retail offer should have a sense of urgency, energy and brightness," he explains, "while a quality retail offer generally tries to have a sense of calm, luxury and comfort."

"The key is to design the ambience to match the offer and the product," adds Lenihan. "Through fixture design and placement, you can encourage browsing or increase the convenience and speed of selection."

TO THE TOUCH

As customers work their way round, you'll notice they touch the merchandise. There's nothing like feeling the texture of a fabric or the weight of a hammer for really 'getting a handle' on the product.

According to Kevin Cawley, computer firm Apple is the best retailer in the world in this regard. "At their new retail outlet in New York the whole focus is on touch. There are four large tables in a huge space – which may seem an inefficient way of retailing – but every Apple product is available and ready to go. People can touch them and use them.

"Other stores, especially high-end, so often put things behind glass doors or have signs saying 'Please don't touch'."

It may seem like an annoyance to a retailer, watching displays being constantly disturbed. It may even seem like an unwelcome expense, as trial products will inevitably get damaged. But compare this with the

damage caused by customers randomly ripping open packaging in order to see and touch what's inside. Consider, too, if it results in more sales, it's got to be worth it. In fact, it may even result in up-selling.

Take note of this: "If you have no real basis for comparing one product with another, the normal instinct is to buy what's cheaper. But if a store sets itself up to educate shoppers, even just a little, a certain number of them will spend more than what is absolutely necessary. If given a choice of three brands, or three models, and given the chance to pit one against the others, the shopper will at least have a sensible reason for choosing the better item." (Quote from Paco Underhill's book *Why we buy – the Science of Shopping*.)

Where items are packaged in such a way that they can't be touched, put a sample on show. This is particularly important with towels and bedlinen – in fact, almost everything that will be worn against the skin.

Better still, create a 'real-life' setting so customers can visualise it in their own home surroundings. This could be as simple as colour co-ordinating shelves of china and glass. In a recent display at Wellington's Redcurrent homewares store, a child's bed had been accessorised complete with bed linen, toys, hottie and slippers on the floor.

Graphic images of the products in use in home surroundings are

TOP: Even in sale mode, HD Tiptrope still manage to maintain an air of calm and comfortable shopping.

MIDDLE LEFT: Highly qualified and very friendly staff make customers feel at ease at Sony Style.

MIDDLE RIGHT: Park the other half at the Playstation and shop at your leisure. Hellenstova got it right in so many ways.

BOTTOM: Vibrant and magical – the store and the merchandise. Enter the world of Swarovski on Langton Quay, Wellington.



another good mood setter. Digital signage can also be used to enhance the ambience of the store, using appropriate lifestyle footage – and the human eye loves movement.

Think, say, of a store selling outdoor sports showing snowboarders sweeping down a mountainside. “By orienting the screen to portrait, rather than landscape, you can give it a poster-type look but in a moving format,” says Glenn Anderson of Futuretech.

On a practical note, check how easy it is to access your merchandise. Once on a search for sunglasses I had to keep standing on tiptoes to see how they looked in the mirror at the top of the stand. Sarah Webb recalls a similar incident at a pharmacy where the make-up stand was so low a woman had to kneel on the floor to try on the eyeshadow. Now that’s persistence.

Equally, no one likes to feel self-conscious as they wander round searching for a badly-signed changing room. Unless their heart is set on the product they may well give up rather than feel embarrassed.

A final point – if you want shoppers to feel OK about touching and testing, don’t make your displays too neat. Back to Paco Underhill: “At Hallmark stores we studied, some front-end Christmas ornament displays were so painstakingly constructed that shoppers didn’t know if they were supposed to take from the display or just gaze adoringly. People know how hard it is to get anything looking nice so they can be reluctant to undo somebody’s hard work.”

MUSIC TO THE EARS

Intangible, but incredibly powerful, music can transform a shop. “Turn it off and you hear the hum of the lighting and air con, or the sound of people’s footsteps in an empty store,” says Chris Shaw of SKY Music. “People will feel uncomfortable because the environment isn’t warm or friendly.”

Yet, says Kevin Cawley, a worrying number of New Zealand stores still play totally inappropriate music – or no music at all. It’s a simple thing, he believes, and even bringing in the CD player from home is better than nothing.

There are more effective ways, of course. Shaw advises paying attention to four factors: content, tempo, volume, and the sound system. “At SKY Music, we assess what your brand ‘sounds like’ and match it with the music profile and tracks. We have 38 off-the-shelf styles. The Chill channel, for example, includes jazz and New Age music, while the Escapism channel is all instrumental.”

Taking advice from the professionals avoids the risk of playing the wrong music – or of playing the right music but repeating it ad infinitum until the staff go crazy. The experts can also tailor the music to different times of day when different customers might be coming through.

The potential risk of handing over total musical control to staff is that your 20-year-old shop assistant will play radio-babble or thrash-metal to her middle-aged customers. Conversely, playing background



TOP: Touch, smell and experience the product at Living Nature, Lampton Quay, Wellington.

MIDDLE: HandyCam videos set up and ready to roll encourages customers to try the merchandise in Sony Style in the BNZ Centre, Wellington.

BOTTOM: Well lit, on hand and information positioned at point of sale, Living Nature encourages customers to try its products at its make-up display.

THE ESSENCE OF AMBIENCE

The other day, I trawled the streets of Wellington for a homeware store with all-round ambience. Finally, I plumped for Redcurrent for the following reasons:

- Colour-themed window using dressing table and shelves to display co-ordinated products;
- Feature wall viewed through window painted to match display;
- Wide open door with friendly message on chalk board outside;
- Big, open high-ceilinged space; I didn't feel intimidated or self-conscious as I entered (as opposed to cramped, low-ceilinged store with staff member watching me like a hawk. Believe me, I found one just like that, too);
- Central display of accessorised sofa and coffee table complete with cushions, throws, china and magazines – very homely;
- Mellow jazz playing;
- Alluring scent filling the store;
- Clear, open displays on shelves and tables, including jewellery – everything available for touch;
- Colour and product co-ordinated displays (e.g. Chinese-themed china) – attractive and easy to visualise in a home setting;
- Neutral walls decorated with pictures for sale;
- Clearly-defined, uncluttered areas to walk around;
- Staff keeping an eye but not pressuring customers (though could have been friendlier); and
- Relaxed, comfortable atmosphere, making me feel I could browse at leisure.



ABOVE: Islands of merchandise with wide aisles in between allows customers access to all corners of Redcurrent – even with a pushchair or stroller. TOP RIGHT: Redcurrent's relaxed and comfortable atmosphere is helped along by well co-ordinated instore lifestyle displays that can be viewed and touched from all angles. MIDDLE RIGHT: Costume jewellery simply displayed alongside a pretty mirror encourages customers to touch and try on in Redcurrent, Wellington. BOTTOM RIGHT: A generous ramp eases Mums with pushchairs into Redcurrent.

'oldies but goldies' at the nearby streetwear store will prove equally disastrous. Music with attitude is what these younger customers feel comfortable with – and they'll be actively listening.

"Sketchers in New York is a classic example," says Kevin Cawley. "They've even got a groove lounge with DJ down the back of the store. People can sit and play on the web, view the latest styles or drink flavoured water at the bar. It's making them feel like the most special person in the world."

Getting the tempo right, meanwhile, will influence how long shoppers stay in the store. "A fast tempo moves people out quicker," says Shaw. "Think of the fast pace dance music at Les Mills, for example. It's designed to hype people up and keep them moving."

Music can even help sell the products themselves. "One wine store tried playing French music, and the French wine sales increased by 200 per cent," recalls Shaw.

A couple of ancient speakers in the ceiling aren't necessarily going to do the job.

The aim is to get an even sound around the store, and perhaps even different music for different areas. At Farmers, in Pakutanga, they've created stores within the store for the various clothing labels. "The main areas play middle-of-the-road music while the youth-focused areas play louder music videos," says Shaw. "There are no physical walls but the music doesn't spill out over the different areas."

THE NOSE KNOWS

Malls love to include a café and a bakery. The homely smell of hot coffee and fresh-baked bread makes customers linger longer. And there's something very alluring about a store that smells of scented products. Even a hardware store can have a certain masculine appeal if it smells of wood chippings and sawdust.

If you don't have the real thing, you can always opt for an automatic dispenser, pumping your chosen fragrance into the store or out onto the street. Ecomist offer around 200 scents – they say leather is particularly popular at car salesyards and one particular

butcher swears by new-mown grass. The wall unit costs \$146 (plus GST) and pumps out fragrance at regular intervals to your requirements.

Aromatherapy is also worth considering – and is one way of diffusing unwelcome smells from neighbouring shops. "We helped one mall store with a butcher's shop right opposite," recalls Bo Hendgen at Absolute Essentials. This aromatherapy firm has created three essential oil 'synergies' specially for the retail environment: Action, Atmosphere, and Remember Me.

"The major ingredients of Action are rosemary, lemon, and lime," explains Hendgen. "They help focus the purchaser on making decisions." Atmosphere, she says, is more suited to a relaxed ambience, while Remember Me includes basil, "the main brain trigger of memory". This is the one for stores where customers are likely to shop around before returning to purchase.

An alternative is to have a blend designed specially for your store. Hendgen cites Small Acorns as an example of a store that has applied this particular form of brand-enhancing ambience.

If you're planning to use in-store aromatherapy, steer clear of candles and be aware that oils must be diffused in correct measures. It's worth seeking expert advice to ensure your blends are safe for customers with medical conditions, such as high blood pressure.

THE HUMAN TOUCH

Returning to babies for a moment... infants crave the attention of adults and it's really no different for grown-ups. You can spend a fortune on your shop fit-out but that, and comfortable ambience, will count for little if your staff don't acknowledge shoppers with a genuine, friendly greeting as they enter. And the smile comes free.

"Have a deep look at yourselves," advises Cawley. "It's all about being customer-focused. Staff are there to make people feel good – and the States are making millions out of it."

By Beverly Sellers, a freelance writer based in Wellington and a regular contributor to NZ Retail.

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