

Walking the *Retail Tightrope*

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IF YOU'RE A TIGHTROPE WALKER, YOU know it's all in the balance. But as a retailer, it is sometimes easy to forget the delicate balance that exists in the store environment. Stores in general share basic physical similarities—checkout counters, end caps, shelves and spinners. But each store becomes individual through its product lines, flow of environment, interior attitude and how these factors relate to its customers. Herein lies the balancing act.



THE PRODUCT SEESAW

The first balancing act of the retail environment is the problem of merchandise. On one side of the seesaw is just too much stuff. Often, stores choose so much product that workers spend the day cramming it into every space available. The thought here is trying to make sure they have everything the customer could possibly want. The result can be an overcrowded, dizzying space. When the customer walks through the door, they are forced to root through the shelves to find what they are looking for—and often leave without it.

There is obviously a delicate balance between having enough product to satisfy a broad range of customers, but not

so much that the customer feels overwhelmed and less likely to make their way to the checkout. When you are choosing product lines, think carefully about your customers. What do they typically buy? New products should work in tandem with your best-selling items so your customer feels comfortable trying them out.

Too many new products all at one time (like right after a big tradeshow) only confuse your customers. The solution to this problem, obviously, is to simplify your product lines. It isn't necessary to carry everything that you saw at last month's tradeshow. First of all, it's better for your cash flow to stock fewer items. Second, if you are thoughtful about your merchandise, the customers will be able to find

similar products and, better yet, actually locate them in your store.

Speaking of location, try some new signs that communicate to shoppers' individual tastes. You can use the extra space previously jammed with product to speak directly to your customers. With good merchandising, effective displays and a streamlined product mix, your customers will be comfortable, not overwhelmed.

SATURATED OR SPARSE?

Now, on the other side of the seesaw is under-stocking product and understating your message to customers. Stores guilty of this typically have very clean, very well organized, very symmetrical shelves but not enough merchandise to appeal

to a wide consumer base. They have used their surplus space, perhaps, to paint inspirational murals, the lighting scheme is soothing, and the displays are subtle. The result: a space so relaxing you almost want to take a nap.

The solution to this problem is two-fold. The first is a shot of personality. Don't be afraid to inject some of yourself into your store. Your customers obviously like you and your taste, so go a step further. Tell your customers a story, make them comfortable, and create a merchandising system that easily leads them through the store. Effective signage placed on the shelves and hung from the ceilings will guide your customer down the aisles and interest them in products they didn't know they needed.

The second key is your assembly of products. As we have said, too much can be dizzying, but not enough may make your customers go elsewhere. Think about

the last time you went looking for the right pair of pants. Too many racks overflowing with jeans in every size seems like too much work. But if the store only carries petites or is stocking only black pants, you'd have to find another outlet. By limiting your product lines in trying to create a serene, unobtrusive environment, you may also limit the coveted "add-on" sale.

Finding the balance between too much and too little is a personal journey. Before you buy a line of products, take a look around the store and decide where you will put it first. What other products will it complement? Are your customers even asking for it? Remember that each store is different and requires a different blend of products to maximize sales.

RETAIL EXPIRATION DATES

Walking through the dairy aisle of the grocery store, you can easily assess the freshness of the products by looking at

expiration dates. This is not so simple in the retail store. Your products do go bad, so to speak, but they don't carry labels announcing it. They are frequently improved upon, re-created, better engineered, etc., and it's your job to balance the new without making the old look obsolete. The key here, again, is to pay close attention to your product mix. Bringing in new merchandise is important, but making sure it blends with your existing stock will bring up your bottom line. Don't be afraid to discount some older merchandise in anticipation of newer product lines. You'll net some sales, which will free up additional space to avoid overcrowding.

The same holds true for merchandising systems and the interior of the store. Are your displays free of cracks and chips? If they are a little worn, try to disguise the blemishes. Look around at your walls, carpets and checkout areas. Do they need to be spruced up or repainted? Take a few hours after closing to give your store a needed makeover; it also communicates to your customers that you care. If you have ever sat down at a sticky restaurant table or been served by a waiter in a dirty apron, you'll know how much a little attention to detail can say about the quality of an establishment.

The goal of any retail store is to establish a relationship with the customer, and it needs to happen as soon as they walk in the store. Know your customers and what they want. You won't wow them by stocking every product under the sun, and you won't make them feel warm and cozy if your store doesn't communicate a specific message to them. They want to feel connected, to feel they can trust you and that they know you. Too much or not enough, clean or cluttered, loud or mute; it is, in the end, all in the balance.

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