Are retailers forgetting the basics?

By Dave Nemeth

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With retailers frantically vying for valuable market share, I decided to spend a couple of days in the field investigating stores in large malls, strip malls and stand-alone destination stores. The retail sector is very aware that they need to do things differently in the wake of the recession, fast-paced technology and ever-changing consumer attitudes. This is still an unknown and we will be seeing retailers experiment with an array of different techniques and strategies to meaningfully connect with their consumers. What did hit me in the face like a right hook from Mike Tyson was that retailers, in their pursuit of future brilliance, have simply forgotten the basics.

Before even entering the stores, I found that the window displays were less than inspiring and it was clear that in most cases this was an after-thought, with very little budget spent on of the most important areas of the business. We are all aware that the so-called "new consumer" is looking for a unique shopping experience, yet these less than inspiring window displays will not fill any consumer with excitement. I must be honest and say that Poetry does stand out from the rest with displays that resemble that of Anthropology in the US and now growing rapidly into the UK. International retailers give high priority to this area of the business by hiring design professionals to create fantastic, innovative displays that portray the brand in the way it should be.

The interior of the stores followed in the same vain, with dull displays and wrong sized merchandise on hangers as well as untidy displays. Furniture stores seemed to feel they were exempt from labelling products and pricing goods all together, perhaps expecting customers to ask the staff who decided to hide or look busy every time a customer entered the store. As far as sales staff go, those in the electronics sector were by far the most skilled and seemed to have a good knowledge of product.

Service overall was shocking and way below par, generally with senior management nowhere to be seen. It seems as if training is non-existent, and sales profiles are mismatched. Surely a 40+ sales person selling a couch that costs in excess of R70 000 is more realistic than a 20-something that really doesn't understand aspirational qualities of the product or understand the reasons for the price at all. I think the best answer I could get was, "Well it looks pretty cool and it's Italian leather, hey!"

The truth is that after such harsh trading conditions, one would have thought that these trading basics would have been addressed and ironed out, and the forward thinking strategies could start being implemented. The problem is that if the basics are not addressed with urgency, no matter what strategy or social networking brainwave one decides to pursue, efforts will all be totally worthless.

ABOUT DAVE NEMETH

A leading blue chip international company recently identified Dave as one of the top creative influencers in the country. Dave Nemeth is a qualified designer who has held a variety of senior as well as executive positions with some of the countries leading retail groups, spanning a career of twenty years. Email Dave at daven@worldonline.co.za, follow @davenemeth on Twitter and connect on Facebook.

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