

Engaging your customers through design

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Retailing is often described as the battle for customers, where the winners are able to identify their targeted customers and capture a big enough share of their attention and retail spend.

Most commonly, stores are being designed to capture customers' minds – to get them to stop, notice and evaluate your product, its pricing, its quality, and then to make a calculated and rational decision to purchase it. The design techniques that assist with that are good store layout, clear departments, good lighting, convenient service points, clear ticketing. These are all important considerations that I often refer to in my articles, and they must never be neglected.

However, there are so many things today that compete for that share of a person's mind, not least all other retailers around you, as well as multi-channelled media advertising delivered through street billboards, newspapers, magazines, TV, radio and internet. In addition, customers' minds are notoriously fickle. If you managed to draw customers' attention to your product or a special price today, it may last for this purchase only – tomorrow is another day and that cold evaluation will have to start again.

A more difficult and intricate, but much more rewarding strategy is to also try to win customers' hearts.

Customers' minds evaluate three things - convenience, product and price. In order to win customers' hearts you must give people other reasons to buy from you than these three. Incredible customer service and active support of social justice causes are examples of such reasons. In both cases, store design and branding can support these strategies but can not be the driving force behind them.

However, one of our recent projects demonstrates how design can be instrumental in winning customers' hearts. A 1,600 sq.m Furniture One store in Taree, NSW was designed not only to make it easy and convenient for customers to shop there, but also to actively engage with them, to make them interact, to leave a trace both in their memories and in their hearts. Why was this necessary? Because competition in the furniture market is fierce. Many similar looking items are being sold in different shops, and if little or no information is given to customers, the only way to choose will be by price. Our client understood this and wanted to have a business centered on good advice and on a special relationship with each customer, a relationship built on trust. (This will sound familiar to most of my readers!)

You can't build a relationship if your customer is running between the aisles with the main goal of

getting out of your shop as quickly as possible. We needed to create a store that would slow the shoppers down, convert the process of being there into a special experience.

The store we designed has all the basic things to make a customer visit more pleasant – friendly and welcoming ambience, good lighting, clear departments, service points with product catalogues and samples, kids play area, coffee machines.

However, it is the Interactive Stations idea that allowed us to really engage customers and to win their hearts. There are a number of Interactive Stations scattered around the store. The design is simple and allows both for 'high tech' and 'low tech' elements. Each Station consists of a pole with several interchangeable panels – printed graphics, pin boards or LCD TV's.

The main element of the content is the 'Story Of The Chair'. You see, furniture is such a big part of our lives, and we often associate some items, like a lounge room sofa or a family dining table, with many events and memories of our past. Because of this, if an old chair could speak, it could tell us a fascinating story about its life. The 'Story Of The Chair' is an illustrated fairy tale for adults and children that we created to make people stop and reflect on how special

and important furniture can be in their lives. This became our main theme. Near the store entrance, we placed a sculptural totem made out of many different chairs, old and new, as a monument to 'The Chair'. On the opening day, there was a huge parade through the streets of the town headed by a giant 5m high Chair. Customers come and share their own 'chair' stories with the staff. Children competitions are being held for best 'chair' drawings.

Apart from the 'Story Of The Chair', the Interactive Stations hold other elements that help engage customers hearts – Furniture Poems, Furniture Facts, and even Furniture Jokes. Whilst going through this big store, customers encounter these stories, discovering interesting things about furniture and also about ourselves. The store became not just another furniture shop, but a store with a soul, a store with stories to tell.

By focusing not simply on capturing customers minds, but on winning their hearts, we were able to strongly differentiate our client's business from the competition and to facilitate building long term connections with their customers, based on trust and respect. If your wish to have a business based on service, relationships and trust, not just on price, I hope some of these ideas will be of benefit.

The Story of the Chair



The chair was created on a day a long time ago. It had no idea where it came from and no idea where it would end up. For a chair, you might say, is just a chair. But a chair is like you and I - it has a life to live.

It would meet with many people

in its life. Reside in many homes. Go through bad times, neglect and hope. For every chair, you see, is looking for one thing in each home that it visits.

It is looking for love.

This is the story of one such chair ...

