

Creating a store that sells through education and entertainment

Your store can be a confusing place for your shoppers. make your design concept easy to navigate. By Yuri Bolotin, Principal, Design Portfolio Pty Ltd

Ever been lost and confused in one of these shops where the product is either unfamiliar or fairly technical – like home electronics, mobile phones or medicines? I regularly see customers in these places (and I am often one of them) that are just going through the aisles looking bedazzled, faced with rows of identically looking objects with some technical jargon words written on labels – they might as well be in Chinese.

If you have some of these 'information intensive' products to sell, you must give a lot of thought to the customers' needs and expectations during the buying process. If you don't – you will at best get a lot of confused people inside your store, at worst – customers simply will not come in – who enjoys looking stupid? They will go somewhere else instead where they would perhaps be offered a different experience.

I was reminded of these issues when we were approached by a client about creating a very large wine store in China. During my trips there I had been observing customers in some of the newly emerging wine shops. These customers looked very much like the lost

souls in the abovementioned shops in Australia. Wine is a relatively recent addition to that country's lifestyle. This is a premium product desired by an increasing numbers of people but nevertheless a product that is not yet well known or understood – rather like a new generation of DVD recorders or a new medicine here in Australia. With this in mind, to place some bottles on shelves is simply not enough to make the customers want to buy. And a very large store, done with that approach means a very large confusion! What should be a strength (broad range) turns into a weakness (people can't find the right product).

Wine retailing is particularly difficult as the main appeal is taste. It is much easier to sell something that mainly appeals to the sight (eg, toys or fashion). It is like selling some unknown food items that have no smell (the bottles don't until you open them), and have a fairly similar colour (of wine). The label artwork does help but can not be much relied upon in China as all text is in English and only few Chinese can read it. Besides, labels can be very confusing.



Colour-coded information areas, using printed and screen graphics, make product selection easier.

Having looked at the situation and studied the market and the customer experience and expectations, we realised that a different approach was needed. We thought that the most effective way to do it would be to create an immersive experience, to take the customers on a journey that is interesting, exciting and educational, through the world of wine.

We enter the complex through a set of wide and heavy timber doors. The entrance lobby is dark and has theatrical spotlights focused on

a huge, striking stainless steel sculptural installation specially commissioned for this project. This sculpture, measuring 6m x 2m; occupies the entire wall. It represents drops of frozen liquid over a shiny metal surface and is a stunning, poetic introduction to wine. The wall opposite to the sculpture was cut out, and thick translucent columns made of slumped glass lit from top and bottom were inserted into the opening. Through it, there is a view of the wine promotional area of the complex. The only other thing in this area is a simple dark timber greeting desk



Table seating, bench seating and a private lounge cater to a variety of shoppers.

that was designed to blend into the environment so as not to overpower the other elements.

The wine promotional area is immediately next to the entrance lobby. It has its own entrance from the street. This area is not very large but striking. All walls and ceiling are lined with long thin planks of timber running horizontally and forming a sweeping dramatic curve at the top of the walls. Deep wall cut-outs allow the daylight to come in, as well as serving as display windows for the store. They are also our visual connection with the outdoor garden where functions and wine launches take place when the weather is good. The 'New Arrivals' wall shows the recently arrived wine and is organised by State/Region, with the graphics giving a short introduction to each Region. Another large wall is occupied by 'Cellarmaster's Recommendations'; it is organised by wine variety. On the floor, there are 'Specials' units designed to support the overall concept and brand image. There is an area for gifts with branded gift boxes that were also designed by us. There is also a display of wine accessories (glasses, openers etc) aimed to generate add-on sales whilst reinforcing our client's position

as the place to visit for anything to do with wine.

On the other side of the entrance lobby, our journey continues into the wine bar and restaurant. It offers customers the opportunity to sit down and have a meal, or a coffee, and to try some wine sold in the Centre. A large wine bar dominates the space, its entire back wall right to the ceiling is made of illuminated wine bottles. A variety of seating modes is available to cater for different moods and group sizes – table seating, bench seating, booth seating and a private lounge. Dark timber floors, dark grey walls and ceiling create a feel of understated quality whilst allowing other design elements to feature. The ceiling has striking custom made chandeliers. Some of the walls have picture frames with very large environmental patterns based on the logo design. These graphics were created by us to reinforce the luxury and unique feel of the space. Even more interest and drama is added by a large area of the wall that features invisibly illuminated sheer curtains.

The heart of the complex is the underground cellar. During our journey so far, we were able to see some tempting glimpses of it through

glazed cut-outs in the floor of the wine promotional area and the wine bar. We are now going down the steps illuminated by torches, to enter the cellar itself. In the beginning we had a space that was neither romantic nor evocative - a large section of underground car park situated under a 23-storey office tower. Our design converted it into a dramatic enclosed double vaulted chamber filled with wine, reminiscent of the old wine cellars of Europe. The cellar is organised by wine Region/State, with thick recycled timber columns and a different colour signage separating each area. Each Region has an area where information about the regional wines is provided using both graphics and LCD screens. Using screen technology will allow to very quickly add new information and promotions in the future. There are also 'Featured wine' areas in every Region, as well as general wine varieties information. The key feature of the cellar occupying a large space in the middle is tasting bar where regular wine tasting sessions are being conducted by knowledgeable staff wearing smart uniforms (also designed by us). In addition to that, there are private tasting rooms. Adjacent to them, there is a rare and premium wine room which is

visible from the rest of the cellar but only accessible through a locked glass door. Additional ambience is provided by wine equipment displayed museum style on pedestals scattered around the cellar.

The centre has a holistic design incorporating all aspects of the presentation – from logo to retail display, interior ambience, information signage, environmental graphics and packaging. It is aimed to provide a total customer experience – to surprise, intrigue, educate, explain, and to linger in memory. Most importantly, to provide an easy and enjoyable introduction into the complex world of wine.

If you have a product that requires technical knowledge and information, you can not rely only on your sales staff to provide it. Your store must play a major part in presenting this information to the customers. Hopefully, this article would give you a few good ideas on how to achieve it.

Yuri Bolotin can be contacted on (02) 9439 1106 or at yuri@designportfolio.com.au



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