

A research study by WD Partners draws attention to the centre store and explores how CPG brands and retailers effectively deploy aisle design innovations to attract shoppers. **Michelle Fenstermaker**, executive director, Insights, WD Partners, discusses the findings that hold globally acceptable design principles



Centre of Attraction

WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO CONDUCT THIS RESEARCH?

Over the past 60 years of modern supermarket retailing there has been very little change in the centre store, despite the fact that centre store represents a large percentage of the overall store profits. However, that percentage has been slipping due to the experience-enhancing strategies that have been applied at the perimeter. As designers for grocery retailers and CPG (consumer packaged goods) companies, WD Partners (a customer experience expert) wanted to test some hypotheses about what would draw more shoppers into the centre store aisles, to make it a more enjoyable experience for consumers, and a more productive space for our clients.

HOW WAS THE RESEARCH CONDUCTED?

WD's research explored how CPG brands and grocery retailers can effectively deploy aisle design innovations to attract shoppers, and outlines the fundamental design principles — uncluttered, symmetry, permanence, premium perception — that must underline effective execution within the centre store. We talked with Boomers (ages 46 to 63), Generation X (ages 30 to 45), and Millennials (ages 18 to 29) across the US. Conclusions are based on an online quantitative study of a national sample of 689 men and 808 women, who were presented with various “aisle attraction” design concepts and asked to rate the designs on several attributes. We also conducted in-depth focus groups, segmented by generation, to expand on the quantitative results. There were no significant differences between genders in terms of what would draw them down the aisle, nor were there any differences between demographic cohorts (Millennials, Gen X, and Boomers). This is great news for retailers and CPG companies, as we now know that they don't need to worry about developing different aisle strategies for different target shoppers.

AN ATTRACTION-DRIVEN CENTRE STORE DESIGN STRATEGY REPRESENTS THE FUTURE OF THE CENTRE STORE SHOPPING EXPERIENCE, AND THE POTENTIAL OF PROFITS FOR BOTH GROCERS AND CPG COMPANIES

WHAT CONCLUSIONS WERE DRAWN WITH RESPECT TO CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR AND STORE DESIGN?

What we found out in the study is that aisle attraction is most effective when it appeals to some of the most basic of human needs: creating a destination (a place we want to be or have a great desire to investigate), offering visual symmetry/balance, a sense of permanence (doesn't look like it's “here today and gone tomorrow”), surprise (something unexpected in a mundane, predictable environment) and payoff (what's in it for me?).

HOW CAN STORE LAYOUT AND DESIGN IMPACT SALES?

Understanding how consumers live and shop can help designers identify opportunities to innovate – in the store and on the shelf. Good retail design “connects” with shoppers, and creates a customer journey – whether throughout an entire store or down an aisle – that is more engaging and effective. Consumers need to be inspired by what they see in the store. It should be easy to find – and purchase – the products that are right for them. Don’t forget that an enjoyable shopping experience definitely can be a competitive differentiator.

WHAT FACTORS SHOULD RETAILERS AND STORE DESIGNERS KEEP IN MIND FOR ENHANCING CUSTOMER’S IN-STORE EXPERIENCE?

WD has four basic principles of retail design. These are core ideas we try to keep in mind as we develop solutions for our clients.

Experience – There’s always an experience at retail, but it may not be the experience the retailer would want. Retailers rely on us as designers to create positive and engaging experiences in stores.

Simplify and amplify – Focus. Turn down the visual volume and turn up the experience. Avoid visual “grey.” Help the shopper be successful every trip.

Sense of discovery – create a customer journey of planned breaks and changes of pace. Controlled vistas create focal points, and draw the shopper from “story” to “story.” In retail, we prefer shoppers to follow their heart rather than their head.

Surprise and delight – Break the monotony of product display. Tempt the eye and the palate. Exceed expectations. Be an advocate for the shopper. ■

Some Nuggets from the Research

- Though 82% of shopper decisions are made at the shelf, grocery store design has done little to change the essential format of the centre store. A decade ago, the centre store accounted for 85% of a store’s profit; today it is 70%.
- Shoppers see the centre store as crowded, intimidating and confusing; the reason why they look for specific products and brands only, and tune out everything else.
- Design innovation and format changes are focused on improving produce and prepared food sections, bakeries and in-store cafes, whereas flimsy stand-up cardboard displays, coupon dispensers and floor ads in the centre store fail to impress shoppers.
- Forward-thinking CPG companies and grocers make efforts to play and experiment in the centre store, like natural food and organic aisles, in-store coffee shops and fixture innovations that create operational efficiencies.
- It’s important to keep in mind that the centre store remains the biggest source of sales and profits for retailers; in fact, some CPG brands are realizing double-digit increases in sales with shelf design innovations.
- Shoppers felt less clutter made the aisle more approachable and more balanced.
- Shoppers are sensitive to the execution of aisle attractions, favoring ones that appear built-in to those that are simply “attached” to the shelves.
- Female shoppers especially favoured rounded edges and avoided hard corners to protect their children and themselves.
- Shoppers thought wood and darker metals/plastics give the space an upscale feel that would entice them, whereas the “sea of white” often found in centre store was thought of as dull.
- Shoppers felt that the produce area appeared warmer and more upscale with use of wood finishes, while the use of black provides a nice contrast to the colourful fruits and vegetables.
- Shoppers expect to see special deals or sales on stand-alone attractions, or end cap displays. The cheaper the execution of the attraction, the cheaper, and less relevant to the rest of the aisle the product becomes.
- Shoppers have trouble finding new products and wished stores would place them in more obvious displays
- It’s time to break up linear assortments, to think afresh about design innovation in the centre store, especially for brands with new product extensions or introductions.
- New products are especially vulnerable to getting lost in the shuffle in the centre store space and could benefit from a well-designed attraction.
- It’s not enough to use cardboard shipper boxes attached to a gondola. To encourage more aisle entry and exploration, brands should invest in shop-like attractions. To do this they must go beyond the product line and the category.

For more information on WD Partners’ Aisle Attraction research, contact: ann.rogers@wdpartners.com.