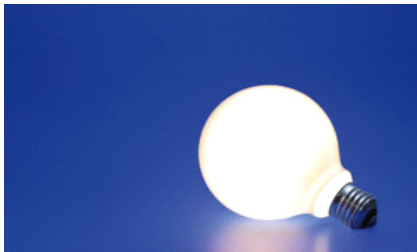


Features

8/15/2008

Smarter Selling: Time To See The (Retail) Light

Meghan Boyer



When it comes to boosting sales, retail lighting is just as important as product quality, store design and merchandising. Yet, many retailers light their spaces ineffectively. From creating dramatic lighting to using fluorescent bulbs effectively, learn what lighting industry experts have to say about retail illumination.

When it comes to retail lighting, some merchants take the practical approach: If consumers can see the products, it means the store is well lit. But “well lit” (bright lights) and “lit well” (visual interest) are very different illumination approaches.

Think of it this way: It’s unlikely a homeowner would place the same lighting fixtures and bulbs in a garage and a dining room. The two spaces have different purposes and, therefore, different lighting needs. In the same way, garden retailers should not put the same types of lighting on the retail floor as they use in a stock-room or greenhouse.

Some garden centers “rely on daylight and cobbled-together off-the-shelf lighting from hardware stores,” says Arthur Corbin, a professor with the Academy of Art University. “Lighting is almost an afterthought.” By being light-years away from good lighting design, such retailers are only hurting themselves: Not designing a specific lighting scheme limits sales potential, while the right light can boost retail sales, agree lighting experts.

Retailers can have a positive impact on sales by making their lighting work for—and not against—they. Doing so takes forethought and the help of a lighting industry expert, but the rewards are well worth the effort. Renovating a store’s lighting scheme can boost sales 25 to 30 percent, says John Morgan, a principal partner with SL Bagboy, a Charlotte, North Carolina-based lighting design agency.

Blinded by the Choices

There are four basic functions for retail lighting, says Arthur: Lighting should grab consumers’ attention from outside the store; direct customers within a retail space; attract shoppers to the back of the space and provide task lighting for workers. No one type of light can achieve all this, which means you must use a

lighting scheme that combines different lighting sources and types.

Any type of light can be used in retail, says John, yet some are more effective than others. General-area or ambient light, such as recessed lights, provides overall store illumination and should be combined with dramatic lighting elements. John recommends using spotlights for drama and accent of high-ticket products and selling areas. “If you are going to spend money on lighting, you need to spend it there,” he says.

When it comes to choosing the types of lights to include, retailers should consider the price, look and energy-efficiency of each light, agree the experts. Light Emitting Diode (LED) lights are currently expensive and among the least effective lighting for retailers, says John. He recommends retailers consider ceramic metal halide and low-voltage ceramic halide lamps. Fluorescent lighting is less expensive overall. It’s suitable for some store areas such as storage spaces, but, John says, it’s not appropriate for spaces such as above display areas.

Light color ranges from cool (blue) to warm (red) tones, says Jonathan Linn, commercial initiatives manager with the Lexington, Massachusetts-based Northeast Energy Efficiency Partnerships. Warm light tones should be used to light natural colors, including taupes, browns and greens. Cool lighting works well with black, grey and stainless steel. Retailers should choose a single color palette, says John. “You don’t want to mix tones in a store,” he says.

Brighter is not always better with lighting intensity. “People tend to blanket a store in light” instead of using light purposefully, says John. “It’s almost better to underlight the space because the drama comes across more.” Different retail areas require different light levels, and retailers need to follow local lighting requirements and codes, says Jonathan. In general, a retail space requires 15 foot-candles of lighting for shoppers to walk comfortably through the space, says John.

Shed Light on Your Market

A merchant’s inventory, shelving choices and merchandising style are all picked with a target client demographic in mind, and the same should hold true for lighting. “You wouldn’t move a Gap into a former Dairy Queen and keep the same lighting,” says Linn. “In retail, you have to think of whether it’s on the cheap or an upscale operation, and you want to create a mood.”

Lighting choices need to match a retailer’s marketable position, agrees John. For instance, fluorescent lights tend to present a low-cost first impression, while dramatic accent lighting denotes a high-end retailer, he says. Since dramatic lighting is more expensive, some retailers use it solely in high-value store areas and use economic fluorescent lighting in other areas, says Jonathan.

Supermarkets are excellent examples of mixing high- and low-end lighting appropriately, agree the experts. Products grocers want to emphasize, including the wine, produce and floral sections, are decoratively and dramatically lit. Grocers’ aisles, which house paper towels and other necessary consumer items, use fluorescent lights. “High-dollar lights are in one section, and low-value lights are in other sections,” says John. In a garden center, using fluorescent lighting over “necessary” gardening items such as mulch or soil or in a sale section is appropriate, says John. High-end lighting should be used to highlight end caps and displays. “Put your light where your profit is,” recommends John, adding that effective marketing can draw customers to other store areas.

Consult a Lighting Professional

Those without an eye for (or a background in) lighting are apt to illuminate a space improperly, which is why lighting experts don't recommend do-it-yourself lighting projects for retailers. A professional with retail-lighting experience is a necessity when designing a lighting scheme. "Get someone who is knowledgeable to come in and design a lighting scheme," says Jonathan.

Professional lighting-design firms are available for hire, but a lower-cost option is using the on-staff designer many electrical contractors employ, says Jonathan. He recommends retailers look for Lighting Certified designers. The National Council on Qualifications for the Lighting Professions bestows the Lighting Certified designation, which is represented by an "LC" after a lighting professional's name.

The bottom line: whether updating current fixtures or building an entire lighting scheme from scratch, you should make sure you're presenting your products in the best light. No matter how great the selection of plants and products, a customer isn't as likely to buy them if all she notices is the poor lighting.

"Whether you want to or not, you always notice lighting," says John.

Meghan Boyer is a freelance writer based in Chicago. She can be reached at meghan@meghanboyer.com.

Four Types of Light

1. Ambient or General Lighting: This flattering, indirect lighting is the sole source of light in mass-market stores, such as Target and Sears. It can be layered with other light sources in high-end and luxury stores.
2. Accent or Directional Lighting: Used as a highlight, accent lighting tells the eye where to look. Unfortunately, it's poorly understood by most retailers, who often use accent light sources for ambient light. Doing so creates random contrast and pools of light with no visual clues for shoppers of where to look.
3. Task Lighting: Brighter lighting is used in work areas, such as office desks or preparation areas.
4. Decorative Lighting: Chandeliers, wall sconces and table lamps are examples of decorative lighting. Lower light levels are better with decorative lighting, and exposed decorative bulbs should not exceed 25 watts.

Source: Arthur Corbin, professor, Academy of Art University