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Young Voices: Lights, Camera, Action!

Kristine Lonergan

The shopping experience is becoming more and more like the hottest show in town!

“What do you want to do this weekend?”

“Let’s go shopping!”

In other words, let’s go get entertained. The Gen Y consumer is no longer hoping to have a fun shopping experience, they’re expecting it. Today’s consumers expect the store to offer an experience that online shopping cannot deliver: providing the “in-store theatre” and the “touch-and-feel” experience around the brand and the product.

Consider what Starbucks has done for coffee, Sephora for cosmetics, Barnes & Noble for books and Apple for electronics. The before-mentioned successful businesses are selling the experience along with the product.

These companies are engaging the consumer, empowering them and putting them in control of their purchase, which encourages further spending. They’re inviting the consumer to be involved, and the Gen Y consumer loves, and is, participating

Gen Yers, also known as “Millennials,” represent a generation of digitally adept multi-taskers (say those four words 10 times fast!). As retailers, we’re in constant competition to get and keep their attention while they’re in our stores, amidst the onslaught of email, pins, “likes,” tweets ... the list goes on and on.

How do you compete? Engage them the minute they pull their car up to your store.

Visit Terrain in Westport, Connecticut, or Glen Mills, Pennsylvania, and the “show” begins as you’re entrance-bound. Terrain has done an outstanding job creating a feeling that you’re about to enter a world full of interesting and unique treasures. Once inside, the creative displays flow with inspirations from around the globe. Terrain has enhanced the experience by offering an irresistible cafe adorned with design ideas. Customers come to shop, meet friends, get ideas or just escape their busy lives. It’s all a part of the experience. Fashion retailers are increasingly leveraging video content, large screens and interactive displays in stores to attract customers. The key is to keep experiences fresh with relevant and regularly

updated digital content to drive sales.

Think of your store as a shelter magazine come to life. From the minute a Gen Yer sees the front cover and every subsequent page, wow them with garden ideas, tips and inspiration. Create actual garden vignettes of a mailbox garden including the mailbox or do the same with a real front porch decorated with hanging baskets, containers and fun garden furniture and accessories. Hire associates who are passionate about working with the consumer and train them how to sell the gardening experience, not just the product.

Hold a tasting event with a local chef using vegetable and herb ingredients from plants that you offer. Partner with a local charity and donate some of the proceeds. Initiate a community garden. Ideas are endless. Gen Y responds to a brand that takes a risk. Have fun with your message: "Take a break from tweeting ... get grounded—GARDEN."

Try experimenting with new service offers, such as lifestyle cafes, as well as exploring opportunities to partner with complementary brands within the walls of the store. These services enhance the in-store experience and help drive increased foot traffic, as well as keep the customer glued to your aisles and merchandise.

Gen Y wants their purchase to mean something. TOMS Shoes is a perfect example. Their motto? "We're in business to help change lives." For every pair of shoes they sell they donate a pair to a child in need. This is exactly what "Millennials" respond to.

What a great opportunity for our industry to highlight all the benefits of gardening for the environment, family activity, exercise, healthy eating and wildlife. Signage should trumpet all the benefits and associates should be well versed in them.

Simply put, the Gen Y customer approaches shopping the way they want:

- They trust peers first for shopping recommendations over advertising.
- On-line reviews do impact their shopping decisions.
- Exceptional service is an expectation.
- They're attracted to companies that give back to the community and environment.
- They want to be involved in their purchase. They don't want to be sold.

Create a show they keep wanting to see again and again, and you're sure to create a loyal consumer who will not only be back, but will most likely tweet her experience, give you a "like" on Facebook and pin you on Pinterest.

Become the hottest show in town and you're bound to gain market share! **GT**

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