



## Investigating the Way Store Environment and Merchandise Assortment Interface to Create Effective Shopping Experiences

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This research examined *how store environment and merchandise assortment interface to create effective shopping experiences for customers*. Customer voices combine with shopping observations to explore customer behaviors in the retail environment. This research provides retailers and merchants an improved understanding of the role that visual merchandising plays in effective shopping experiences for customers.

### Review of Literature

Visual merchandising is how the product visually communicates to the consumer, and whether or not the message creates a positive psychological or behavioral outcome which ultimately leads to a purchase (Kerfoot, Davies, & Ward, 2003). The store environment is a platform for visual merchandising that includes: store layout, wall setups, store fixtures, signing, lighting, and merchandise displays (Bell & Ternus, 2012; Burkhart, 2012). Clear paths throughout the store have been proven to influence customers to browse the store environment (Kerfoot, Davies, & Ward, 2003). Consumers' preferences for store layouts increase the frequency of shopping; their attitudes toward the layout can be gauged by the ease of difficulty of finding the merchandise (Jacobs, 1972).

From a visual merchant's point of view, an effective shopping experience is one in which: (a) merchandise is displayed in a way that is appealing to the customer (Bellizzi, Crowley, & Hasty, 2001; Burkhart, 2012; Cornelius, Natter, & Faure, 2009), (b) merchandise is displayed in a way that is easily accessible to the customer (Jacobs, 1972), (c) the customer is guided throughout the store in a manner that exposes him or her to all of the merchandise (Burkhart, 2012), and (d) the customer develops a desire to return (Pan & Zinkhan, 2006). For retailers, effective visual merchandising can transform a shopping experience into one in which customers enjoy shopping (Kinley, Josiam, & Lockett, 2010) and increased sales result (Chevalier, 1975). Visual merchants depend on stores having merchandise desired by their customers (Paulins & Geistfeld, 1992); effective visual merchandising strategies might enhance the desirability of the merchandise (Kerfoot, Davies, & Ward, 2003).

### Method

This study investigated the effectiveness of shopping experiences at a campus store. Two phases of research (observation and survey) were conducted to complete the case study analysis.

In phase one, customers were observed while they were in the store with the following observations being documented: customer demographics (sex, approximate age, race), time spent, whether the customer shopped alone or in a group, merchandise viewed, merchandise touched, price checking, questions to sales staff, and whether purchases were made. The way customers moved throughout the store and what merchandise they viewed were observed and recorded on field notes.

A verbally administered survey was developed for phase two. Customers were asked about their shopping experiences, what triggered them to enter the store, whether their store visits were planned or spontaneous, and whether purchases were intended.

The observation and interview components of the research provided unique opportunities to collect data enabling confirmation and insight about the ways customer behaviors and their reported experiences are related. Fifty customers participated in this project; 25 for observations and 25 for the surveys.

#### Analysis and Results

Overall, both of the population samples represented men and women as well as students and non-students. The shoppers in these samples viewed this store as an important resource for a variety of items. Similar patterns emerged between the observation and survey samples. For example, 56% of observed shoppers made purchases, while 64% of surveyed shoppers made purchases; 100% of surveyed shoppers reported that they moved through the store with ease and observations indicated similar ease of movement throughout the store.

This study supports the notion that this store's open layout design, accessible wall displays, appropriate store fixtures, descriptive signs, bright lights, and inviting merchandise displays appeal to customers and support their overall positive shopping experiences that result in sales in over half of the visits. Merchants should give attention to the high portion (96%) of customers who indicated they plan to return and continue to seek ways to provide merchandise that consumers are seeking as well as merchandise that may appeal to the customers for impulse purchases. The well-defined market of customers who patronize campus stores such as the one in this study provides a tangible and convenient population from whom information about current consumer trends and purchasing needs can be drawn. Continued efforts to learn the preferences and needs of customers are likely to result in sales growth, particularly because of the high expectations for returned visits among these customers.

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