The Visual Merchandising Concept in a Contemporary Environment

(Courtesy of Lord & Taylor.)
Learning Objectives

After completing this chapter, the student should be able to:

1. Discuss the various aspects of visual merchandising that are important to creating and installing modern visual presentations.
2. Describe the different environments in which visual merchandisers operate and the different demands of each.
3. List the different categories in the visual merchandiser's budget.
4. Explain the importance of safety in the installation of visual presentations and the precautions necessary to avoid mishaps.
5. Describe the elements that contribute to the success of window and interior displays.
6. Contrast the emphasis placed on mannequin design today with that of years past.
7. Briefly discuss the lighting changes that have taken place in the industry.
8. Tell about the various types of careers available to someone pursuing entry into the field of visual merchandising.
9. Discuss the trends that are currently becoming part of the visual merchandising scene.

Introduction

In the world of visual merchandising as we know it today, artistic talents play a major role in creating an atmosphere that motivates shoppers to become customers. Unlike the fine artist whose creativity is a statement of feelings, or yesterday’s window trimmer whose goal was just to produce a pretty display, today’s visual merchandiser must create displays with an eye on function and artistic expression that ultimately increase the store’s profitability. In today’s retail environment, the practice of concentrating a store’s display budget on windows replete with costly props and backgrounds is the exception rather than the rule. While some flagship stores such as Macy’s Herald Square in New York City and Neiman Marcus in Dallas still feature exciting, costly displays—especially at times like Christmas—their branch stores are often in windowless structures or buildings with few display windows. In shopping malls, the major retail venues in the United States, the traditional windows have been replaced with wide-open entryways through which shoppers can view a large portion of the main selling floor. In these environments, the store itself is the display, and it must be effectively enhanced to attract shoppers and stimulate sales.
With the emphasis on the whole store rather than on just the windows, display people have become visual merchandisers—part of a team that specialize in the entire store’s visual appearance. When one enters a Disney store, for example, the experience is unique. The total environment or theme concept immediately captivates shoppers, in particular children, who are quickly motivated to buy a variety of tempting items. With the animated figures that encircle the store, the giant screen that features Disney videos available for sale, and the mounds of stuffed animals heaped in an inviting fashion, a magical moment in shopping is achieved.

Many retailers are using this concept, which was initiated by Banana Republic. In their original stores, merchandise emphasis was on safari-inspired clothing, and the interiors were designed to reflect that image. Until the company changed its image and merchandising philosophy, the stores were replete with netting, jeeps, palm trees, bamboo, and anything that gave the impression of a trip to the wild. Today, companies like Nike in their Nite-towns, Warner Bros. in their retail outlets, and OshKosh B’Gosh have followed the early Banana Republic lead and subscribe to this thematic approach to visual presentation.

Another departure from traditional store design and merchandise presentation is a concept introduced by Ralph Lauren. In his New York City flagship store on Madison Avenue, antique and reproduction fixtures transform the environment into a homelike setting. Merchandise is featured in armoires and on tables that one would find in elegantly designed residences. Enhanced by fine art and beautiful home accessories, the magic begins as the doors open into the stores. Shoppers are made to feel that they are in a comfortable home rather than in a conventional store.

Borrowing from the retailers, restaurants have successfully adopted the thematic approach. The Hard Rock Cafe, Motown, Planet Hollywood, and RainForest Cafe created environments reminiscent of an exciting setting. The latest and perhaps most visually exciting of these eating establishments is the Rain Forest Cafe, with branches throughout the country. As customers enter, the lush vegetation immediately sets the mood to whet their appetites. In addition to the food they serve, most of these dining emporiums feature boutiques offering a host of products bearing their logos, a marketing technique that adds to the bottom line.

Williams-Sonoma with its enticing cooking utensils displayed creatively, Crate & Barrel with its brilliant settings that make shopping an adventure, and Pottery Barn with its wealth of contemporary home furnishings each add their own touches to make them distinguishable from other stores. At the department store level, the lavish windows of the downtown flagships still generate a great deal of excitement. Particularly at Christmastime, stores like Lord & Taylor and Saks Fifth Avenue in New York City still impress critics and customers with their imaginative window displays (Figure 1–1). Lines of would-be customers congregate to view the extravaganzas set forth by the visual merchandisers.

![Figure 1–1  A stylized fantasy display at Christmas. (Courtesy of Marshall Field's.)](image-url)
Each year the presentations seem more elaborate than those of the previous year. While these approaches are an exciting part of today's visual environments, they do not encompass all of the design directions taken by the retail community. The challenge to visual merchandisers is to continually develop ideas that will present the entire store in its best possible light every day, to make certain that their companies get a fair share of the consumer market.

Those wishing to enter the field of visual merchandising must develop the knowledge necessary to create and install presentations of merit. Throughout this text, concepts and theories as well as a host of display techniques and innovative projects are carefully presented to assist the reader in learning how to develop ideas and tackle the everyday problems associated with visual presentation.

**The Visual Merchandiser’s World**

**Visual merchandising**, briefly defined, is the presentation of a store and its merchandise in ways that will attract the attention of potential customers and motivate them to make purchases. The role of the visual merchandiser in this effort is to carry out the merchandising concepts as formulated by management. These merchandising plans include what items are to be featured and in which locations they should be housed. The visual merchandiser, guided by these decisions and using all of his or her creative talents, sets out to present the best possible visual effects.

A position as visual merchandiser involves a combination of skills, including creativity (Figure 1–2); a sense of order; dedication to design principles; and the discipline to follow directions, stay within budgets, and complete paperwork. It involves artistic talent and training and also knowledge of tools, lighting, construction of backgrounds and props, and a complete understanding of store design. Other important skills include the ability to create signs (both hand-lettered and computerized), write copy, and create and choose appropriate graphics. On any day, the demands of the job could involve many other abilities.

The specific duties depend on the arena in which the visual merchandiser works and at what level he or she is involved. Some positions require expertise in only one aspect of visual merchandising, such as sign preparation or window installations, whereas others require a broader base so that all of the functions can be satisfactorily accomplished by one person. In major stores, visual merchandising roles tend to be specialized because there is often a large staff that carries out each project. When Macy’s Herald Square or Marshall Field’s in Chicago, for...
example, plan and install their famous annual Flower Shows (Figure 1–3), scores of individuals with different talents undertake the task. On the other hand, a freelancer who creates backgrounds and props, installs the displays, and prepares copy must be a jack-of-all-trades. Somewhere in between is the person who works for a small chain and, along with an assistant, is responsible for more than one aspect of visual merchandising.

Whatever the level of participation, each individual should understand the job and what his or her role is in developing the entire visual merchandising picture. Basically, there are three areas in which people in the field are employed: department stores, specialty chains, and freelancing.

**Department Stores**

The major full-line department stores such as Macy’s and Bloomingdale’s and the specialized department stores such as Saks Fifth Avenue employ in-house staffs to visually merchandise their premises. Key individuals generally operate from the company’s **flagship stores** and are responsible for the direction of the visual merchandising philosophy and the creation of the concepts for the entire company. Since the role of visual merchandise director has become so complex, the position has been elevated in most stores to vice president and in some cases, senior vice president. In addition to being the central figure in planning window and interior presentations, the visual merchandise manager has assumed numerous other responsibilities, such as store design, layout, fixture design and selection, graphics development and procurement, signage direction, and lighting usage.

Other members of the visual merchandising team may specialize in one or more areas. They include sign-making, graphics, prop and background construction, and trimming. Generally, each member of the team has a narrow responsibility and contributes some particular expertise to the overall challenges conceived by the head of visual merchandising. Although visual merchandising is typically a subdivision of the promotional division in most large department stores, each company uses a structure that best suits its needs.

**Specialty Chains**

Unlike the department store that generally locates management in the company’s flagship store, the visual merchandising manager in chain organizations usually operates from central headquarters where all other top managers are based. The responsibility at this level is to conceive a visual concept with what is generally a small staff of designers, who disseminate the ideas to those responsible for the individual stores’ installations (Figures 1–4 and 1–5). The plans are carried out either by trimmers who travel within a particular region of the stores or by the individual store...
The Visual Merchandising Concept in a Contemporary Environment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DQ</th>
<th>Item Description</th>
<th>Sku</th>
<th>Display Comments</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>16 oz, Stacking Bowl</td>
<td>1162270</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>2 qt. Stacking Bowl</td>
<td>1162254</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>4 oz. Stacking Bowl</td>
<td>1162262</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>6 qt. Stacking Bowl</td>
<td>1162288</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Original Cuisinart</td>
<td>97744</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>Vong Peanut Sauce</td>
<td>1203785</td>
<td>Dropshipped from vendor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Grn Normandy Towels s/2</td>
<td>1138346</td>
<td>Late; use any green towel until arrival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Pot Sticker Makers</td>
<td>1188739</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>White Deluxe 11</td>
<td>411876</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>White Mini Prep</td>
<td>518050</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>Maple Condiment Bowl</td>
<td>384479</td>
<td>Replenishment stock will arrive 1-2 weeks late</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Furniture**

- 1) Ice cream machine is on an 8” riser
- 2) Ice cream machine is on 3 Austrian Ginger cans.
- 3) Small biscotti jar is filled with vanilla beans, place on a 6” riser.
- 4) Banana dishes are stacked 6 high.
- 5) Banana dishes are stacked 5 high.
- 6) Banana dishes are stacked 4 high.
- 7) Australian Ginger is 3 high, 3 across.
- 8) Australian Ginger is 2 high, 3 across.
- 9) Australian Ginger is 1 high, 3 across.

*If you do not own this furniture, place books in small flour basket.

**Structure**

1) Ice cream machine is on an 8" riser
2) Ice cream machine is on 3 Austrian Ginger cans.
3) Small biscotti jar is filled with vanilla beans, place on a 6" riser.
4) Banana dishes are stacked 6 high.
5) Banana dishes are stacked 5 high.
6) Banana dishes are stacked 4 high.
7) Australian Ginger is 3 high, 3 across.
8) Australian Ginger is 2 high, 3 across.
9) Australian Ginger is 1 high, 3 across.

Managers who faithfully install the preplanned displays from photographs and corporate directives. In more and more companies, specific plans are set out in mock windows and interior settings in the company's headquarters and are photographed for copying by the stores. A more detailed presentation of this centralized approach appears in Chapter 2.

**Freelancers**

Individuals who operate their own visual merchandising businesses and provide their services to clients for a fee are called freelancers. Generally, they concentrate on window presentations for independent retailers and sometimes involve themselves in interior presentation if the store requests it.

**Creating Effective Visual Presentations**

The visual merchandiser is largely concerned with the creative presentation of the store's merchandise in settings that will maximize sales. The job involves the coordination of all the components needed to produce window and interior displays that will enhance the store's image and set it apart from the competition. To achieve this goal of creating an inviting environment for shoppers, a number of tasks must be performed, such as selecting the appropriate props and mannequins to enhance the merchandise. Once these ingredients have been determined, the visual merchandiser must consider design, color, lighting that both illuminates and creates dramatic effects, and signage. The finished product should be one that attracts shoppers' attention and transforms them into customers.
In order to effectively differentiate one retail facility from another, and bring the retail premises to its highest level of visual appeal, a variety of different components must be successfully coordinated. Visual merchandisers must be constantly aware of what’s taking place in each of these visual segments and must be prepared to make any necessary changes. The following sections represent an overview of the various components, which will be explored in greater depth in the upcoming chapters.

**Store Design**

There is no longer a typical store design. Merchants employ the services of architects and designers who, along with visual merchandisers, create environments that are both unique and functional. The space that was once allocated to store windows has been minimized and replaced with more selling floor space. In place of the traditional windows, large panes of glass are used to allow shoppers to see a large portion of the store. The interiors range from natural settings using stone and handhewn woods to elegant environments with atriums, majestic staircases (Figure 1–6), marble flooring, and other touches of grandeur. Many of the major department stores are reducing the appearance of vast selling floors with the construction of individual shops or boutiques to house their special designer collections. This approach gives the customer the feeling of shopping in smaller stores rather than the cold feeling of the large department store.

Food stores are abandoning the sterile looks long associated with them in favor of surroundings that feature espresso and juice bars, preparation areas that allow shoppers to see how the products are prepared, areas that offer “prepared meals,” and a host of kiosk fixtures scattered throughout the store. Chains like Whole Foods, Fresh Market, and Harris Teeter are leaders in innovative visual merchandising that transforms their stores into exciting food shopping venues.

**Mannequins**

While traditional mannequins are still often featured, many stores have replaced them with, to name a few, wire mannequins, soft sculptured types, stylized forms, and motorized models (Figure 1–7). With the increasing cost of traditional mannequins, many merchants have opted for forms that represent mannequins and are created by visual merchandisers. The creation of these **representational mannequins** is fully explored in Chapter 4, including step-by-step instructions on how to build them.

**Props and Materials**

The list of materials and props used by today’s visual merchandisers seems to be endless. Although conventional store-bought props are available at various resource centers, more and more retailers are making use of things found in nature (such as tree branches, rocks, and sand) and found objects once reserved for the junk pile (such as old chairs, worn picture frames, and rusty farm tools) (Figure 1–8). With fresh coats of paint and new finishes, **found display objects** can be used dramatically in displays. Not only do they provide for effective visual presentations, they also enable budgets to go further. Antiques and antique reproductions are also being used extensively, a trend started by Ralph Lauren. Of course, at Christmastime, animated displays and glittery props are still of paramount importance. Shoppers line up along the major department store windows to enjoy the creative offerings of companies like Spaeth Design that specialize in unique, animated presentations. (See Chapter 15 for a Profile on Spaeth Design.)

**Lighting**

Although fluorescents are still used by retailers like supermarkets and warehouse clubs for general illumination, this form of lighting is no longer in great prominence in most retail stores. Today, halogen and quartz lighting and high-intensity discharge lamps are the products of choice. They not only serve the functional needs of illumination but can be used to achieve dramatic effects. Numerous types of cans or holders are being used to house these lightbulbs, supplying a variety of looks to augment the many types of store fixtures.
The store’s basic environmental design is enhanced at Christmas with a wealth of holiday trim. (Courtesy of Marshall Field’s.)

Realistic mannequins are the mainstays of most major department store’s visual merchandising programs. (Courtesy of Adel Rootstein. Photograph by Ellen Diamond.)

Old picture frames and chairs that have been refurbished enhance window displays at minimum cost. (Photograph by Ellen Diamond.)
Chapter 1

Graphics and Signage

Although traditional two-dimensional signs are still used abundantly, signage and graphics have taken on new looks (Figure 1–9). Airbrushed murals celebrating local landmarks, multilevel murals featuring a variety of montages, animated cartoon characters that move throughout the signage, backlit transparencies, light walls, prismatic displays, and digitally produced huge photographic blowups that rival outdoor billboards are just a few of the exciting approaches now used in retail environments.

Electronics continue to pervade retailers’ premises. Fashion designer Norma Kamali began featuring each season’s collections on numerous television screens in her New York City store windows. Today, the trend continues with major retailers all over the country—such as Carson Pirie Scott, Dayton-Hudson, Bloomingdale’s, and Macy’s—using television monitors throughout their stores to show vendor collections. In addition to in-store video, retailers are using other electronic formats to capture shoppers’ attention. For example, Vialat, a system by Advanced Interactive Video, Inc. of Columbus, Ohio, is an interactive directory used in shopping malls. The system highlights store sales and promotions and gives previews of upcoming events. It also automatically dispenses individual retailer coupons. Instant Imagery by R. D. Button Associates, Inc. of Randolph, New Jersey, is a computerized system that enables customers to see how they look in clothing without trying it on. The customer inputs his or her size and selects an outfit, which is then displayed on the person’s image on a computerized screen.

Point of Purchase

In addition to the signage that abounds in retail establishments, there are point-of-purchase programs developed by manufacturers for retailer use. The Point of Purchase Advertising International (POPAI) reports that it now represents a $12 billion industry! Its president defines point-of-purchase merchandising as “displays, signs, structures and devices that are used to identify, advertise and/or merchandise an outlet, service or product and which serve as an aid to retail selling” (Figure 1–10). Industry reports revealed that whenever these programs were in evidence for specific brands, sales increased significantly. Examples of how the industry has gone from one that merely used signage to one that develops full programs are included in Chapter 13.

Sound Usage

Sound is not a visual element, but it is being used to enhance visual presentation. Professionals in the field agree that shoppers can turn away from visual elements, but sound is inescapable. The first early venture into sound for
visual enhancement was made by Disney. In its Main Street environment in Disneyland, Disney determined that the attractions alone were not sufficiently stimulating. The incorporation of sound made them come to life. Sound is being used abundantly by retailers today to set moods and give shoppers news. At Warner Bros. stores, for example, Bugs Bunny’s voice is used for the store directory. More and more retailers are using music to put shoppers in a buying frame of mind. Walk through many junior departments, for example, and you can hear a rock beat permeating the selling floor.

In order to keep up-to-date with the comings and goings of the visual industry and store design, it is imperative that those responsible for such endeavors read all of the periodicals that touch upon these subjects and attend the trade expositions that feature the latest in the field. One of the ways in which to learn about new trends, product offerings, and other pertinent news is by reading the pages of the trade periodical Visual Merchandising and Store Design, whose Profile follows.

PROFILE

A Contemporary Visual Merchandising and Environmental Design Profile: VM + SD

The periodical “bible” of the visual industry is undoubtedly Visual Merchandising and Store Design (VM + SD). Not only does it provide pertinent information to visual merchandisers and store designers about the field but it also enables others in every retail capacity to learn about innovative ideas that will help them to become better merchants. Its history as a visual publication dates back to the early part of the twentieth century when it was called Display World. At that time it concentrated primarily on store windows. When the term display was inadequate to describe the overall aspects of visual programs, its title was changed to Visual Merchandising. Another title change to VM + SD took place when it was obvious that these two components of design were compatible with each other and provided for overall premises excellence.

Produced monthly, VM + SD presents a wide range of materials, including innovations of retailers around the world and articles that address everything from signage and graphics to mannequins and lighting and the various resources from which they may be purchased. Once a year, a special issue, Buyer’s Guide, provides store designers, visual merchandisers,
construction services firms, photographers, and the retail industry association with a complete guide to resources needed to help them carry out their roles. Monthly announcements of conferences, exhibits, competitions, and events keep the industry aware of what is happening and where it is taking place. Articles written by the publication's editorial staff and industry experts who specialize in certain segments of the field appear in every edition.

The wealth of excellent photographs of innovative store designs and visual presentations enable readers to see, first hand, what is happening that is newsworthy and, perhaps, how they can capitalize on it for their own use. Rounding out the magazine's offerings are advertisements of major companies that supply the visual merchandising and store design industries. Each ad clearly depicts the company's products and helps potential purchasers to learn about what is available to them.

In addition to the monthly publication, VM + SD's website, www.visualstore.com, offers the latest happenings in the industry and serves as a place where professionals can log on for information other than what is featured in the periodical.

### Visual Merchandising and Store Design Websites

One of the fastest ways in which to explore the visual merchandising and store design industry is by accessing online resources through the websites of individual businesses, trade organizations, and associations. At these websites, visual merchandisers and store designers are able to browse and learn about product offerings, innovations in design, industrial expositions and meeting places, company resources, directions for every visual component, and the like. Once the appropriate sites of interest have been selected, further investigation may be accomplished by e-mailing them or making in-person visits to get better acquainted with the products and services they provide for those involved in visual merchandising and store design.

The following chart offers selected websites that serve a multitude of needs. The list is by no means complete in terms of what is available on the Internet, but merely serves the purpose of introducing readers to the materials in the field and the organizations that benefit the industry's professionals.

### SELECTED WEBSITES FOR VISUAL MERCHANDISERS AND STORE DESIGNERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization Name</th>
<th>Website Address</th>
<th>Offerings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institute of Store Planners</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ispo.org">www.ispo.org</a></td>
<td>Information on store design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Association of</td>
<td><a href="http://www.iald.org">www.iald.org</a></td>
<td>Lighting information and products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lighting Designers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Council of Shopping Centers</td>
<td><a href="http://www.icsc.org">www.icsc.org</a></td>
<td>Latest innovations in shopping centers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Planning and Visual Education Partnership</td>
<td><a href="http://www.visualstore.com/PAVE">www.visualstore.com/PAVE</a></td>
<td>An alliance of the major organizations dedicated to visual merchandising and store design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearr Corp</td>
<td><a href="http://www.clearrcorp.com">www.clearrcorp.com</a></td>
<td>Major supplier of graphics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pam International</td>
<td><a href="http://www.pamint.com">www.pamint.com</a></td>
<td>Store equipment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol Barnhart Inc.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.carolbarnhart.com">www.carolbarnhart.com</a></td>
<td>Mannequins, forms, decoratives, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point of Purchase Advertising</td>
<td><a href="http://www.popai.com">www.popai.com</a></td>
<td>Marketing research regarding point of purchase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
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<tr>
<td>Visualstore</td>
<td><a href="http://www.visualstore.com">www.visualstore.com</a></td>
<td>Complete retail design and visual merchandising resource</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adel Rootstein</td>
<td><a href="http://www.rootstein.com">www.rootstein.com</a></td>
<td>Premier manufacturer of upscale mannequins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VM + SD</td>
<td><a href="http://www.stmediagroup.com">www.stmediagroup.com</a></td>
<td>Monthly magazine on visual merchandising and store design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lightsearch.com</td>
<td><a href="http://www.lightsearch.com">www.lightsearch.com</a></td>
<td>The source for lighting specifiers and buyers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The National Retail Federation</td>
<td><a href="http://www.nrf.com">www.nrf.com</a></td>
<td>Major resource for information on retail industry</td>
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<td>American Center for Design</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ac4d.org">www.ac4d.org</a></td>
<td>Primary source for design information</td>
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<tr>
<td>Color Marketing Group</td>
<td><a href="http://www.colormarketing.org">www.colormarketing.org</a></td>
<td>Premier international association for color and design professionals</td>
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Other Factors In Visual Merchandising

There are other factors that visual merchandisers consider on a day-to-day basis, primarily budgets and safety.

Budgeting

Retailers of all sizes must grapple with how much of the budget to allocate for their visual merchandising. No matter how much is earmarked to accomplish the store’s goals, it never seems to be enough. Budgets are established in many ways, with the major department store organizations using the most structured formats. The small, independent merchant, on the other hand, tends to be less disciplined about budgeting, particularly where visual presentations are concerned. This may be because the staff does not include visual professionals who can lobby for reasonable allocations or because these merchants view visual merchandising as something to be achieved with whatever resources are left over after stock purchasing, human resource costs, and advertising. Generally, there are three aspects to visual merchandise budgets, no matter how large or small the organization: display fixturing, materials and props, and labor costs.

Display Fixturing. Equipment of a more permanent nature, such as stands, platforms, pedestals, merchandise forms, and mannequins, is generally used for a long time (Figure 1–11). Except for the major department stores where specialized forms and mannequins are set aside for specific purposes (such as the mechanical ones often used at Christmastime), this type of equipment is generally used for all presentations. Since the materials from which these forms are made are long-lasting, expenditures for this classification of display pieces are made infrequently, perhaps once a year or less often. Repairs to such equipment, such as mannequin restoration, often come out of a contingency budget.

Figure 1–11 Platforms and other fixtures must be considered in display budgets to give the visual merchandiser a wealth of items to use on the selling floor. (Photograph by Ellen Diamond.)
Chapter 1

More and more retailers are setting their sights on less costly mannequins, such as unisex types made of wire or other materials that can be used for many purposes. Creative visual merchandisers are even producing their own mannequin substitutes to feature merchandise. These forms are often very exciting and can be made inexpensively. Using a variety of basic materials, the trimmer comes up with forms that serve the retailer's purposes. We discuss how to build these original forms in Chapter 4.

Materials and Props. The settings that we see in store windows or inside stores that set the scene for a display are changed frequently. Sometimes these backgrounds are painted or adapted for repeated use, saving the retailer a great deal of expense. For specific seasons such as Christmas, when glittery fabrics, imaginative mechanical devices, and other materials indicate a specific setting, it is difficult to use the same fabrics that worked well the rest of the year. The transformation of a store at this holiday period is costly. However, because it is a time when most retailers generate a major portion of their annual sales, budget cuts are not usually made at this time. The majority of retailers overexpend themselves at this time of the year and, if necessary, cut back on the moneys used for visual presentations for the remainder of the year. By borrowing props such as chairs, ladders, bicycles, and musical instruments from other businesses or from their own merchandise departments, retailers can stretch budgets (Figure 1–12). It is the creative visual merchandiser who can develop effective presentations when costs have been greatly reduced.

Labor Costs. A look at any major store's organizational chart for the visual merchandising department indicates that a significant amount is spent on the staff who create, construct, and install the store's visual presentations. In special situations such as storewide promotions, the labor cost is further increased by overtime pay for the staff and by hiring temporary employees to complete the project. In small stores where freelancers are generally used, expenses increase when higher prices are charged by the freelancers.

Many chains have reduced their labor costs by turning to a variety of graphics instead of the traditionally used displays. Companies like The Gap, Banana Republic, The Limited, Abercrombie & Fitch, and Ann Taylor have taken the graphics route to curtail labor costs associated with traditional visual merchandising. In order to cut labor costs, some small retailers create their own displays or at least make some changes in merchandise presentation themselves between freelancer visits. By using seasonless props that are easy to change, retailers can reduce the labor cost of trimming. Although the expense for visual presentations may be considerable, most retailers agree that the visual impression is very important in attracting shoppers and that any investment in creative display pays off in the end-of-the-year bottom line.

Figure 1–12 Bicycles are excellent props in displays and may be borrowed without cost from other retailers. (Photograph by Ellen Diamond.)
The Safety Factor

Visual merchandise design is based on such elements as lighting, merchandise selection, and the principles of display employed to ensure success. In executing designs, the installers must always make certain that the presentations are safely produced. Most retailers are reluctant to discuss careless display work that resulted in injuries and lawsuits. An electrical wire that extends past the interior display area, an overhead sign that falls, or an unsecured mannequin that topples when a customer touches it are typical of the safety problems associated with display.

Safety is an important consideration on the job, for the well-being of the visual merchandising staff as well as the customers. The potential exists for someone to be burned by hot lights, shocked by faulty electrical equipment, or tripped by poorly placed wires. In order to prevent these accidents, the following precautions should be taken when working on an installation:

♦ When signs or graphics are suspended from the ceiling, a sufficient amount of space must be left for shoppers to walk under them. The signs must also be out of the shoppers’ reach.
♦ Ceiling grills or grids should be used to suspend items. The use of screw eyes directly in a ceiling might not guarantee good support. If there is any doubt about the holding ability of screws, toggle bolts should be used for plaster or plasterboard ceilings.
♦ All parts of a mannequin should be secured, with special attention to the base plate and rod that attaches to the buttock or ankle. The support rods should be tightened to prevent toppling. Even when mannequins are used in enclosed windows and out of the reach of shoppers, automobile and pedestrian traffic could cause them to tip over. If base plates are not used, the mannequin should be wired to the floor by a process called striking a mannequin.
♦ Heavy-duty nails or screws should be used to secure merchandise or props to walls. The use of pins should be avoided when long-term support is needed.
♦ Three-dimensional letters should be attached with bonding materials such as hot glue, double-face foam tape, or headless nails called brads. Vibration or heat from light fixtures could cause letters to fall if they are not well attached.
♦ Lighting fixtures should be placed out of the customers’ reach. Unprotected floor spotlights should not be used in interior installations where someone could get burned by touching one.
♦ Extreme caution should be exercised when using hot glue guns, spray paint, or any other tool that could cause damage or injury.
♦ Electrical wiring should be examined regularly to make certain there is no damaged wire that could start a fire.
♦ Suspending wire that is strong enough for its task should be used. Although nylon filament and number 30 (invisible) wire are common choices, they do have limitations. The supports should be tested before the display is completed.

Careers In Visual Merchandising

Whether you will be employed by a major department store, starting as an apprentice and rising through the ranks, work for a chain to trim the windows of several units, or go into business as a freelancer, a career in visual merchandising will require particular skills and abilities. Some people have a natural color sense; others might be sufficiently talented to construct backgrounds that generate excitement. The challenge is to develop both what comes naturally and what can be learned from books and experience.

In order to prepare for a career in visual merchandising, several practical courses are beneficial. Courses in color, design, lighting, lettering, photography, advertising layout, prop construction, and general display techniques can give the prospective visual merchandiser the background necessary for success. Schools, colleges, and technical institutes across the country offer such courses either in degree programs or on a course-by-course basis.

Once the preliminary tasks have been mastered, you should prepare a resume. It should be about one page in length and should briefly describe professional training, educational accomplishments, and related experiences. A good resume is needed to compete with all of the others that companies receive from candidates. Booklets from the U.S. Department of Labor, online resources, computerized programs, and books on resume writing are available. You can also employ a professional resume writer to carry out the task. An appropriate cover letter should accompany the resume, outlining your interest in the position you are seeking. In addition to the resume, you
should develop a portfolio of your visual merchandising projects. It should include samples of any work created either in class or on the job.

When seeking employment, there are several places to look. Trade periodicals such as VM + SD, Women's Wear Daily, and DNR feature classified ads, and consumer newspapers do the same. Contacting employment agencies and attending trade shows such as Shop East, Global Shop, Visual New York, and the Exhibitor Show in Las Vegas can turn up important leads. Once a prospective employer shows interest by granting you an interview, it is important to appear with a prepared portfolio of work and to present a professional and enthusiastic manner.

Proper attention to the details of a job search will ultimately match you with a suitable employer. Once you are hired, an exciting world filled with opportunity awaits you.

## Trends In Visual Merchandising

As is evident in every aspect of retailing, companies are undertaking changes in visual programs and directions to maintain their places in this highly competitive business arena. With visual budgets sometimes strained, visual merchandisers have, by necessity, come up with new approaches to planning. Others without the constraints of limited funds have also embarked upon new approaches to their programs that they hope will generate excitement and transform “lookers” into customers. By all accounts, there are many trends, no matter what the budget, that are making headlines in the area of visual merchandising and environmental design. Some of the major trends in the field are listed here and will be given greater attention in the subsequent chapters in the book.

- **The increased use of graphics.** In just about every retailing venue, and in the stores that house them, the use of graphics is reaching new heights. Everything from the digitally produced “billboards” to graphics that feature motion is being utilized to capture the attention of the shopper.
- **Opulence in store design.** Throughout the country, upscale retailers are investing in store designs that are more extravagant than ever before. Companies such as Cartier and Ferragamo have taken facilities design to new heights in their New York City emporiums with extravagant fixturing, lighting, and other amenities to capture the upper-class market. The various trade papers indicate this is only the beginning and that retailers will be likely to continue these design endeavors for the foreseeable future.
- **The resurgence of mannequins.** In the past few years, many retailers have opted for less costly, more practical mannequins on which to display their merchandise. Today, however, and for the foreseeable future, companies like Bloomingdale’s and Nordstrom in the United States, and David Jones in Australia are following the trend of relying upon unique mannequins to enhance their facilities in place of the less costly “torso” and “headless” types that made their way into visual merchandising during the close of the twentieth century.
- **Innovative lighting.** A wealth of new ideas is now vastly improving lighting for interiors and visual presentations. Included are advances in color kinetics, new lensing systems that give a smoother appearance to the light beam, new lighting control systems, and greater energy efficiency in white-light LEDs.
- **Directional signage.** Studies show that the average customer spends only 9 minutes in a store, so it has become essential for retailers to create directional signage that quickly directs the customer to the right place to find the desired products. To achieve this there is a trend toward greater use of hanging and framing systems. Companies like Rose Displays and APCO are addressing retailer needs with a wealth of new signage products that will more than likely become part of the interior landscape of the vast majority of large retail spaces.

It should be noted that these are only some of the trends that have been reported in trade periodicals such as VM + SD. Others will be addressed throughout the various chapters.

## Terms of the Trade

- backlit transparencies
- directional signage
- flagship stores
- found display objects
- freelancers
- graphics
- mock windows
- online resources
- point-of-purchase
- Point of Purchase Advertising Institute (POPAI)
- portfolio
- representational mannequins
- seasonless props
- striking a mannequin
- theme concept
- total environment concept
- visual merchandising
- window trimmer
Chapter Review

Key Points in the Chapter

1. The world of display has been expanded from a concentration on eye-catching windows to a concept of storewide visual merchandising that includes not only window and interior displays but how to present any and all merchandise for customer inspection, and create total, exciting environments. This includes the choice and use of functional and unusual lighting throughout the premises and signage and graphics that differentiate one part of the store from the others.

2. Merchandise presentation must be creative as well as functional so that customers can make purchases easily.

3. Borrowing from retailers, restaurants have successfully adopted the thematic approach and have transformed dining establishments into unusual environments.

4. By using the environmental or thematic approach to visual merchandising, merchants present the same setting throughout the year, without the need to change for seasons and holidays.

5. Visual merchandisers perform their duties for many different types of retailers, with each requiring the same basic preparation for success.

6. All retailers are confronted with the question of how to allocate dollars for their visual presentations. Included in their budgeting considerations are display fixturing, materials and props, and labor costs.

7. Safety plays an important role in visual merchandising. Carelessness in installation could result in injuries to store employees as well as shoppers.

8. The creation of effective presentations involves the appropriate mix of various components, such as color, lighting, fixturing, and signage selection and usage.

9. In order to keep abreast of the times, today’s visual merchandisers must be aware of trends in the field. Contemporary trends include:
   ♦ an increase in the use of graphics
   ♦ opulence in store design
   ♦ the resurgence in the use of mannequins, props, and materials that do not require purchasing
   ♦ innovative lighting that is both functional and exciting
   ♦ directional signage that reduces the amount of time needed to find particular departments and merchandise
   ♦ interactive point-of-purchase devices
   ♦ the use of sound as an attracting tool.

10. A career in visual merchandising requires skill in a number of areas, each of which can be learned through formal instruction and on-the-job training.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the display person’s job in today’s retail environment differ from what it was in years past?

2. Define the term visual merchandising.

3. Define the total environment concept as used by some of today’s retailers and restaurateurs.

4. In what way does the department store visual merchandiser’s task differ from that of the freelancer?

5. What are some of the categories covered by the visual merchandising departments of most large department stores?

6. In what way can a store that utilizes mannequins reduce its outlay for such forms while still capturing the shopper’s attention?

7. By what means can a visual merchandiser cut costs for materials and props?

8. Why must the visual merchandiser pay strict attention to safety when creating presentations?

9. What are some of the safety points that should be considered when planning and installing a display?

10. What are some of the types of illumination that provide both functional and dramatic effects?

11. What is meant by the term point-of-purchase?

12. What types of knowledge must the visual merchandiser possess in order to develop a career?

13. Discuss some of the major trends of visual merchandising in the new millennium.
Chapter 1

Case Problems

Case 1
Faced with imminent human resources cuts in just about every division and reductions in budgeted expenditures for materials and supplies for the forthcoming year, the divisional managers at P. J. Marin, a midwestern department store, are preparing their recommendations for the new budget. The company had been a dominant force in retailing but has fallen on hard times. The board of directors has instructed management to cut expenses until profits improve.

The company’s visual merchandising manager believes that the way to become more profitable is through promotion, with visual merchandising playing a key role. Mr. McCarthy, who heads visuals, has tried to convince management of the dangers of curtailing his budget at this time, saying that an increase would be in order to help alleviate the problem. Though he advocated a visual plan that would require an increase in spending, or at least remain at the current budgetary level, the powers at the top still directed a cut.

The budget for the visual area is divided into three parts: display fixturing, materials and props, and labor. It was suggested by the assistant visual manager that several trimmers be terminated and department managers be responsible for making interior changes. Another suggestion was to reuse last year’s materials and props. Still another suggestion was to cancel the order for action mannequins earmarked for the active sportswear department.

The time has arrived when Mr. McCarthy must deliver a revised budget that not only will reflect dollar reductions but will still make P. J. Marin a force in visual presentation.

Questions
1. Do you agree with the company’s plan to cut the visual budget? Defend your answer with sound reasoning.
2. Which, if any, of the suggestions are feasible?
3. What approach would you suggest to cut the budget and still make P. J. Marin a visually appealing store?

Case 2
Jane Livingston is a recent graduate of a prestigious art school. Her aspirations of becoming a fine artist have diminished with each art gallery’s rejection of her paintings. She would someday like to break into the world of fine art with her creations, but, with funds at an all-time low, she is considering a career alternative.

Prodled by her friends, Jane is considering a field related to art—visual merchandising. Everyone feels she can easily make the transition from painting landscapes to creating attractive visual presentations because of her excellent background in design principles and color. Although she possesses the art background, she has never taken a professional course in display or visual merchandising and doesn’t know where or how to begin.

One of her former professors suggested that a department store would be a perfect beginning for Jane. As an apprentice she would learn to apply her theoretical knowledge to on-the-job situations. Another acquaintance feels the chain store would be a wiser choice. Working for a major specialty chain with several hundred stores would offer a broad base of experience, he says. Finally, a relative is trying to convince her to take the freelance route. “Being your own boss would give you freedom that the other two approaches wouldn’t offer,” she says.

Jane has assembled a portfolio of her artwork to help break into the field of visual merchandising. She still hasn’t decided, though, which route to take.

Questions
1. Does Jane have the qualifications necessary for a visual merchandising career?
2. Which route do you feel would be best for her to follow? Why?

In the News
The Know–It–All
Some months ago one of the Show Window’s agents called upon a prominent firm in an eastern city to solicit their subscription, and was sent to their window trimmer. That gentleman said to our agent:
"Why should I take your magazine? I have been trimming windows twenty years, and I know all about my business. Your magazine can’t teach me anything. Show me a magazine that’s been published over twenty years and I’ll subscribe for it, for I might get a pointer. But I suppose I could teach you fellows more in a day about window dressing than you ever knew."

Our agent caught his breath, leaned against a post, and remarked mildly:

“You can see by our pictures what other people are doing in other cities.”

“That don’t amount to anything. They can’t show me anything I don’t know.”

“But,” said the agent, in despair, “you could see how much better your own work is than everyone else’s. Every number would pat you on the back, so to speak.”

The trimmer for a moment wavered. Then he said decidedly:

“I know I’m good, and that’s enough. I don’t care to see how bad the other fellow is.”

Going out, our solicitor met the head of the firm and got a subscription. “I want to see,” said the merchant, “whether my man is keeping up with the profession.”

This was three months ago. The other day this merchant wrote us, saying: “I’m looking for a modern, up-to-date window trimmer. I find my man is one of the old timers, who knows it all and can’t learn anything new. So see if you can find me a man who is learning all the while, and can keep my windows in line with the times.”

Well, that’s the whole story; but it points to its own moral.

Window trimming is never learned. There is always something new being brought out, some advanced plan or arrangement and construction produced, and these improvements are not the result of one man’s study, but the conception of innumerable heads, all working in the same direction. The man who thinks he knows it all is a self-confessed failure. It is the wise man who posts himself thoroughly on all that is going on in his line, and strives to keep abreast of the current. Thoughtful men, able men, men of genius and artistic discernment are constantly studying to make window trimming more effective, and old methods are swamped every month in the flood of new ideas that are given to the world. There are some simple technical details, which are always useful, and which every man should know. But it takes more than a knowledge of puffing and pleating and draping to make a window trimmer.

One of the most successful men in the profession recently told me that he thinks of his windows night and day, eats with them in his mind, sleeps with panoramas of windows running through his dreams, and plans new ideas while he is at work trimming a window he has previously thought out. He studies every window illustrated in this magazine, adopts every good idea he finds, and endeavors to improve upon others. Nothing pertaining to window trimming is so insignificant as to be disregarded by the man who aims at excellence. Hard work, constant thought, and, above all, a willingness to learn what you don’t know, is the price of success. But do not let this discourage you—the same requirements apply to every other trade or occupation.


### Internet Exercises

1. Log on to three department or specialty store websites for the purpose of learning about career opportunities in visual merchandising. If you do not know their specific websites, you can use any search engine, such as www.google.com, to discover them.

   Once you have settled on three choices, you should determine if any one provides an opportunity for employment. If the necessary information that you are seeking is unavailable on the websites, you should contact a human resources individual by e-mail, telephone, or fax, all of which are generally provided on the site, to learn more about potential visual employment. Once you have completed the task, write a brief summary of the jobs available in visual merchandising at each of the three companies.

2. Professionals in visual merchandising most often use the website www.visualstore.com when they are researching a problem related to visual presentation and store design. Pretending that you are a visual merchandiser, log on to this website and choose from the many areas of information, such as the retail designer list, associations, and VM + SD magazine, to determine what they provide in the way of current information to the professional in the field. Once you have chosen a particular area of interest, write a paper summarizing what you have learned about it.
Exercises and Projects

1. Visit a department store or specialty store to evaluate its window and interiors in terms of safety. Use the Evaluation Survey form that follows as a guide in your evaluation and prepare a report on your findings.

2. Make an appointment to interview someone in visual merchandising and prepare an oral report that includes the following information: career opportunities, salary potential, typical workday, academic preparation, and technical expertise needed for employment. The interviewee may be someone employed by a company or working as a freelancer.

3. Using this chapter as a guide, prepare a resume for a hypothetical job in visual merchandising for a department store, for a chain organization, or as a freelancer.

4. Put together a portfolio of work for use in securing a visual merchandising position. Make certain that all samples of your work (photos of displays, lettering, layouts, etc.) are carefully mounted on presentation board or in a binder.
NAME ________________________________  DATE ____________

Evaluation Survey

Store Name ________________________________  Store Classification ________________

Mannequin placement ____________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________

Hanging signs __________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________

Light fixtures ___________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________

Interior prop placement _________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________

Accessible display merchandise __________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
