

SHINING A LIGHT ON WINDOW DISPLAYS

by
Scott Day

Small business owners have enough challenges to deal with, so do they have to work in the dark, too? Window display lighting is probably the number-one visual merchandising problem of all small businesses. The lighting and layout of window displays, along with other merchandising techniques, have a major impact on how well a business reaches its target market.

Why worry about the display windows in your business district? Attractive windows speak volumes about the quality and positive impressions your Main Street will make on the public, and they motivate potential customers to stop and enter a store instead of walking by.

Installing new window displays is a challenge in creativity that some business owners dread more than a trip to the dentist. But, it is a challenge worth accepting as I constantly hear from merchants that their windows are their best form of advertising. In fact, many will say: "If I put it in the window...it sells!"

It's therefore important to help your merchants understand that windows are like free billboards that come with the retail space. Great-looking windows can sell the items they display and sell the public on the store's, and Main Street's, positive image. Imagine the synergy if people start talking about what's happening in Main Street windows. Because another successful form of advertising is word of mouth, we've hit nirvana if people find the displays interesting enough to discuss.

THE MAKINGS OF A GREAT WINDOW

What makes a good window display? The first thing to consider is whether the items on display can be seen from across the street. This means the design needs to be simple, bold, and compelling to get people to notice it from afar. The second truly defining measure is: does it sell merchandise? Just because it looks good doesn't mean it sells well and a good window display will do both. The marketing goal of a window is to attract the right target audience by using the appropriate visuals and lighting. Lighting is a key determination of price point in a customer's mind; people associate fluorescent lights with lower price points and associate dramatic lighting and spotlights with higher price points. Third, a good window display will communicate its message in 5 seconds since that is how much time the storefront has to capture motorists' attention.

However, a window has only 2.5 seconds to capture a pedestrian's attention. A key to capturing the attention of passersby is good lighting. Many business owners only turn on their show window lights at night to save energy. Contrary to this practice, businesses should leave their lights on throughout the day as well. Why? Unless the store has enough light behind the display window, the glass will be too reflective in daylight and will act as a mirror. If the lights aren't on, reflections, not merchandise, will be what people see. And if the glass is dusty, people won't be able to see what's being displayed unless they are right in front of the storefront. Therefore, merchants need to understand that lighting the display window during the day is essential to reduce glare. Now the question becomes: how does the business maintain energy efficiency and how much light is necessary?

ENERGY-EFFICIENT LIGHTING

There are several ways to make lighting energy efficient. One easy method is to use timers so that after hours the lights in the window are reduced to just a couple of accent lights. But there are also different types of bulbs that can be used. Low-voltage halogen lights not only show the true color of merchandise but, as they are also made to be energy efficient, they can reduce lighting costs. On the other hand, halogen bulbs can throw off heat, which can add to air conditioning bills, so a merchant needs to pay close attention to the number of bulbs and where they are placed. Low-voltage halogens put out enough light to illuminate merchandise from about five feet away. Beyond this distance, they become less effective unless several are used, which in turn creates additional heat and requires more energy.

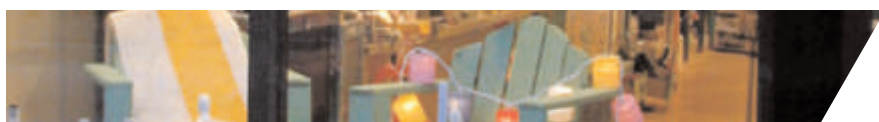
More recently, fluorescent spotlights have come on the market. This is a bit of an oxymoron because fluorescents don't have filaments that emit a direct beam of light. They actually emit a light pattern that is similar to a flood light, and not nearly as concentrated as a spotlight. I prefer to use traditional incandescent or halogen spots because they do a better job of reducing the mirror-like qualities of the display window. If fluorescent spots are used, they should be set relatively close (5 to 6 feet) to the merchandise that will be illuminated. When helping your merchants select the most appropriate lights, keep in mind that an incandescent 75-watt spotlight can knock out merchandise from 8 to 10 feet away and a 75-watt halogen spot (which is not the same as a low-voltage halogen) can illuminate merchandise from about 12 feet away because it has a more concentrated beam. A 75-watt halogen will also emit more heat, so pay close attention to their number and placement.

Another technique to increase the energy efficiency of window display lighting is to raise the height of merchandise with risers so items are closer to the light source. The shorter the distance the light travels to illuminate the objects, the more concentrated the beam of light will be. This lights up the object better without requiring a high-wattage bulb. Ideally, the merchandise in a store window should be in the customer's primary line of sight, which is about 3.5 to 5 feet above the floor. This positions merchandise above the height of hoods of cars parked along the street in front of the store.

Another energy-efficient lighting option is to include lower wattage accent lights in the display so the light only has a short distance to travel to illuminate the merchandise. These accent lights can be in the form of small table lamps, "can lamps" that provide eye-catching light from below, or clip-on accent lights. Since they're lower wattage, they use less energy.

A new entry on the market is a small, low-voltage halogen can lamp, which is about the size of a tennis ball and can swivel. A neat feature of these lamps is that they come equipped with an automatic pressure switch so that if they're knocked over they automatically turn off. To be on the safe side, however, because they will generate a significant amount of heat, these lamps should be mounted so that they can't be knocked over and should be kept away from all flammable substances.

Merchants should always install new lighting fixtures according to the manufacturer's instructions or hire an electrician. They should also check the heat a new fixture or bulb emits to make sure it's not getting too hot after installation. If new fixtures of different amperage are being installed on existing circuits, it is advisable to have a qualified electrician to do the work.





© Scott Day

This window display uses a combination of halogen lights and smaller incandescent lights that are placed closer to merchandise. Items that are actually for sale are used as part of the display.



© Scott Day

This store owner uses 40-50 watt halogen lights that are placed close to the merchandise (about 4 feet) to highlight the items in the window while reducing the need for higher wattage bulbs.



© Scott Day

This store uses all halogen track lights along the front of the window. It also creates good transparency in design because only about one-third of the display space is occupied with objects, allowing people to see all the way to the back of the store from the sidewalk.

MIX UP THE LIGHTING SCHEME

Ideally, when a merchant changes a window display, the lighting should be adjusted to highlight the new objects and call attention to them. This may or may not require a new combination of lighting, depending on how the objects are placed in relation to the lights. Typically, this involves adjusting the angle of any spotlights and adding new accent lights. A new lighting combination can create a different visual effect and get people to notice the store. This strategy reinforces the concept of the window display being a key part of the street's overall theatrical qualities. You wouldn't want to go to a theater more than once if it was always showing the same production. Changing window displays every few weeks and altering the lighting will consistently grab the passing customer's attention.

LOOKING GOOD FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Merchants shouldn't rely solely on the standard window lights that are basic features of a building. If the general contractor or building owner only installed a couple of recessed lights set two feet back from the display window, the configuration will do little to show off merchandise or reduce glare. These lights will only highlight the bald spots of the mannequins in the window and won't do the merchandise justice or capture the attention of shoppers. Display lights should be as close to the front window as possible so that the merchandise is lit from the front – no less than a 15-degree angle.

Scott Day is the principal of Urban Development Services, which specializes in urban design, design management, and retail economics for commercial districts. Urban Development Services, which is based in San Antonio, Texas, develops market-driven revitalization plans for pedestrian-oriented commercial districts. Previously, Scott worked for the National Trust Main Street Center for 17 years. His retail background includes work as the merchandising and department manager for Potpourri, a contemporary home furnishings store in Milwaukee. For more information on Scott, visit www.urbandevelopmentservices.com.

Transparency is important in planning a window design. If the lighting looks great from the sidewalk and the display is intriguing, merchants should further entice potential customers by letting them see inside the store. If merchandise is stacked as a solid mass in the window or too much is being displayed, it will block all views of the interior. Merchandise should fill no more than 30 percent of the glass area of a display window so the customer can see around it into the store. While the display creates intrigue, the merchandise behind the window display should build on this play. Perception of safety is another reason. People typically are more reluctant to enter a space if they can't see into it. For these reasons, dissuade business owners from installing smoked, tinted, or mirrored glass when rehabbing a storefront because it will prevent shoppers from seeing inside.

In conclusion, merchants need to have a variety of lights at their disposal to establish the appropriate mood for each new window display and match the illumination with the new configuration. By expanding beyond basic lighting options, a business owner can create a storefront window that has visual interest and won't lose potential customers to glare. A variety of spotlights, floodlights, accent lights, clip-on lamps, and bulbs will enable merchants to create eye-catching window displays that will entice people walking or driving by. And, be sure to remind your Main Street merchants to have a qualified electrician examine new lights and periodically check to see if any objects have shifted and are touching the bulb, thus creating a risk of fire. ■



© Josh Bloom