

Career Path for Visual Merchandising: A Case Study Approach

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Abstract

This case study outlines the organization of visual merchandising careers and establishes the visual merchandiser's expected responsibilities in department chains and specialty store environments. Interviews were conducted with a Director of a large national department chain, Field Visual Manager of a well-known national specialty chain, and Assistant Visual Manager of a boutique style specialty store. The paper outlines the nature, organization, and function of visual merchandising careers with recommendations of improving the preparation of students for this career path.

Key words: Visual merchandiser, career, case study, retailing

1. Literature Review

Visual merchandising is an important aspect of the sales matrix of stores and organizations. Jobs in visual merchandising have undergone significant changes in the last decade thus demanding greater attention (Lea-Greenwood, 1998). Visual merchandising has been defined as a way of presenting a store and its merchandise with the intent of motivating consumers to make purchases (Diamond & Diamond, 2011). The main job of the visual merchandiser is to capture consumer's attention and create moments of pleasing engagement (Ravindran, 2008). Spies, Hasse & Loesch (1997) found that store atmospherics aroused consumers and influenced their buying behavior.

Until early 1990's, this area was referred to as display (Lea-Greenwood, 1998). The emphasis was on creativity. The display staff was often looked at as decorators and trimmers, and the correlation between their work and sales was not tied together. A display department would sometimes be tied in to advertising or buying office initiative, but often they were allowed the creativity that in today's retail environment has been somewhat diminished. The emphasis was on using mannequins and props effectively, and applying the elements and principles of design to make an artistic statement. The position was evaluated based on creativity and providing a clean and hazard-free store space (Diamond & Diamond, 2011).

Today, visual merchandisers are an integral part of the retail team at the corporate and storeline level. They partner closely with all areas of the store functions to help drive sales and are held accountable through reviews and coaching, based not only on creativity but on store sales plan and how visual merchandising adds to the bottom line. Visual merchandisers create a fashion story and enlighten customers on current trends and colors. Eye-catching displays and signage make customers not just enter a store but entice them to buy more, perhaps when all they had in mind was "window shopping". The visual merchandiser has the power to increase sales per transaction by creating exciting and properly merchandised presentations that subtly encourage a customer to buy more than one item, creating a demand for a whole "look" or showing accessories to finish off an outfit. The review of a visual merchandiser today is driven not only by sales figures, comparing this year's sales goals and actual sales to last year's but also by role-specific expectations of skills and competencies.

In recent years, visual merchandising in chain stores has become more standardized. Lea-Greenwood (1998) suggested that visual merchandising communicated the brand image. In order that all stores in a chain are putting forth the same message the process is being centralized. Centralizing of this function has increased professionalism, uniformity, and savvyness of the creative process (Lea-Greenwood, 1998). The centralization of visual merchandising provides a cohesive store/brand image and helps to integrate promotional efforts across stores and brands.

The objective of this paper are to outline the dynamic nature and organization of visual merchandising careers in department and specialty store in the US, to establish the visual merchandiser's expected responsibilities in these stores and to extrapolate skills and knowledge that students in merchandising need to develop in order to become competent in their job.

2. Methods

2.1 Data Collection

The data for this study was established using case study technique (Yin, 1984). Three interviews were conducted. Open-ended questions on organization of visual merchandising positions and function of visual merchandisers were addressed. The first interview was with a person having over fifteen years experience as a Director of a large national department chain in the US, the second was with a Field Visual Manager of a well-known fast fashion national specialty chain in the US, who had over ten years experience in the job and finally, the third was with the Assistant Visual Manager of a boutique style specialty store in the US who has about three year experience as a visual specialist.

The interview with the Director was conducted at the researcher's institution. This interview was done over three days for about an hour each. The interview was recorded and then transcribed. The interview with the specialty store person was conducted in a mutually agreed on location near the store, the interview lasted for over 90 minutes. Detailed notes taken at the interview were used for this study. The last interview with the visual manager of boutique style specialty store was done on campus and lasted for under an hour. The interview was recorded and transcribed.

2.2 Analysis

The case study was developed in a descriptive framework by using analytical strategy for organizing the data. Data that was collected were grouped into content area based on the goal of the study; organization of visual merchandising position and function of visual merchandiser at corporate and at store. Analysis of data related to function of visual merchandiser at corporate delineated areas such as creating store image, planning planograms, trends, budgeting, and collaborating. At the store level, the analysis of data composed of information on implementing directives, budgeting, collaborating, developing planograms, documenting, and communication. In order to validate the case study, the report was reviewed by visual personnel from the three stores (Gaskill, 1992).

3. Results

The results from the case study were organized in two main aspects: organization of the visual merchandising position and the function of visual merchandiser. The functions were separated based on corporate activities and activities at store level.

3.1 Organization of visual merchandising position

In recent years, the trend has been, in chain department stores and specialty stores to have a centralized visual merchandising department at corporate under the umbrella of the promotions or creative division. The corporate office is responsible for providing store branches with detailed store layout plans. In addition to store layout, they are also responsible for preparing and delivering planograms, sometimes referred to as zonograms. Planograms and zonograms are detailed diagrams, drawings, or other visual description of specific products and product categories on fixtures and props within a store's layout. This prototypical plan helps to set new merchandise groups on floor. In some specialty stores merchandise groupings are referred to as "shops". Each "shop" is based on a concept or theme, e.g. "freebird", to depict a bohemian trend theme

The visual merchandising personnel at the corporate office work closely with the fashion and buying offices, who identify, interpret and purchase product and the graphic department, who design imagery and signage relating to the themes and promotions of said product, in order to develop directives for merchandising presentations.

Large retail organizations may have in-house print shops that produce collateral to be delivered to stores for the visual merchandiser to install or they may partner with a third party to produce and deliver graphic collateral. Either way, the corporate visual merchandising department must coordinate directive install dates with delivery of merchandise and graphic collateral. The corporate visual merchandiser generally has been promoted up the visual merchandising ladder and will have worked in store/district/regional visual merchandising positions before attaining a corporate-level position. This experience is extremely valuable, as a well-rounded corporate visual merchandiser will have understanding of the challenges storeline visual merchandisers face.

At the department store level, visual merchandising is headed by the title of Visual Merchandise Director or Senior Visual Merchandiser. Typically, in specialty stores the title is Visual Manager. Department stores may have three or four Directors in a store, based on size and/or store volume, each for a classification/category of merchandise. In low volume specialty stores, there is usually only one head of visual, who may also be the co-manager of the store. In mid to high-volume stores there could be up to three Visual Managers. The Director/Manager may have two to four either full-time or part-time visual merchandisers and one stylist (person involved solely in dressing mannequins) - depending on the size of the store, its location, productivity, and selling season to assist with implementing the store plans. In some smaller locations of department stores, visual merchandisers may be hired as freelancers to complete a specific job on a one-time basis or to be contracted on a regular basis. Sometimes larger stores may use freelancers for a specific talent like faux painting or floral design, or because a specific project warrants the manpower.

The visual merchandising team is sometimes complemented with two or more floor merchandisers, a painter and a carpenter. Most national chain stores also have a district visual merchandising position. A District Visual Manager, sometimes referred to as Field Visual Manager in specialty setting, has to travel around a fairly large area mapped out as a district by corporate. They typically rotate from store to store on a daily/weekly basis. Their main responsibility is to make sure that stores are complying with directives, making call-outs (addressing challenges related to cleanliness/tidiness, lighting or substitution of garments), assisting individual stores with equipment, and acting as trouble-shooters if directives or priorities change. They are the liaison between corporate and individual stores. Several years of working at the store level as director or manager can promote an individual to a District Visual Manager/Field Visual Manager position. In a specialty setting, a Field Visual Manager can become a Regional Visual Merchandiser supervising a larger mapped area, with more stores. For a District Visual Manager or a Regional Visual Manager, the move up could be to join corporate to actually be involved in conceptualizing the store presentation.

In the boutique style specialty store, the Assistant Visual Manager is in charge of presenting the store. The Assistant Visual Manager is assisted by two stylist, one who is hired as a full timer and typically is the manager in training and the other is a part time stylist. Assistant Visual Manager is overseen by the Store Manager and evaluated by a District Manager of visuals. In this specific type of specialty store, corporate do not develop planograms but promote “concepts” and “themes” and give directives on outfitting. These directives are mostly suggestive in nature and not as rigid as in other chain stores. Thus giving the Assistant Visual Manager immense freedom in creating the display and placement of styles on the floor.

3.2 Functions of visual merchandisers

From the organization structure, it seems clear that visual merchandisers have roles and responsibilities at both corporate and store level. Visual merchandiser’s roles at both levels are coordinated and interdependent.

3.2.1 At Corporate:

The visual merchandiser at corporate are involved with activities such as planning store layout and planograms, developing trends, developing budgets, and collaborating with printers and vinyl developers.

Planning store layouts and planograms: In department stores, changes in stores are made about every two weeks when new merchandise is received. However, every new season large-scale changes are implemented, related to store layouts/planograms. This is done to make the store look fresh and create interest in new merchandise and evolving a fashion story.

In specialty stores large changes are made every six weeks, and small changes (garments on mannequins due to sell out) as needed, with large inventory of new merchandise coming in daily.

In both department and specialty stores floorplans and planograms are implemented using 2D and 3D software also used to achieve space optimization. Both large chain department and specialty retailers will put out prototypical store plans labeled A, B, C, D and so on based on square footage, volume of sales, and on the amount of dollars made per square footage of store.

In boutique style specialty store, directives from corporate leads to four drastic seasonal décor change. They also direct monthly “concept” changes. Monthly “concept” changes are administered differently in the front half and back half of the store by using separate themes within the broad “concept.” In the midst of a season both themes are based on the season but towards the end of a season the front may be directed towards the coming season while the back will continue with the present season. Each week within the month, updates are made to placement and display method based on weekly assessment of style performance in terms of sales.

Trend Analysis: Visual merchandisers are continuously connected with color and style evolution through studying media, designer works, and competing stores. They work with buying office and the fashion/creative office on creating color boards and style boards that tell a story. The trend stories are tied with store layout and planograms by developing flipbook and directives that are sent as hardcopy to department stores. A flipbook is a guide produced seasonally that shows prototypical visual set-ups that relate to the trends and refer to the zonograms for placement. Directives, on the other hand, are used for specific trend call-outs and sales events (buy one get one free). A directive includes detailed information such as UPC numbers for the merchandise team, collateral delivery dates for the visual team, and set-up and takedown dates. If a trend lasts through a whole season, there is a seasonal directive, and within those seasonal directives there are monthly directives. An example is blue is the hot color for the season with shade and style updates throughout the season, itself. From January through mid-February the look is nautical, with a strong representation of navy blue and blue and white stripe, mid-February through March is more blue floral with lighter weight fabrications and many shades of blue, and March to April, it becomes blue hippie with tie dye and denim at the forefront. Directives, flow charts, and prototype displays will help the storeline visual merchandiser update the monthly trends keeping with the season trend. Some retailers upload virtual prototypical store to department “tours” to make it easier for the storeline visual merchandising team to portray the corporate representation of trends.

Developing budgets: In department and large specialty stores, corporate funds visual activities in stores. The six-month funding is established based on dollars per square footage a store earns. “A” stores with high dollar per square footage are given higher budgets, better and newer mannequins, more panels and fixtures, larger graphic packages, and more signage than lower performing stores. This presents store visual merchandisers with challenges and is where the creative side of the position can be fully utilized.

Collaborating with printers and vinyl developers: Directives are sent from corporate to stores with collateral. Collateral may contain among other things, graphics, posters, signage, and vinyl. These are prepared in-house or through an agency. Collaborating with photographers, printers, and vinyl manufacturers in order to meet time schedules is an important aspect of visual merchandisers job at corporate. Boutique style specialty store sparingly use graphics, signage, and vinyl in conjunction with each display change.

3.2.2 At Store:

The visual merchandiser at the store is responsible for implementing corporate directives, budgeting, collaborating with printers and vinyl makers, developing planograms, vinyl and signage, documenting and communicating.

Implementing corporate directives: Well-rounded visual merchandisers are able to style mannequins of varying types - realistic, abstract or stylized. They work with hardbody forms, usually made of fiberglass. Some will have arms and legs that detach for ease of dressing. Some do not. Some will be “body” only and the visual merchandisers may need to use manufactured sleeve inserts or may need to create inserts with tissue paper, cardboard, or felt stuffing to rig the form. The ability of a visual merchandiser to be able to rig forms to give life and excitement to the featured clothing is important. Visual merchandisers who work in menswear departments or stores need to be proficient in dress shirt and suit rigging. They need the ability to tie a variety of tie knots and to know which knot is appropriate as it relates to the collar style of dress shirt. Styling ready-to-wear and children’s mannequins and forms also needs basic skills of styling the mannequins or forms. A good visual merchandiser will use this talent to take presentations to a higher level.

Visual merchandisers must read and execute corporate directives, paying attention to details. National retailers strive for consistency in all of their stores. Consistency reinforces their brand and creates a shopping experience the customers come to know as “theirs”. Today, due to mergers, retailers are often faced with owning stores that in no way follow their prototypical floorplans. A visual merchandiser in such a store will have to look at the prototypical floor plan as a springboard and accept the challenge of interpreting how best to use the store’s architecture to match the vision of the corporate directives. The visual merchandisers may need to reach out to their District Visual Manager for advice as to how best accomplish the directive. The visual merchandising teams in department stores are responsible for creating strike zones (spaces away from parent departments in high traffic areas where trend is pulled together and hi-lighted, using special fixturing, mannequins and graphics), inposts (displays in parent department), outposts (similar to strike zones but often on a smaller scale and using one item such as sweater or hoodie), vortexes (a large trend shop set in a high traffic area), and feature walls (a wall generally at the entrance to or flanking a department).

Visual merchandisers also decide on the density of merchandise on the floor, and work with the merchandising team when new product is delivered to ensure it is set correctly on the selling floor and is being displayed according to specific company standards of size, color, hung, folded, fixtures and props. Although directives are provided, an accomplished visual merchandiser has fixture placement skills, creative skills of designing or making special props and modifying fixtures, has the ability to use simple tools such as staple gun and drills, make sure to steam garments, uses compositional skills when positioning mannequins and for the overall look of the area being set. Most retailers comply with ADA standards and it is the duty of the visual merchandiser to make sure that all regulations are abided.

Once a display or presentation is set, visual merchandisers are responsible for general upkeep and maintenance of the area. Good merchandiser will ensure the staff completes a morning floor walk where visual presentations are dusted and any changes due to inventory sell-through are updated. They will communicate with the housekeeping staff when vacuuming or more intense cleaning is needed and they will make sure lighting is correctly positioned and all lights are in proper working order. By keeping up with housekeeping on a daily basis, the visual merchandiser helps with the impression the customer takes away from his/her shopping experience.

Stores today may or may not have windows, depending on their location. In this situation, it is important to remember that the customers see the window from both the front and the back as they enter and leave the store. Some visual merchandisers will have the chance to work in a store that has actual windows that are closed to the public, have backdrops and their own lighting. To fully utilize these windows as showcases for product, a visual merchandiser is required to know specialized skills such as striking mannequins (using the mannequin’s center of gravity, the stylist will anchor the mannequin to the floor with two lengths of wire), and creating dramatic compositions using props and lighting. A difference between large specialty and department stores is the time visual merchandisers work on putting up the displays. In large specialty stores, it is often done after store closing for several hours at night. Typically, in department stores and smaller stores all displaying activity is done during the early morning hours. However in the ever-changing retail world, a visual merchandiser must be flexible, as major floor moves or installs will be best executed overnight, very early in the morning or at other times not part of a normal workday/week.

Budgeting: Visual merchandisers are responsible for maintaining seasonal budgets determined by corporate. Funds are needed to purchase vinyl, mannequins and forms, and for painting and repainting walls and panels as needed by directives, repairing existing props and fixtures, and buying toners for printers and photo paper for printing and documenting presentations, floor moves and floor sets. In some situations, a visual merchandiser will be able to work with a vendor or designer to enhance a department or presentation, utilizing funds the vendor or designer will supply.

In boutique style specialty stores budgeting is done at the store level. Assistant Manager of visuals use store funds to buy knickknacks from local variety stores to round off display accessories and props sent from corporate in order to complete a display.

Collaborating with printers and vinyl makers: Often signs and graphics are not sent with directives from corporate; instead the direction will be given for stores to produce or purchase their own. Store visual merchandisers may have them produced locally through an agency or make them in the store. Collaborating with local printers and vinyl manufacturers in order to meet time frame is an important aspect of visual merchandiser’s responsibility.

Developing planograms, vinyl and signage: Occasionally, when company directives are not available or do not coordinate with merchandise sent to the store, visual merchandisers at store will create store-specific directives. This requires skills in Illustrator, Photoshop, Indesign, Smart Draw or Auto Cad. Sometimes signs and graphics are made in-house using computers and plotters. Visual merchandisers should also know signage application and production of vinyl and its application. Coming up with verbiage for signage is a skill that visual merchandisers will have to develop.

Documenting: Visual merchandisers in large stores have several activities to document on a daily basis. First, visual merchandisers along with the buying team, may be involved in receiving new inventory and documenting receipt through computerized inventory system. All lost shipments, special orders, and transfer in or out have to be accounted for. Stock room has to be organized and cleaned regularly after putting out all new stock in the various departments or zones. Second, visual merchandisers must manage deliveries of collateral, confirming its receipt and either installing it or storing it in orderly fashion until the installation date. At certain times of the year, back to school and Christmas, deliveries will be very heavy, and a good visual merchandiser will do his/her best to make space in advance to house all collateral and propping to make installs as easy and time efficient as possible. Safe keeping of collateral until it is used is important, as is storage upon takedown if the collateral may be used in the future. Third, a visual merchandiser may borrow items from various departments such as the jewelry, shoe, or handbag to complete a display. These items should be documented in a log out sheet for return to the specific departments. Visual merchandisers have access to all areas of store but if they do not document correctly the borrowed pieces could get lost, leading to financial loss for the company. Fourth, an inventory of props and fixtures, old signs, graphics is done regularly. Very often items are recycled. Sometimes visual merchandisers may borrow props, fixtures or mannequins from other branch stores, which must be logged in for return. Finally, visual merchandisers often document the displays they put up using a camera or video for their personal or store portfolio. Sometime, these are used in the review process and for job promotion. They prove helpful to review how presentations and departments were set in previous seasons. Pictures should be taken immediately on completing a task because the display may be dismantled due to merchandise removal for sale, broken or chipped mannequins.

Communicating: Communication by a visual merchandiser is made at various levels and with almost all store teams. The visual merchandiser must have good and regular communication with the Store Manager and also with their District Visual Manager. Visual merchandisers have to check with operations manager regarding use of elevator for transporting large props, fixtures, and storage facilities and therefore, need to communicate with them floor moves and other large projects that may lead to work hours out of the regular work schedule. They communicate with loss prevention teams to make sure that displays do not infringe with cameras. They also are regularly communicating with merchandise floor teams who have delivery dates of new or special merchandise. They should have good relationships with the housekeeping staff as they are great partners in maintain a clean and neat shopping environment. Visual merchandisers, like all store teams, attend regular meetings, view webinars, make or participate in conference calls for updates and alerts, check portals, and visit Intranet sites. It is their responsibility to communicate important visual merchandising information to all store executives, and this is often done in weekly status meetings. Visual merchandisers are often considered executives at the store level, and their professional demeanor is extremely important.

In this particular boutique specialty store communication with District Visual Manager is done via email or weekly conference calls. At the weekly calls all Assistant Visual Managers will participate and go over what is important for the week. On a continuous basis communication is done with the district visual manager and other assistant visual managers via the Flickr application on the phone. When logged onto the 'store site' all personnel have access to the photo album. These are used by district manager for evaluation and by other assistant visual managers as inspiration source either to mimic or to spur ideas.

4. Conclusion

This paper discusses the role and responsibility of visual merchandiser in three different retail formats. In department stores, visual merchandising is headed by Directors and supervised by District Visual Manager. In specialty stores, the similar managerial positions in visual merchandising are referred to as Managers or Assistant Managers and supervised by either District Visual Managers or Regional Visual Managers.

All three stores used in the study have centralized department at corporate controlling the image at retail. In department and large specialty stores the presentation and atmospherics of stores have more of a cookie cutter approach with all stores in the chain looking identical. However, in the smaller boutique specialty stores the stores seek more individuality and create one of a kind imagery.

The function of visual merchandising managerial staff in all three settings require knowledge and skill in following directions, designing, brand image conceptualizing, budgeting, and documenting. These individuals have to translate concepts into non-verbal communication. This may require immense leap in skills and knowledge.

The findings in this study have implications for improving the pedagogy for visual merchandising courses. Traditional approaches to teaching visual merchandising emphasize refining personal skills in putting up displays. The current paper illustrates that this traditional approach is insufficient for visual merchandiser career path. Visual merchandisers should be able to convert knowledge in design, communication, merchandising rules, trends, branding, and computers into skills in using props and fixtures, space utilization, and developing multiplicity of presentations with high buy-appeal. The visual merchandiser while promoting the visual aspect of the store in conjunction with brand image has to promote the product itself with respect to current trends thus assisting consumers in making their purchase with minimal effort and stimulating their impulse purchase tendencies to buy more than they intended. Educators of merchandising program must promote competency-based curriculum, encouraging multi-disciplinary program format, with field experience, and interaction with faculty experts to prepare students for a challenging career.

The researchers acknowledge that the three stores used in this study may not be inclusive of all visual merchandising organizational structure or job functions but it is a snap shot of this career path.

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