

Playing with the

Big Boys

Lessons you can learn from the nation's most successful retailers

BY COLETTE WEIL, MBA

Why should we pay attention to non-HME retailers? Can selling clothing or electronics or refrigerators be anything like our products? Absolutely!

Retailers in other markets have to do exactly what we do. They need to build a specific brand, let people know they offer distinct products and services, get shoppers into the store, make the experience worth the shopper's time and engage the shopper to come back.

That's no different than what every HME retailer faces. So make it easier on yourself. Learn from those who have spent the money to try the latest retailing and merchandising techniques.

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Men's Wearhouse

So what can we learn from some of this country's most successful retailers?

Men's Wearhouse is at the top of my list. The chain's tag is personal and memorable: "We stand behind every purchase you make with us. We guarantee it." You would think CEO George Zimmer is standing in your living room personally making this commitment to you.

Their brand and promise—"You're going to like the way you look"—is consistently used everywhere and incorporated in every media form (print, radio, TV, web, email, etc.). And they deliver on this promise in the store through service, product quality, pricing, promotions and follow-up. Customer testimonials are effectively used to demonstrate delivery on the brand promise.

Let's face it: This chain is just selling clothing. But since its founding in 1973, Men's Wearhouse has grown into one of North America's largest specialty retailers of men's apparel. The chain differentiates itself with "wardrobe consultants," and these salespeople are expert at "companion selling."

Clean, uncluttered, waist-high tables allow consultants to show products "working" together. There is adequate space for presentation. For impact, store

windows use floor-to-ceiling signs made of mesh to enable light to come through. Displays are straightforward and attractive. Signs make statements.

Every consultant attends "Suit High" training that includes mock scenarios and role-playing to understand the customer, how to present and how to suggestion-sell. There is shadow training on the floor, too. To anyone who has shopped at Men's Wearhouse, have you ever walked out with just one item?

But Men's Wearhouse doesn't leave it to chance: The environment to purchase clothing for men is critical.

"Most men consider shopping as comfortable as a root canal," shares Zimmer. Thus, the complete store experience is crucial for the ultimate objective—building a customer for the long term. Men's Wearhouse understands that a satisfied customer comes back over and over and refers friends.

Operations and software systems are another part of this chain's retail heart. Database savvy enables the clothing retailer, now at 1,269 stores, to track each customer's profile, transactions, tastes, purchases and participation in promotions along with its valuable customer loyalty program. Regular contact with customers is maintained through direct mail and email campaigns.



Men's Wearhouse keeps its customers satisfied and rewards (and tracks) their purchases through a loyalty program.



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Brookstone

Brookstone, which first introduced itself in a 1965 *Popular Mechanics* classified ad selling hard-to-find tools, now operates a multifaceted direct marketing business that includes two catalogs, an expanding Internet operation and 305 retail stores throughout the United States and Puerto Rico. The chain chooses locations in premium shopping malls, lifestyle centers and the nation's busiest airports.

From the beginning, according to this retailer, "quality of product, quality of service and quality of people have been a hallmark of Brookstone." If this sounds like the same thing you might say about your business, then you should also find some of the chain's retail approaches insightful and very adaptable to HME.

Brookstone's store entry is open and engaging, featuring large print-high impact floor signs. The first visual is a "story-telling" display that grabs attention 10 to 15 feet inside the doorway.

If the store is running a feature on a pillow, snoring device or some other new item, these boxes are stacked creatively along the shelved walls. These displays can be seen from the outside window and make a dramatic visual statement.

Window displays, front signs and window signs are changed regularly to spark attention and give new reasons for passers-by to peek inside.

In addition to its specials, take a close look at the merchandising and sales tech-



Brookstone's entry is open and engaging, with specials featured right at the door.

niques for high-ticket massage chairs and new high-end exercise/relaxation equipment. Brookstone creates a focal area near the store window around the demonstration product with large posters, signs and information. Shoppers walking by see the "environment" and customers trying the product. There is enough floor space for a spouse, salesperson and customer to stand around the product to evaluate.

Comfort is also part of the sales experi-

ence. The product is demonstrated and used by all, including the salesperson, who points out features during and after the demos. All information about the product is available within arm's reach for the salesperson. There is a price sign on the seat of the chair, with features and benefits on a floor stand.

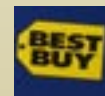
The salesperson does not leave the customer to get a binder, price sheet or swatch book. Nor is the customer loaded up with material at this first encounter. Follow-up is accomplished with further material, a personal card mailed from the salesperson and a phone call.

If you think that strategy might not work, think again. Brookstone is growing at the rate of 10 to 15 stores a year.

Start Shopping

Visit key retailers, large and small—and your HME competitors—with a critical, searching, creative marketer's eye, then shop your own store.

- What do your potential or current customers see when they walk/drive by your store?
- What do they hear about you? How?
- Why would they come to your store?
- What differentiates your store experience?
- What is the customer's experience when talking to you on the phone, in the store or at a promotional event?
 - How and when do they hear from you again?
 - What are the top three things that every employee says about you to every customer, referral source and contact? What do you want the customer to repeat?
 - What could make your entire retail presentation better for your customer and set you apart (and get other retailers to shop you and take your ideas)?



Best Buy

Large retailers such as Best Buy show us some of the newest techniques in merchandising, store flow, signs and more.

Grown from a single audio components store in St. Paul, Minn., opened in 1966, Best Buy now operates a global portfolio of brands selling consumer electronics and home office products, entertainment software and appliances in more than 1,200 retail stores in the U.S., Canada and China. With 140,000 employees, the chain



With its superstore format, Best Buy keeps product presentation uniform. Big boxes are stored atop shelves and hidden by lifestyle graphics positioned above end caps.

and what to evaluate. Best Buy shoppers usually do their research, and it is always assumed that potential buyers will competitively shop. Additionally, the store's mix of products may or may not be the same as that of other competitors.

In these large stores—which typically range from 20,000 to 45,000 square feet depending on the size of the market—there is not continuous sales assistance by one contact as in small stores, so reliability and standardization of presentation is critical. Also note that the return policy and warranty are always standard parts of the sales presentation.

Participating in Best Buy's loyalty program is another way this chain locks in the customer at the cash register to send special offers, monitor and analyze its consumer profile and build follow-up patronage.

Best Buy knows that large, big-ticket sales are hard both for first-time buyers or older buyers on their fifth freezer. Product category signs are large, easy-to-read and show comparisons and services offered. Department signs and store policy signs are also large, easy-to-read and bilingual.

Just as with HME, bulky, poorly packaged products are a part of Best Buy's departments. This retailer has solved

Common Problems for HME Retail

Here are some problems that commonly plague HME retail. Check the non-HME retailers in your area to see how they handle these issues:

- Too much store clutter. Odd shapes and sizes of unattractive packages are mixed with good retail packaging. There are odd shelving configurations, and stock is often stored (vs. displayed) on the selling floor.
- No simple, effective communication of the brand and value proposition
- No drive-by appeal
- Employees don't feel "retail-comfortable" and are not trained to suggestion-sell to build the sale.
- Shoppers are confused and/or overwhelmed upon entering the store. These potential buyers are not assisted upon entry or, often, throughout the store experience. (Many are made to wait while a claim is submitted.)
- No price tags
- Lack of continuity in presentation of product information
- Not enough events and promotions
- No clear, posted policies on payment, returns, billing or service
- No encouragement or reason is given to customers to come back and shop.

the problem of storage by hiding big, ugly, boxes with large lifestyle graphics strategically positioned above end caps and across the top level of the store. This technique alone is a great idea for HME retailers that stock on their show floor.

There are lots of great techniques from other retailers that can work for the HME environment as well. Many of these can be adapted to your business cost-effectively, quickly and with ingenuity.

It is time for you to become a creative, practical marketer and take advantage of every way possible to reach and satisfy your target audience. Ask the manufacturers you buy from to help where they can. They are as eager as you to build retail sales with new ideas.

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