

Visual Food Merchandising

A Fresh Look

Looking for ways to spice up your clients' foodservice operations? Visual food merchandising can be an efficient way of achieving that goal.

By **DIANE CHIASSON, FCSI**

Both an art and a science, visual merchandising brings food and retail products to life. This process is carefully arranged through eye-catching food merchandising, where the vision of freshness, color and quantity is key to any foodservice operation's success. Menu development, hand-chosen props, appropriate lighting, pleasing packaging and signage that sells are also part of this strategic process. When done properly, visual merchandising can significantly increase sales.

Every member of the team must acknowledge the importance of visual merchandising, so that all facility designs are conducted in a manner that encourages sales. Without this buy-in, the facility will not achieve its full potential. One of the most basic rules of visual merchandising is the better the foodservice operation looks, the more a customer will purchase. By employing solid visual



A bread display presents a unified theme.

The pizza station at Oakville Trafalgar Memorial Hospital.



merchandising techniques, an operation can be transformed into a vibrant and exciting one customers will want to experience.

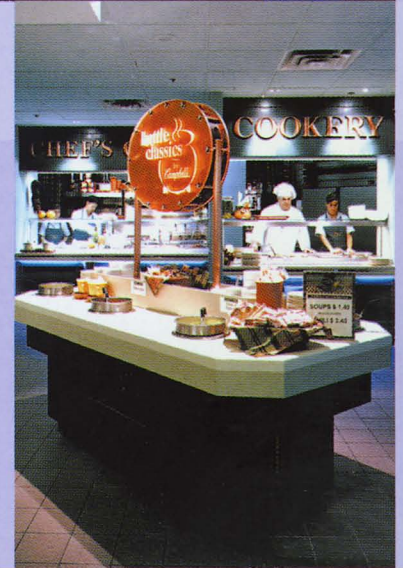
As an example, visual merchandising was used with positive results at Café on the Square at Toronto City Hall in Canada. This location was built just over a year ago and has already been very successful. Chiasson Consultants Inc. enhanced the Café on the Square through an in-depth visual merchandising and training program, and the results helped create a beautiful and appetizing serving area – leaving with the customers images of fresh appetizing food while boosting sales of the restaurant.

At Oakville Trafalgar Memorial Hospital in Oakville, Ontario, Canada, the use of visual merchandising helped revitalize a struggling cafeteria-style operation. Artfully constructed displays, a carefully planned lighting layout, signage and a great visual food merchandising program was completed with excellent success.

“These are always the first things people notice,” said Julie Davis, director of food services at Oakville Trafalgar Memorial Hospital. “(Visual merchandising) takes away the institutional look, providing an overall feeling found in any restaurant, which makes all the difference in terms of sales and satisfaction.” Sales in the bakery increased by over 300 percent after renovations.

An employee program in visual merchandising and sales training was also implemented within the hospital that helped boost staff morale and provided them with the confidence to run the cafeteria with visual merchandising consideration.

The hospital's soup station is one example of visual merchandising in a cafeteria-style layout.



The 18 Steps

Foodservice operations need to implement a carefully planned visual merchandising program to optimize sales and create additional selling opportunities. Read on to find out the 18 most important steps to great visual merchandising:

Assess the space. Prior to beginning any merchandising project, you must look at the room and determine the space with which you have to work. Special consideration must be given to the fixtures that cannot be moved. For instance, when creating a display, consider what the intention is regarding the ceiling, the walls and the floor area, while also assessing impact on traffic flow and lighting available to enhance the display.

Determine the message. Each display should have a theme, a product to focus on or a specific message to

convey. This message is integral to the display, must take center stage and cannot be diluted by superfluous decorations.

Determine the color statement. When considering props, food items and decorations, think vibrant colors.

Determine available props. It's often unnecessary to purchase an extensive, and expensive, array of props for display. Look at items on hand in the kitchen, pantry and stockrooms that might add substance to a display.

Consider the focal point. Every display should have a main focal point to attract attention. Decide how to achieve this. It should be noted that items grouped together (i.e., sandwiches and soups) enhance the sales of both items.

Determine the line direction.

Using lines can move the customers' eyes around the display. Vertical lines can be used as the center of a display; this portrays strength, height and dignity. Horizontal lines convey an easygoing, restful and calming effect. Horizontal lines are best when breaking up a vertical line. Diagonal lines convey action and strength. These are best used to direct the eyes to a point from top left to bottom right. Curves add a flowing movement and help direct the eyes.

Consider the senses. Often, displays can be more effective if stimulating more than just the eyes. Always consider sound, smell and taste as additional elements of any display.

Consider the layout. Layout can also direct eyes and create focal points. A symmetrical design creates an equal weight, and each side has the power to attract the eyes, creating order and dignity. An asymmetrical design leads the eyes to the heavier side. With a design that flows top to bottom, ensure that the heaviest and bulkiest items are placed on the bottom. Always have one element emphasized through the use of contrasting shapes, colors or textures. Make sure the layout leads the customers' eyes to the focal point.

Purchase the items. After deciding how the display will take shape, determine what items will be needed and whether they are already on hand. This includes both props and tools to construct the display.

Clean the area. Remember, props will likely be reused in future displays; therefore, fully clean the intended display area so that expensive props and materials are not needlessly ruined.

Show and tell. Construct the display with a look that shows off certain products and tell customers about them. Signage will have to be considered to complement the display.

Vibrant, exciting visual merchandising can transform an operation into a more successful enterprise.



Sketch it out. Make a small sketch as to what the display's intention is, cross-referencing with the props and materials purchased, as a final check before construction. Any display should be quick and easy to erect, safe to passers-by and simple to tear down. Changing or updating a display is important, so consider these issues before proceeding to the construction phase.

Build in layers. Begin construction with display items that will be used in the back. Raise specific items necessary by using cardboard boxes, small crates or fruit baskets turned upside down.

Midpoint assessment. Don't wait until the project is completed to ensure it is taking shape as originally anticipated; otherwise, additional time may be necessary to take additional time to tear the display down and start from scratch. There are other important duties to attend to other than creating displays.

Be blunt. If you want the customer to buy a particular item, state it frankly on the signage. The message should be clear, concise and brief.

Stimulate. Bring the display to life by employing elements of color,

humor, interrupted visual patterns, props, samples and geometric shapes.

Unify it. Use a theme, such as Easter and Christmas, that will help you get your message across. Also employ theme elements in other areas such as windows, additional displays and packaging. Theme props can range from Christmas trees to flowers and often times can be reused in years to come.

Always consider the life of a theme prop prior to purchasing. Major displays (other than those created for long holiday seasons) should be rotated every 10 days to keep the dining area looking fresh and unique.

Final Assessment. Once the display has come together, stand back and assess the outcome. Is it alive with color? Does it convey the intended message? Is it sturdy and safe? Does it have an eye-catching focal point? Is it appropriately lit? Does it have the potential to offend anyone? Is it consistent with the dining facility as a whole? Is signage neat, colorful and effective? If any or all of these questions are not satisfactorily answered, make the necessary changes. 🍎

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