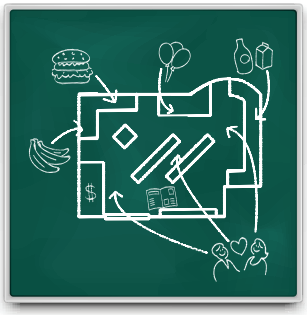
Layout by Design

Editor's Note: *This article is the third in an ongoing series by industry experts David Brewster and Maurice Minno on how c-store executives can better compete in this transformative economy.*

Most c-stores are operated by thoughtful retaillers who strive to provide the best they can. Operators are always looking for doable ways to improve the quality of their customers' experience. Many new concepts have been developed to make stores more open (inside and out), wide, square, quiteter, cleaner, gender-neutral/friendly and bigger. All are good things if you have the space, the time, the money.

Most c-stores really are pretty small so every square—every cubic—inch of space is a golden, treasured resource that must be focused on enhancing your customers' experience.



Here's the science of it. Think of your store as a big salad bowl: low in the middle, high around the edges, meant to contain and mingle many ingredients. Now, cut a door into the side of the bowl near the bottom. Take one step into your store. You can see the whole store from that place. When you put anything into the middle, or hang anything from the top (ceiling, that is), it must not block your view of the sides of the bowl. When you begin to fill your store with ingredients, don't overfill. You must be able to stir those ingredients around.

And here's the art of it: Don't stir those ingredients too much. Blend them, yet let ingredients breathe, have their own identity. Think salad, not pudding.

It's that easy, and that hard.

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Breathing Space

Of course, your store is neither salad nor pudding, and it's not a bowl. It is a very complex, high-speed, three-dimensional selling environment. We're talking about communicating your total store layout to your customers. From their point of entry, sight lines must be clear and uncluttered, pathways and stopping places obvious, and big enough for a lot of customers.

To a huge extent, less is more: Fifty percent of your sales-floor space must be empty of fixtures and goods so that there is room for customers to see, select and move along their journey, so that staff can greet, see and help customers, clean up messes, and stock and arrange product. This "empty space" is not wasted space. Hardly. This space is the structure forming the shape of the physical identity of your store. Space allows customers to breathe, to move, to develop positive impressions, to scope out and understand your store, to easily course his/her way to destination points across your 2,000- to 3,000-square-foot bowl. This empty space is the hardest thing to be designed, and it must be.

Keep it simple: Applying the salad-bowl layout by design is hard work. Step back. Become a new customer coming into your store. Take one step in the door and look around; scan. Study the panorama your customers see. Can they appreciate your total offer?

What you/they probably will want to see immediately is what you/they come into the store for, looking good and easy to get to. Most c-store customers don't come in to shop your store. They are need-driven. They are in a hurry. To be really convenient—really fast—by design, you must keep it simple. If there is too much stuff in the store, if it's piled too high, if it isn't organized and messaged meaningfully and attractively, if you don't have lots of customer space, it won't be simple, neither for your customers nor for you.

Simple. Easy. Uncluttered. Clear sight lines and pathways. Low and open in the middle, high at the edges. Layout by design draws a clear plan for a customer-centric, product-focused and operationally functional space. That's what this is all about. ■