



Smooth sailing AHEAD

Here's how to keep your store looking as good as it did the day you renovated it.

By Robert Wilbrink

Have you ever walked through a store during a grand opening and wandered about in awe and admiration, only to return a few months later to find disorder, dismay and disarray? Why is this? There may be lots of reasons, but the main culprit is human nature, namely a resistance to change and a lack of discipline.

Discipline starts at the top. The store owner or manager sets the tone. Their vision of what the store should be is ultimately what the store becomes. It's like sailing a boat. If the captain knows exactly where he wants to go, he'll use his instruments and crew to keep the boat on course. Without

the captain's expertise and vision, the boat drifts aimlessly and ends up wherever the winds and currents take it.

The store manager needs a clear picture of what the store should be. If that picture is what the store looked like just after a renovation—and the manager has the skills to steer the store by training and motivating staff—then there's a reasonable chance of maintaining that picture.

Too often, however, the manager's mind has been preconditioned by years of what was the "old" picture of the store. That picture was disorderly and contained out-of-stocks, poor adjacencies, dead stock, missing bin labels, product orphans, crooked signs, and signage that supported the multiple



images of the vendors instead of the store's own brand.

Then there's the staff. They, too, have been conditioned by the "old" store. It was familiar, an extension of who they were and how they thought things should be done. So employees start making their own design decisions based on gut feel or yesterday's isolated customer experience. Without discipline, the store drifts aimlessly and ends up wherever the winds and currents take it.

Worse than a lack of discipline is outright resistance to change. Like mutiny, this is when individual employees deliberately steer the store, or parts of it, back to where it came from. They might have liked the old way of applying bin labels. Perhaps the dump bins are a pain to keep full and they'd rather just drop a pallet in that spot, just like they used to. In their opinion the widgets sell better next to the doodads, so the first time there's an opening they slide them back. A new display that gets rammed by a lumber cart gets removed because it's just taking up valuable product space anyway. They order in the old vendor's product line and create a dog's breakfast with the new one because that's their personal preference.

Once I installed new music and announcement systems in several of our stores to create a better atmosphere and provide an additional way to advertise to our customers. Yet in a couple of stores I was continually frustrated because every time I walked in, the music was down so low it might as well have been off. That's because certain employees complained it was distracting and kept messing with the controls. The only solution was two padlocks—one for each store.

In another situation we moved the service counter well away from the front entrance to encourage more self-serve shopping. This was contrary to what employees had been used to in a store one-third the size of the new one. They argued it wouldn't work because their customers demanded personal service at the desk. Sure enough, I went back a few months later and carpenters were busy building a new service desk near the entrance. In the process they demolished a number of key design elements of the new store.

The lesson here is that if staff members are left to their own devices without strong and disciplined leadership, many of the gains that result from a renovation can be lost. Staff (sometimes even the store manager) will over time consciously or subconsciously find ways to return the store to what it used to be.

So how do you overcome human nature? How do you prevent the winds, currents and mutineers from eroding the impact of that great renovation? Here's a few suggestions:

Involvement and communication. Employees need to feel part of the change. The owner/manager should meet with staff at key points before and during the project to keep them informed. During the renovation the manager needs to address employee concerns as they arise and explain why things are being done a certain way. Suggestions from staff should be taken seriously, even if they aren't implemented. This shows respect but also encourages positive input.

Define and communicate the new standards. Be clear about what expectations have changed and why they're different than the old store. In fact, document standards and expectations, then meet with staff and ask all employees to read and sign a summary document that goes into their file.

Develop and teach procedures. Defining standards isn't enough. What procedures are needed to maintain these standards and who is responsible for getting them done? If the standard is to have no more than 200 out-of-stocks in the store (99 per cent in-stock on 20,000 SKUs) create a procedure to measure this. Assign responsibility for counting the holes once per week, for example. Track the results and hold people accountable.

One thing that's often overlooked after a renovation is that the rate of sale of some products changes dramatically. Sales history means nothing so you can't rely on system-generated SOQs. Monitor new programs closely, because neither the system nor the staff has a feel for rate of sale. A common problem is product orphans—SKUs that end up in the wrong section, for a variety of reasons. Have a staff person "shop the store" every day, by running a buggy up and down every aisle to pick up orphaned products, then reverse course and put everything back where it belongs. This keeps the store organized and helps employees learn where to find products in the new store.

Consistency, follow-up and, finally, religion. The manager must reinforce the standards day-in and day-out until they become second nature to the staff. Through consistency the staff learns what's expected. Through practice they

A RENOVATED STORE LOSING ITS EDGE HAS THESE TELLTALE SIGNS...

- ✓ High out-of-stocks
- ✓ Empty sections
- ✓ Impassable aisles
- ✓ Disorganized power aisles (with blocked sight lines)
- ✓ Missing bin labels
- ✓ Damaged/missing signs
- ✓ Damaged displays
- ✓ Unfocused end caps
- ✓ Permanent end caps
- ✓ Empty clip strips
- ✓ Staff out of uniform
- ✓ Light levels decreasing
- ✓ Dirty floors
- ✓ Confusing product adjacencies
- ✓ Product orphans



know how to deliver. They see the positive benefits for customers and take pride in the condition of the store. They know the manager cares and now their fellow workers do, too. Over time it becomes religion.

Fix what's broken. Although damage prevention is an important consideration in store design (bump guards and bollards to protect racking, countertops resistant to wear, and base height that takes into consideration the wheels and

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platforms of shopping carts), let's face it: stuff will break over time. The trick is to repair the damage right away, identify what caused it, then add protection so it doesn't happen again. The alternative is to ignore the damage until eventually the store returns to its old and tired self.

Perseverance. All elements of store design can be considered in concert when preparing for a major renovation. Changes after the fact don't get the same scrutiny. A lot of seemingly small changes can fundamentally undermine the store's design. I experienced this in a previous career in marketing as “death by a thousand cuts” when the best concept for a TV commercial would be compromised by the opinions and biases of an army of people who needed to approve the spot. In the end, a fabulous concept would end up dead on the cutting room floor.

The key is to give the new store a chance to perform. Focus staff's energy on the fundamentals of excellent customer service, stock balancing and good housekeeping. If changes are needed a year or two down the road, develop them in a way that is organized and not based on knee-jerk reactions.

In the end, it's up to the store manager to steer the ship. By having a clear vision and staying the course, providing leadership and giving staff the right tools, there is a much better chance the full benefits of the renovation will be realized. As customers, we won't be disappointed on the return visit or the many more that follow. **HM**

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strategic and operating perspective and specializes in the home improvement industry. (905) 332-6652, www.bmfmerchandising.ca. Wilbrink has been involved in numerous store renovations while employed at RONA and Lansing Buildall. This is the final installment in a four-part series.