

“Today’s consumers have had enough of being screamed at by overpowering colours and prefer more subtle and muted tones.”

# A little LESS BRIGHT, please

By Robert Wilbrink

**C**olour can be used in many ways to complement a shopping environment and contribute to the branding of a store. In the earlier days of Home Depot, that meant painting everything but the cashiers’ finger nails orange. Revy differentiated itself by painting its stores blue. Fixtures, counters, signs and hundreds of overhead doors were all drowned with Revy blue. Rona similarly relied on Rona gold and created monotone box stores through the late 1990s. The concept was to take the dominant colour in the logo and use it to dominate the environment. This was a literal interpretation of colour and a limited view of branding. The problem was that for customers, this environment was oppressive. They would get what they needed—then get the heck out!

Building and home centres have also historically applied a literal approach to colour. Beaver Lumber used green and yellow wherever it could. Lansing Buildall, the Toronto chain, put red stripes around the top of the walls as an extension of its standing chevron logo until the late 1990s when the Watt group, a retail design firm, convinced Lansing the logo would have much more impact against a more appealing backdrop. Watt suggested a sand colour as a background and a very dark green for accents. These colours complemented the logo colours and created a more aesthetically pleasing shopping environment.

The Do-it Centre program made liberal use of red and brown in its heyday in the 1980s. Today many stores still sport fixtures that were painted with these daunting colours during that era. At the time it was very effective, but today’s consumers have had enough of being screamed at by overpowering colours and prefer more subtle and muted tones. Compare Best Buy to the old Majestic Sound, Fortino’s or Zehr’s to the original Loblaws, and Shoppers Drug Mart to its previous self.

President’s Choice is arguably the most successful example of branding across a range of products. Would Loblaws have inspired millions of consumers to purchase and become loyal to these products had the designers been literal in applying the Loblaws yellow colours to the

packaging? Not likely. Instead they created inviting graphics and photography. Then they applied an attractive logo that complemented the image instead of dominating it.

The fast food industry learned this lesson a long time ago. While McDonald’s arches are yellow, the inside of its stores are anything but. The main priority of McDonald’s is to make customers comfortable so they’ll want to come back. By not making yellow the dominant background colour, McDonald’s is able to tastefully apply the golden arches to in-store graphics in a way that will get noticed. Similarly, the colour red appears almost exclusively on the logo of Tim Hortons in its coffee shops, not as the dominant decor colour (which is usually a softer coffee colour).

Today in our industry, box stores are evolving rapidly toward more inspirational environments defined by a range of colours, which offer background and accent to the primary logo colours. I was recently standing in a new Home Depot appliance department. What I saw was the tasteful use of silver greys and soft blues. Large photo murals added more atmosphere and colour. The Home Depot logo was applied to the signage and stood out effectively from the background colours. I slowed down, took a deep breath and felt comfortable. My wife felt so comfortable she bought two appliances instead of one! What we experienced was both a well branded and inspirational shopping environment. This is not new to retail but it is relatively new to our industry.

The effect of being too literal with colour is to create a stark, unappealing and uninspiring shopping environment. The challenge for designers is to apply this reasoning in an industry that has historically looked the other way! **HM**

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