Chapter 61
Visual Merchandising in Online Retailing Based on Physical Retailing Design Principles

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ABSTRACT
Effective design guidelines aid in the creation of successful online stores. One possible resource to aid in formulating effective online store design guidelines is found in principles and practices of physical retailers. In particular, physical store merchandising techniques provide a significant body of research from which online store guidelines may be constructed. By examining the research literature and common practices of physical retailers, online retailers may glean new and interesting ideas upon which to base guidelines for online store design.

INTRODUCTION
While retailing on the World Wide Web began in the United States in the mid-1990’s (Netscape Communications Corporation, 1997; Petrak, 2000; Zakon, 2002), traditional store-based retailing has been practiced for centuries. Although some have argued for starting with a “blank slate” strategy when building online retailing research (Childers, Carr, Peck, & Carreon, 2001), it would be unwise for those studying online retailing to disregard the decades of research that exists in traditional retailing (Chen, Gillenson, & Sherrell, 2002; Hübischer, Pittarese, & Lanford, 2002; Pittarese, 2003). Research focusing particularly on the use of physical retail merchandising techniques in e-Commerce is currently underdeveloped.

Early research in physical store merchandising can be traced to the 1960’s. During this time researchers first began to focus on how the display and presentation of products in the selling environment could be used to enhance sales (K. Cox, 1964, 1970; Kotzan & Evanson, 1969). Merchandising, defined as “the activities required in the attempt to make a product interesting to buyers” (Rosenberg, 1995), encompasses areas such as store organization (Hart & Davies, 1996), product display and presentation (Bryan & Gershman, 1999), and overall design and...
Visual Merchandising in Online Retailing

The key in this process is to recognize that although online retailers do not face the same physical constraints as store-based retailers, they do face practical constraints in managing a shopper’s attention and motivation. For this reason visual merchandising in the online environment is an important concern. How can products best be presented to facilitate a shopper’s navigation among the products and positively influence his purchase decision?

VISUAL MERCHANDISING ONLINE

Research was conducted by the author to test the viability of extracting merchandising principles from physical retailing for use as the foundation of design guidelines for online retailing. A set of candidate merchandising principles was selected, an online store guideline based on each principle was formulated, a prototype store was constructed for each guideline, and the stores were usability tested by users.

Store Variation One: Unsought Products

In physical stores shoppers are immersed in an environment where they see many products not specifically related to a conscious shopping goal. Frequently these unsought products will attract the shopper’s attention and will be purchased. In many online stores only products within a selected category or matching a product search term are displayed. This provides little opportunity for the shopper to be influenced by something outside of their explicit focus.
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