

## GIMME A “V”!

### 10 Ways to Add Verve to Your Merchandising Mix

By: Andrea Syverson



As a merchant, it can be easy to slip into neutral at times and follow last year’s patterns and processes of product creation, trade show travel and vendor meetings both domestically and internationally. After all, your brand attributes haven’t changed much and you surmise that perhaps your customers haven’t either. Ahh, but here’s the rub...by doing the same ole thing over and over you might unconsciously be slipping your brand into fatigue and potentially, irrelevancy.

The remedy for that is good old fashioned verve. Verve is liveliness, it’s energy and enthusiasm...not just about the products but for your customers’ real needs. Do your merchants really care about making your customers’ lives better through their product development and sourcing work? Take some time to study your product offering and ask yourself a few questions about the vitality of your merchandise selection:

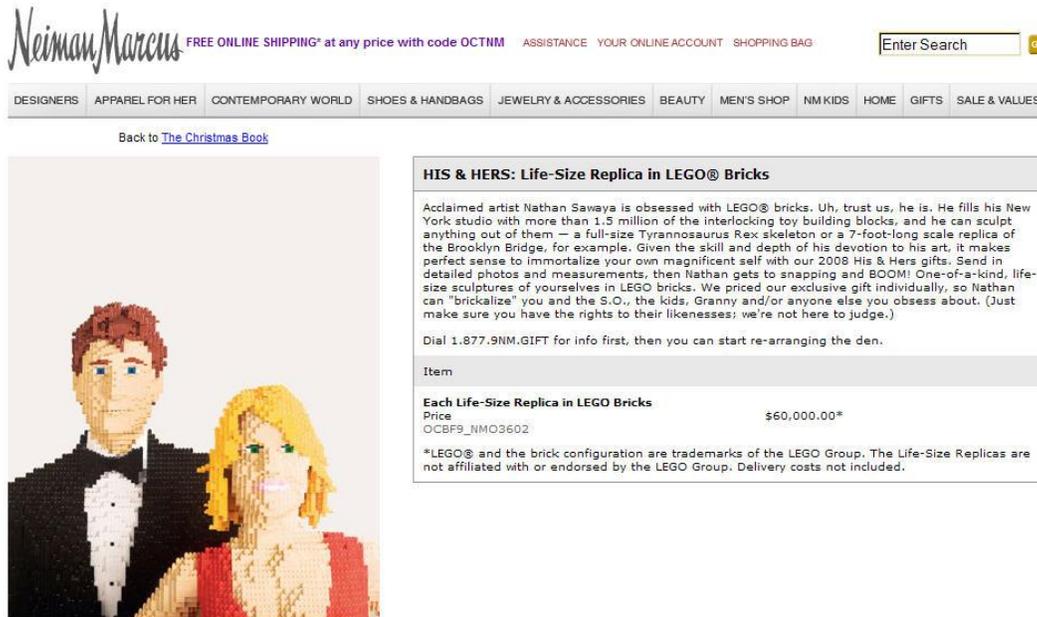
1. Are your products meeting our customers’ intangible needs of more time and less stress? (What futurist Edie Weiner calls the “new luxuries.”)
2. Are your products enhancing your brand story? (Each product has a job to do...it either enhances the brand or detracts from it. It’s that simple.)
3. Are your products giving your customers something compelling worth remarking about to their friends? (What Seth Godin refers to as “purple cows.”)

Have a “vitality index” conversation with your team and be hard on yourselves (better you than your customers or your competitors!).

If, after that discussion, you’re feeling that your vitality index could use a boost, try a few of these ideas to add verve to your merchandise mix:

1. **Focus on components.** Think about “inside out” merchandising. What goes on inside your products? Often it’s the little things that make the biggest difference to your customers. **Dell’s** recent ad campaign for their computers focuses on its hinge... “the cockiest hinge on the market” while **Apple** plays up the “thinnovation” of its MacBook Air. Perhaps some of your products have “inside out” stories that need to be told in a bolder way.
2. **Luxe it up!** Another way to add verve to your product line is to take a lesson from **Neiman Marcus** and add a bit of “luxe” whimsy. In addition to creating a buzz-worthy dream book year after year for the rich and famous, these folks have mastered the art of taking some common products in unusual and upwardly mobile ways. This year’s Wish Book contains a \$15,000 crystal chess set and a set of \$60,000 his & her life size sculptures created out of LEGO bricks.

While this is obviously a micro-niche strategy, perhaps some of your products can be taken “up a notch” a bit.



The screenshot shows the Neiman Marcus website header with the logo and navigation links: DESIGNERS, APPAREL FOR HER, CONTEMPORARY WORLD, SHOES & HANDBAGS, JEWELRY & ACCESSORIES, BEAUTY, MEN'S SHOP, NM KIDS, HOME, GIFTS, SALE & VALUES. A search bar is visible with the text 'Enter Search' and a 'go' button. Below the header, there is a link 'Back to The Christmas Book' and a large image of a life-size replica of a man and a woman made of LEGO bricks. The man is wearing a tuxedo and the woman is wearing a red dress. To the right of the image is a product description box with the title 'HIS & HERS: Life-Size Replica in LEGO® Bricks'. The text describes the artist Nathan Sawaya and the product. Below the description is a table with the item name and price.

Neiman Marcus FREE ONLINE SHIPPING\* at any price with code OCTMM ASSISTANCE YOUR ONLINE ACCOUNT SHOPPING BAG Enter Search go

DESIGNERS APPAREL FOR HER CONTEMPORARY WORLD SHOES & HANDBAGS JEWELRY & ACCESSORIES BEAUTY MEN'S SHOP NM KIDS HOME GIFTS SALE & VALUES

Back to [The Christmas Book](#)

**HIS & HERS: Life-Size Replica in LEGO® Bricks**

Acclaimed artist Nathan Sawaya is obsessed with LEGO® bricks. Uh, trust us, he is. He fills his New York studio with more than 1.5 million of the interlocking toy building blocks, and he can sculpt anything out of them — a full-size Tyrannosaurus Rex skeleton or a 7-foot-long scale replica of the Brooklyn Bridge, for example. Given the skill and depth of his devotion to his art, it makes perfect sense to immortalize your own magnificent self with our 2008 His & Hers gifts. Send in detailed photos and measurements, then Nathan gets to snapping and BOOM! One-of-a-kind, life-size sculptures of yourselves in LEGO bricks. We priced our exclusive gift individually, so Nathan can “brickalize” you and the S.O., the kids, Granny and/or anyone else you obsess about. (Just make sure you have the rights to their likenesses; we’re not here to judge.)

Dial 1.877.9NM.GIFT for info first, then you can start re-arranging the den.

Item	
Each Life-Size Replica in LEGO Bricks	
Price	\$60,000.00*
OCBF9_NMO3602	

\*LEGO® and the brick configuration are trademarks of the LEGO Group. The Life-Size Replicas are not affiliated with or endorsed by the LEGO Group. Delivery costs not included.

- 3. Make a metaphor.** Where is the poetry in your products? I see more and more food companies creating metaphors to position (or in some cases, re-position) their products in new categories. **Evian** recently decorated their water bottles with a lace motif and called it “water in a party dress” while the Italian water company **Panna** claimed its “water belongs on a wine list.” One summer **Land’s End** put little black bathing suits on its front cover and connected this product to the “little black dresses” that every woman needs each season. What metaphorical connections can you make with your products to help your customers perceive them in unique ways?
- 4. Creatively name it.** **Ben & Jerry’s** turned boring old vanilla, chocolate and strawberry ice cream on its heads years ago when it decided to add some vivaciousness to the naming of its products. Who can resist Chunky Monkey or Cherry Garcia? **L.L. Bean** has also been intentional about the naming of its product as another way to enhance its brand positioning. From its Casco Bay Windbreaker to its collection of Double L chinos and jeans to the Bean Canteen, L.L.Bean knows that creative names stick in the minds of their customers.
- 5. Theme it.** **Anthropologie** gets a V+ for verve! According to its website, Anthropologie was founded in 1992 by a small group of people with a love for making things that inspire the imagination. Sixteen years later, this passion continues. One way it is made visible is through the way they creatively theme their products. This winter, their cold weather fashion collection is arranged by artfully themed outfits called “Fireside” or “Jubilee” or “Sweet Bough.” These themes not only make shopping easier and less time-consuming but more fun in the process!
- 6. Pair it up.** What products can you mix and match or combine functionality in some unusual or practical way to give your customers more than they bargained for? **CHEFS** features a product that does double duty and then some in the kitchen: the 8-Cup Multi Pot with Strainer Lid...one little pot that “does it all” for only \$39.99. **Starbucks** played on their customers’ love of mixing their favorite coffee combos by offering customized t-shirts they can create online that show off their drink preferences.

7. **Leverage the icons.** Many companies leave a bit of merchandising verve on the table when they do not leverage their iconic brands enough. **L.L. Bean** provides an excellent example of how one company masters this. Each year L.L. Bean takes their iconic boat tote to new levels by line extending it in numerous ways: by shape, by size, by price point, by on-trend fashion additions such as varsity letters or stripes and even as gift containers holding flowers or pancake mixes for the holidays. In addition, they featured the boat tote on their gift card and front cover this past summer. Don't tire of your icons...find a way to re-energize them!
8. **Package it.** While what's inside matters a great deal, sometimes, what's outside matters just as much! Take a look at all the ways companies add verve to common products simply by "verving up" its outward container. **American Stationery** added colorful "deskworthy" holders for their correspondence cards and gave customers a practical holder as well. **Sundance** places all their jewelry in signature felt bags, adds a story card and then puts the items in branded jewelry boxes. The packaging adds verve to the gift experience.
9. **Add a little whimsy.** **Little MissMatched** is another multichannel retailer that exudes merchandising verve. They've built an entire business on pairing whimsy with function (3 socks sold as "pair", clothes with detachable short and long sleeves, room décor and more!). But even companies that offer business-to-business products or super practical products can capitalize on the attention-getting power of whimsy as well. Insurance companies knew they needed whimsy to differentiate themselves in the marketplace. **Geico** brought in the Caveman. **Aflac** brought in the infamous duck. **New Pig**, a supplier of industrial products, adds whimsy from the first call with their "Kiss a Pig, Hug a Swine" on hold song for customers. Fun sells.
10. **Stretch your bestsellers.** What do you do well? How much time have you spent trying to do that very one thing *better*? Sometimes we take our bestsellers for granted and forget to look "underneath the hood" at what drives their success and brainstorm ways we can maximize that success. That's where real merchandising vitality can pay deep dividends.

So, go ahead and gimme a V and an E and a R and a V and another E. VERVE. It all adds up to customer-pleasing products. Give it a try.

Andrea Syverson is the founder and president of IER Partners, which has guided and strengthened brands of all sizes with savvy best practices for creating customers for life. Combining her passion of adventurous listening and working across diverse industries, her "outsider-insider" creative branding and merchandising expertise and objectivity has been valued by companies as diverse as Ben & Jerry's, Celestial Seasonings, CHEFS, Boston Proper, SmartPak, Spanx and World Vision. She holds an MBA and has dedicated more than 20 years to providing clients both domestic and international with innovative approaches to branding, product development and creative messaging. She is the author of two books in which she shares her hands-on approach for both brand building and creating customer-centric products that enhance brands: *ThinkAbout: 77 Creative Prompts for Innovators*, and *BrandAbout: A Seriously Playful Approach for Passionate Brand-Builders and Merchants*.