

YEAR-ROUND MERCHANDISING VIBRANCY

By: Andrea Syverson

In the world of merchandising, it is always the season for thinking and tinkering about *next* season! By now, I am sure you and your team have sliced and diced all the holiday sales reports and have a deeper understanding of which products worked and which ones did not. And hopefully, you've had the most important conversation of all. You've wrestled with the WHY conversation and what is underneath all those reports and spreadsheets. That is, *Why* did the customers respond to this product or color or price point and not that one? *Why* was this item a surprise seller to us? *Why* didn't we anticipate this poor performer? etc. As an independent and fresh lens contributor to my clients, I often lead discussions like these and it is in these fierce conversations about WHY certain products/categories are working or not that real and actionable merchandising revelations are uncovered. I encourage brand leaders to have these face-to-face discussions because they are the basis for a growth-oriented, sustainable, vibrant merchandising strategy independent of the latest season's trends.

While every brand has their own unique product fit chart, here are a few things I believe every company needs to consider as they strategize their year 'round merchandising offer to make it as VIBRANT as possible:

Valiant

How strong of a statement do your products make about your brand?

Just how full-bodied (in a brand sort of way!) is your merchandising offer? How many of your products contribute directly to your brand mission? Perhaps it is a good time to take an inventory of your key categories and items and discuss how important each one is to your overall positioning. Sometimes, brands drift into product choices that are best left to their competitors. Other times, the item may be just right but there is an untapped opportunity to connect the product story more closely to the brand story.

I loved how **Performance Bicycle** offered a product last Christmas that was both a valiant item in reinforcing their brand positioning but also very relevant to their customers' needs. What parent hasn't wished for Santa's elves to bring all those toys already assembled and ready for Christmas morning action? With Performance Bicycle's Kids Bike in a Box, that dream was answered. It was cleverly marketed with this online product copy and a short and humorous YouTube video:

The screenshot shows the Performance Bicycle website. At the top, there's a navigation bar with categories like Bikes & Frames, Bike Parts & Components, Tires, Tubes & Wheels, Cycling Clothing, Shoes & Pumps, Helmets & Saddles, Nutrition & Hydration, Lights & Accessories, Bike Tools & Transport, and Bicycle Trainers. A promotional banner for '12 DAYS OF DEALS' is visible, with 'DAY 8' and 'Take an EXTRA 10% OFF YOUR TOTAL PURCHASE'. Below the banner, the product page for 'Performance Bicycle Kids Bike in a Box' is shown. The product description reads: 'Kids Bikes, Professionally Assembled and Ready to Ride. Look Dad, no partal flo tools, no waiting, no womes. Just open the box and ride. Imagine, a brand new bike delivered to your door, professionally assembled, quality tested and ready-to-ride by our Spin Doctor Techs. Convenience and value delivered to your door with our 100% Satisfaction Guarantee and Low Price Promise.' A video player is embedded on the page, showing a child sitting on a bicycle in a living room.

Look Dad, no parts! No tools, no waiting, no worries. Just open the box and ride. Imagine, a brand new bike delivered to your door, professionally assembled, quality tested and ready-to-ride by our Spin Doctor Techs. Convenience and value delivered to your door with our 100% Satisfaction Guarantee and Low Price Promise.

A wonderful example of lively, brand-worthy merchandising!

Inspirational

Does your product offering connect with your customers in an emotionally engaging way?

Great merchants know that every product has the potential to connect with a customer in some emotional way. And, yes, while it's easier to make those emotional connections for brands selling items like cars or jewelry or clothing, kitchen gear or sports equipment, I've seen brilliant merchandising with such mundane products as rice, underwear, salt and office supplies.



Take men's grooming supplies for instance. Shaving cream and blades are not the sexiest of products to sell but **The Art of Shaving** has indeed made it so. In fact, the entrepreneurial owners' stated philosophy is to "bring art and passion to a daily routine." They encourage potential customers to join "the brotherhood of shaving" and merchandise their 4 exclusive products as items necessary for "The Perfect Shave."

An excellent example of a brand that merchandises an everyday product in an extraordinary way!

Befriend

Does your merchandise provoke passionate aficionados?

Speaking of a brotherhood, do you have a band of customers who rave about your products? Befriending goes both ways and brands that create products their customers can't live without also create brand cheerleaders. Can you name the products in your merchandising offer that have this status with your customers? If you can't either identify them or don't know of any, it's time do some serious homework.

Amaze

What is WOW! about your products?

Again, one may think that the WOW factor is reserved for glitzy over-the-top lifestyle products for those dream kitchens, perfectly accessorized sport outings or the designer-inspired dens, but as I've said, the real power of WOW happens everywhere and with everyday products.

Here's one example: multichanneler **Duluth Trading** makes your basic workwear tantalizing! Check out their "seriously usable stuff" both for "hands-on" men and women. They pride themselves on creating products with and for their customers and have trademarked several innovative products: The LongTail T® (positioned as the cure for plumber's butt); Fire Hose® Workwear (made with real fire hose) and Buck Naked Underwear ("so comfortable, they're like wearing nothing at all!").

WOW! is a brand attribute for Duluth Trading's merchants and their ingenuity shines with every product.

Now, take a look at your line...are there some everyday products that could use a bit of WOW?

Nudge

Do your products provoke continual brand interactions?

Many brands can get customers to try their merchandise once, but the real secret to growing a sustainable brand is one with happy repeat customers. Merchants play a key role in making and offering products that customers keep coming back for.

J.Crew provided one of the best examples I saw of this last Christmas. Grant it, their entire brand is one of vibrant merchandising practices, but the "Give Sparkle" product campaign really caught my attention. Borrowing brilliantly from the perennial, best-selling, out-of-their-industry concept of "fruit of the month clubs" (or flowers or chocolate, etc), J.Crew applied this idea to their jewelry category: "A year's worth of statement jewels. Give 1. Give 12. Spoil Her." With this program, J.Crew fans have a monthly experience with the brand that is very likely to cause additional purchases.



What ideas can you "borrow brilliantly" from others to nudge your customers in creative and attention-getting ways?

Trust

How much confidence do your customers have in your products?

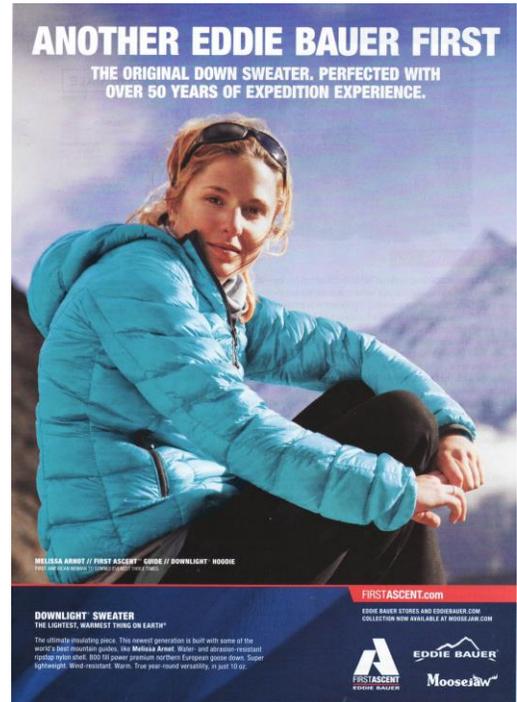
Do your customers trust you? Do your products deliver what you say they will? Each and every product experience has the potential to either build or diminish trust with your customers. How do message and measure this very important communication?

Eddie Bauer knows it has stiff competition in the outdoor apparel market. Outdoor enthusiasts have trusted this brand for years because of its continual product innovation, its passionate customer connection and its reliance on mountaineering experts (like Melissa Arnot, first American woman to summit Everest three times) to co-create gear with their merchants.

Here's how they describe their First Ascent™ line: "World-class expedition gear created by Eddie Bauer with some of the best mountain guides in the world. Simple. Functional. Light. Durable. Everything you need. Nothing you don't.™" Customers can count on the integrity of Eddie Bauer products.

How do your products add integrity to your brand?

Vibrant merchandising is none other than a full time, full intensity job. Is your brand up to the challenge?



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*.