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Colour System Design: Simplifying Colour Selection

“The whole world, as we experience it visually, comes to us through the mystic realm of color.”

-- Hans Hofmann, German Abstract Artist

The challenge

In my previous article “Colour System design – Dealing with Choice” I covered the challenges of providing enough choice for consumers without overwhelming them. Unfortunately there is no research that provides the “magic” number of how many colours are necessary for a Colour System, but I laid out the importance of creating a Colour System that contains the following elements:

- Ease of Navigation
- Meeting the needs of “want to” and “have to” consumers
- Providing colours that are “sure things”
- Using a language that is easy to understand
- Providing enough choice without overwhelming the consumer

In this article I will cover the importance of **physical layout** of systems.

Substantial research has been done in a number of industries covering shelf positioning of key products and core brands to achieve optimum benefit. This research can also be applied to Colour System design.

In the paint industry, shelf positioning is of course relevant for paint, but that is not the scope of this article. Shelf positioning within the scope of the display rack layout is what is being referred to. It is important to remember that in fact the colour in the display is the product. As mentioned previously, colour in the paint industry is representational marketing where the consumer does not necessarily have a physical product to feel and touch. The consumer makes their decisions based on the “representation” of what they believe they will achieve by using the colour display. Therefore the colour system design has to be considered as critically as shelf placement in the supermarket industry.

Positioning of “Extras”

We need to, when designing Systems, ensure the effective positioning of elements within our colour systems, as well as ensuring that our colour systems have optimal placement. This will ensure that we are able to compete for the attention of the consumer and assist in delivering the right message.

"The majority of the human population is right handed, therefore; the more people will grab to their right before their left." (Mark Wiggly, Safeway store manager). This simple psychological knowledge has helped both the Albertsons and Safeway brands to increase their market share since their inceptions. ("Importance of Product Shelf Position at Safeway and Albertson's Grocery Chains", Ben Johnson, August 13th, 2007)

When placing elements of the system on side panels of the display, is consideration taken that the vast majority of human beings are right handed and therefore have a natural tendency to favour the right hand side of a display?

A variety of studies suggest that 70% to 90% of the [world population](#) is right-handed rather than [left-handed](#).

Consumers have a tendency to grab from the right. The validity of this information is not just based on anecdotal comments, but also detailed Neuroscience research from Dartmouth University, which highlights the importance of positioning.

"People have studied peripheral vision and how it helps perception, but nobody really talked about it in terms of helping action," says Todd C. Handy, the lead author and a research assistant professor at the Center for Cognitive Neuroscience at Dartmouth. "There are certain things that we all know attract our attention, like flashing lights and loud noises. Yet, think about how often we grab things without directly looking at them. Now here's evidence that, to help us do this, grabbable objects can literally grab our attention. There's a clear association." ("Graspable objects grab attention when the potential for action is recognized", Todd C. Handy, Scott T. Grafton, Neha M. Shroff, Sarah Ketay, Michael S. Gazzaniga)

Considering the above information, what is the relevance to display rack design?

The inference is simple. Trend brochures, seasonal colours and items that promote "sure thing" colours and colours we want to promote, should be displayed to the right of the display rack. Moreover, these items should be tactile, or "grabbable". If we make these items tactile, we will enhance the likelihood that the consumer will, without thought, reach across the rack and pick them up.

Once the item is in hand, the colours and message need to speak to the consumer, ensuring that the colour choice is made.

Colour positioning in the rack

When designing Colour Systems, visual appearance of colour and the way that colours are laid out within the display rack is crucial to the visual appeal of the system, but more than just visual appeal we also need to make the consumer choose colours.

Below is an extract from the article "Brand Placement and Consumer Choice: An In-Store Experiment"

(Luigi Ciuti, personal communication, February 21, 2005) "...results indicated that most shoppers failed to look at one third to one half of the brands on the shelf; shoppers looked mostly at the products in the center of the shelf. In fact, shoppers looked at the brands positioned in the center of the shelf nine times more than those placed in the corners." However, these findings are based on

proprietary research (i.e., studies that were not published in peer-reviewed journals, but were conducted by businesses for their own use); therefore, the reliability and validity of these findings are not known.

Overall, the results show that the target brand's relative sales against its product category were higher when it was placed in the middle shelf compared to the high or low shelf. One explanation for these results is that the response effort associated with looking at middle shelves is lower than that associated with looking at the high or low shelf. ("Brand Placement and Consumer Choice: An In-Store Experiment", Valdimar Sigurdsson, Hugli Saevarsson, and Gordon Foxall

Can this be related to Colour Systems? In the late 1990's a major paint manufacturer in South Africa launched a new Colour System, which was laid out in a logical, chromatic flow, heavily weighted to bright yellows at the centre.

Over the period of the next 18 months sales of the colours were tracked using actual data of colours tinted at Point of Sale (POS), and it was found that an overwhelming percentage of the color choice was from the centre of the display.

Was this because the Colour System layout was correct, based on the market needs or was it because the colours (bright yellows) were attractive and enticed the customer to choose these colours. Or was it simply as suggested in the above research that products/colours positioned to the center of a shelf will perform better?

We know that shelf positioning for product is important. Do we consider this in Colour System design?

The reality is that the right colours laid out in a display rack taking consideration to consumer shopping preferences, will outperform the right colours laid out ineffectively.

Height of Display Racks

The female shopper must be considered when discussing the importance of choosing colour.

Hundreds of hours are justifiably spent on the palette and layout, and display rack design, but are we getting the display rack physicals right?

How many times have you gotten into a new car to discover that the ergonomics are not perfect. The light switch or radio does not fall easily to hand. This is simply due to inattention by the designers and affects the key users of the vehicle.

Display racks are similar. They are not there simply to hold the stripe cards but are a key element in aiding consumer choice. The ergonomics of a display rack need to be carefully considered, with height, width and depth receiving as much importance as the colour palette.

Is consideration made to *Best* and *Preferred* worked zones – shoulder height to waist height? Not due to injury ergonomics, but again, to creating a convenient and effective shopping environment for the consumer.

Best Work Zone

1. As far forward as your wrist when you hold your arm slightly bent
2. Upper level at about heart height
3. Lower level at about waist height
(OSHA - Occupational Safety and Health Administration Guidelines for Retail Environments)

Preferred Work Zone

1. As far forward as your hand when you hold your arm out straight
2. Upper level at shoulder height
3. Lower level at tip of fingers with hands held at the side
(OSHA Guidelines for Retail Environments)

This has the subsequent benefit of making restocking of stripe cards easier, and possibly more likely to happen.

A common comment usually heard around the world in our industry is that one of the most important consumer groups is usually women. They act as the “want to” consumer and yet do we really consider this when designing display racks?

The average height of a woman in the USA is 5 foot 4 inches, which indicates that the maximum comfortable height for the highest row of chips should be approximately 6 feet from the ground, but does this also consider the best and preferred zones? Many display racks in the USA have a maximum top row height of 72 inches, meaning it is a stretch to reach colours in the top row, definitely outside best and preferred zones.

Who is your shopper, what is their height, are they right- or left-handed? These need to be considerations in display and system design.

Why so much emphasis on Colour Systems?

Recent research emphasizes the importance of capturing the consumer’s attention at Point of Sale.

“Our research found that one consequence of the new world of marketing complexity is that more consumers hold off their final purchase decision until they’re in a store. Merchandising and packaging have therefore become very important selling factors, a point that’s not widely understood. Consumers want to look at a product in action and are highly influenced by the visual dimension: up to 40 percent of them change their minds because of something they see, learn, or do at this point—say, packaging, placement, or interactions with salespeople.” (“The consumer decision journey” – McKinsey Quarterly 2009 Number 3, David Court, Dave Elzinga, Susan Mulder, and Ole Jørgen Vetvik.)

This intimates that, although traditional marketing through traditional channels is of importance in brand building and awareness, the POS display and messages delivered at POS have a crucial role to play.

This places substantial relevance on getting the POS display right!

The palette

In my previous article “Colour System design – Dealing with Choice” and this article I covered the challenges of providing enough choice for consumers without overwhelming them, as well as the need to effectively layout the physical elements of a Colour Display to ensure effective consumer attraction.

The key points in both articles are summarised below.

- Ease of Navigation
- Meeting the needs of “want to” and “have to” consumers
- Providing colours that are “sure things”
- Understandable communication
- Providing enough choice without overwhelming the consumer
- “Grabbability”
- Centricity – key colours should be weighted to the centre of the rack
- Ergonomics

I will be round up this series with a brief discussion on colour palettes, below.

The physical elements covered previously are critical to success but by no means can they alone lead to your success in POS tinting, the colour palette is the overall design that can make or break your system.

Colour palette layout is beyond the scope of these articles, as it is equal parts science and art, and needs to be handled by someone with a keen understanding of the science of colour and the soul of an artist.

Visual appeal, colour flow and having the right palette for your markets and target groups is important and colour palette is not something that should be developed by a committee, or thrown together based on historical sales and future trends with no thought to the complete package.

A good Colour Designer will consider each of the following

- Market palette
- Historical Colours
- Trend colours
- Legacy colours
- Brand values
- Existing palette
- Visual Appeal

My recommendation therefore is to work with a reputable palette designer, and take the time to get it right.

Summary

Getting the POS display right can and will drive sales by making it easier for the consumer to choose

colour.

1. Key Merchandising, Brochures and “sure thing” or hot colours should be placed to the right of the display. “Grabbability” and tactility should be an important consideration for these elements.
2. Chromatic flow should be laid out in a visually arresting way but also considering that the “key colours” or “sure thing” colours are weighted to the centre of the rack.
3. Display rack ergonomics for the target consumer groups need to be carefully considered.

In-store displays are critical to ensuring that you are front of mind with your consumer and give you that last chance to influence the purchasing decision. If we do not get them right we lose the chance to make the sale.

References

1. Ben Johnson, August 13th, 2007. *Importance of Product Shelf Position at Safeway and Albertson's Grocery Chains*
2. Todd C. Handy, Scott T. Grafton, Neha M. Shroff, Sarah Ketay, Michael S. Gazzaniga, *Graspable objects grab attention when the potential for action is recognized*
3. Valdimar Sigurdsson, Hugl Saevarsson, and Gordon Foxall, *Brand Placement and Consumer Choice: An In-Store Experiment*
4. David Court, Dave Elzinga, Susan Mulder, and Ole Jørgen Vetvik. *The consumer decision journey* – *McKinsey Quarterly 2009 Number 3*