

The psychology of color at retail

The one major psychological influence that all retailers can — and do — make use of is color. Color can be everything to a successful store, if the palettes work well across the whole shop and complement other elements such as product displays and lighting. The point, according to retail designers, isn't about creating the most beautiful shop, but one that has coherence.

Color is central to coherence because we react instinctively to it. Red means "stop" and green means "go." Our brains are hot-wired to respond to color and, for modern retailers, the trick to using color is to understand both its physiological and psychological influences.

We react fundamentally to colors because they help us make sense of our surroundings; indeed, some 80 percent of information reaches our brains via our eyes. It means that we are instinctively more comfortable when colors remind us of something familiar — for example, a soft shade of blue triggers associations with the sky and a psychological sense of calm. Prisons and hospitals now use color to influence the behavior of inmates and patients.

In children, by contrast, those color associations are still being formed, which is why youngsters respond best to bright primary colors. Those bold colors are the color of most toys, clothes and children's books — and the color schemes of the most successful kids' retailers.

Color psychology perhaps explains why people are allegedly more relaxed in a green room and why weightlifters perform better in blue gyms. It's certainly the reason why some paint manufacturers now have color cards setting out the therapeutic aspects of each color, and why some cosmetic companies have introduced "color therapy" ranges.

We all share similar responses to color, although some cultural variations exist. For example, white is the color of marriage in western societies but is the color of death in China. In Brazil, purple is the color of death. Yellow is sacred to the Chinese, but signifies sadness in Greece and jealousy in France. People from tropical countries respond most favorably to warm colors; people from northern climates prefer cooler colors.

Our heart rate and blood pressure rise when we look at intense reds; conversely, we can become tired or anxious by looking at large areas of bright whites or grays. In a retail environment, understanding those responses can be crucial to enticing a customer inside, and then enticing her to open her wallet or purse.

To make things more complicated, the success of a retail store isn't so much influenced by the chosen color scheme but by how their target customers react to it.

Is the store aimed at teenagers? Thirty-somethings? Senior citizens? The success of the store depends on how the customer reacts to both the products on display and the sales environment. Younger people like the energy of bold colors; older people prefer more subtle palettes. Get those colors wrong, and a retailer will find that their customers simply won't relate to the brand.

Color association also extends into food retailing. For example, most fast-food restaurants are decorated in vivid reds and oranges. These are colors that encourage us to eat quickly and leave — exactly what the fast-food operator wants us to do. Luxurious brands, on the other hand, favor softer colors that appear more sophisticated. In classier restaurants, those are the colors that encourage us to linger — and to order another drink, another coffee.

Some retailers are now using carpeting to influence patterns of travel around a store — particularly from the crucial zone just inside the shop entrance, often referred to as the compression or transition zone — the place where customers first orientate themselves with what's inside. Here, carpeting is being used to subtly direct shoppers deeper into the store or, by using different colors and patterns, create subconscious walkways that shoppers will tend to follow.

By recognizing how color influences us, retailers are better able to induce feelings of warmth, intimacy or serenity — or, by using more vibrant palettes, to excite or stimulate. It's about understanding target markets, the product lines to appeal to them and the kind of brand the retailer wants to convey. Lastly, it's about conveying that brand through color and design.

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