

Store Layout and Customer Flow

By Dr. Jaime S. Ong

Why are some stores laid out in the form of a grid or maze, with merchandise racks arranged like parallel bars that act as barriers to traffic flow, whereas other stores follow a free-form arrangement that allows more random and unstructured shopper movement?

Step into a supermarket, and you find yourself standing between two parallel merchandise racks, each rather more than head-high, so you see all brands and packages displayed on either side, but nothing beyond. The canned soups aren't visible from the toothpaste and mouthwash section, and you have to ask a store clerk for directions, or visit each aisle in turn, seeking till you find.

If your grocery list includes meat, fish or dairy products -- which is the case for eight out of 10 shoppers -- you have to walk all the way to the back.

In contrast, a boutique will group merchandise and fixtures into patterns that allow customers to see all clothing categories from any point in the store. At one glance you know where to find blouses, skirts, sweaters, slacks and accessories.

Store grid and free-form layouts are neither inconsistent nor at cross-purposes with each other. They are actually tactical responses to the fact that homemakers go to the supermarket with shopping lists, but fashionistas don't. The different store layouts share a common goal: to get you to shop longer and buy more.

As marketing professors J. Paul Peter and Jerry Olson explain (in Consumer Behavior and Marketing Strategy, McGraw Hill, 1999), a supermarket's design directs customers to the store's side and back walls, where the most sought-after and high-margin items are located. Along the way, shoppers must pass by and see a large number of slower-moving products, which ups the likelihood of their buying items not covered in the shopping list.

On the other hand, a customer in a boutique or apparel store buys more when she can be enticed to move from one type of merchandise to another, in a relaxed and unregimented flow: when she (no longer shopping for groceries, but for a trendy outfit for next week's outing) can readily spot a scarf or belt that fits perfectly with the blouse she has just picked up.

Store marketers also know that shoppers have a right-turn bias. (The same holds true when you enter a movie theatre or auditorium; you instinctively head for the right-hand side, which fills up faster.) So retailers stock their newer, full-priced items on the right-hand sections. Disney stores pull you -- or rather, your offspring -- all the way to the back wall, where a huge video screen features animated cartoons and familiar kidsongs, surrounded by all those irresistible toys and tapes and T-shirts. Since you hardly ever go back the same way you came, you pass by other goodies displayed on the other side of the store.

Going back to the supermarket: what determines the organization of items on shelf space? Are canned soups arranged alphabetically, or are the best-sellers placed on eye-level shelves while the slow movers go to the bottom?

Though one might expect a customer-friendly supermarket to stock the best-selling items where the shopper can most conveniently find them, i.e., at eye-level, Mike Ereneta, retired Magnolia Corp. vice-president and sales director reveals that it's the manufacturer not the store, who generally decides which among his brands and packages gets pride of place within the shelf space allotted.

Eye level is the best place for impulse purchases, so newer and slower-moving products are more visible than the favorites and standards. The latter, which typically have more competition, consequently have thinner margins. But the slow movers are stocked only two to three units deep. Behind them are more of the best-selling flavors or packages, which get bought faster; if you devote an entire shelf level, facings and depth, to the new brands or flavors, you risk a stockout of the faster-moving items on the shelves below.

Finally, the heavier and more breakable packages, like 2-liter bottles, hug the bottom shelves, for a practical reason -- to reduce the risk of back pains for merchandisers and store crew. According to David Feldman, author of [When Did Wild Poodles Roam the Earth](#) and other conundrum collections, this is also why the folks at Campbell Soup Co. suggest that their Big 3 -- chicken noodle, tomato and cream of mushroom -- be placed on the lowest shelves: grocery workers restock in case lots, which are bulkier, because of the quick turnover.

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