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Do you own a tool truck or a tool store?

Product merchandising can take your business to the next level.

You are first and foremost a salesperson. But you're also a retailer.

You may see your truck as a warehouse. I see it as a store on wheels. So, as the shopkeeper, part of your job is overseeing the "visual merchandising" – that is, displaying your products to grab attention, stimulate interest and build sales.

Retailers have studied store layout and merchandising for decades to make every square foot of store space as profitable as possible. What can you learn from them to increase your tool sales?

Q. The majority of my customers are men who come out to my truck to buy, not to browse. What's the point of making my shelves visually appealing if they know what they want?

A. Your customers may be mostly men buying work tools, not doing "recreational shopping," but that doesn't mean merchandising doesn't influence them. Retailers wouldn't spend millions of dollars every year on store design and displays if they weren't convinced it impacted sales.

Take Bass Pro Shops Outdoor World, for example. They also cater to a predominately male market (according to alexa.com's visitor audience demographics of the BassPro.com website) yet their store design and merchandising is jaw-dropping.

They dedicate about 20 percent of each store to things like indoor waterfalls, room-sized aquariums and stuffed elk in authentic native foliage. If men weren't influenced by store designs and merchandising, don't you think Bass Pro Shops would be a lot more profitable by just using gray warehouse shelves and handwritten signs?

Bass Pro Shops started in 1971 as a sporting goods section in the back of founder Johnny Morris' dad's liquor store. It stayed in that 8 sq. ft. space for the next 13 years. Fast forward to 2016: Bass Pro announced it's acquiring competitor Cabela's for \$5.5 billion. (By comparison, Sears sold the 90-year-old Craftsman Tools brand to Stanley Black & Decker for less than \$1 billion.)

Bass Pro Shops is doing something right!

They don't build stores. They create destinations. Today, there are over 50 Outdoor World locations drawing visitors from across the U.S. Take 70 seconds to look at Bass Pro Shop's "Memphis Pyramid" (<https://youtu.be/h7alzX0b2Sk>). You don't need to be an outdoorsman to see their retail and merchandising success.

Q. I don't have room on my truck for a stuffed elk. So, what can I do to increase sales?

A. Understood. Space is precious on a tool truck. Don't waste it.



Got milk? Customers grabbing milk or eggs will first see a new Sunny D flavor. (Note: Milk and eggs aren't priced. Convenience is the selling point, not price. The lesson? Use colorful signs and product placement to draw attention to your newest or currently featured products. Also consider when to price tag, or not to.)

There's a difference between "window dressing" to get customers into your store and "visual merchandising" to promote specific products on your shelves.

The goal of merchandising is to cut down the customer's choices, so buying doesn't feel like work, says Bob Phibbs, CEO of 24-year-old training and consulting firm The Retail Doctor (retaildoc.com). The simpler the decision-making, the higher your product sales.

Phibbs uses a humorous analogy to make his point: Poor merchandising is like pointing to a cow and asking a customer to see a steak. It takes a lot of work. But good merchandising is like presenting a perfectly cooked steak, plated with sides and offering a taste.

The more a customer can see himself enjoying the product, the easier it is to sell the product.

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A tool truck is pretty small compared to a retail store. Learn more about what you can do to efficiently merchandise product on the truck.

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Q. **It's a tool on a shelf. How do you make it any simpler than that?**

A. Just seeing a tool doesn't help your customer visualize the value of it.

"Put words to it," Phibbs says.

We're not talking paragraphs or even bullet points. A simple sign that reads "Test batteries in half the time" will close more sales than a tester on a shelf with an orange "Special" tag on it.

Don't know what to say on the sign? Review the literature for hot button points. Or, better yet, ask each customer why he chose a product. Consider using their words to create your sign.

Bilingual English-Spanish signs also fit some routes. You know your customers best.

Q. **My DM says where I put the product on a shelf matters. Is he right?**

A. Absolutely! I'd like you to go on a field trip: visit a big retailer and a busy convenience store. Study the layout and product placement. See what ideas you can adapt to your truck.

"Whatever you make the most profit on should be at eye level," Phibbs says.

You'll notice this is how shelves are stocked at most successful retailers.

"The money is between a customer's belly button and his eyes," Phibbs emphasizes.

If you put items above that, you're making them work. What's below that is even less productive.

Think of it this way: Your customer has wants and needs. He will look for what he needs. So you can put that at the bottom or top shelves. If he doesn't see it, he'll ask you for it. But put what he wants in that high-visibility nose-to-navel area to trigger more impulsive purchases.



***Add-ons.** Dips and salsas are featured between rows of chips as an impulse add-on. The lesson? Place add-ons near your featured tools. For example, promoting an air tool? Think about putting accessories or pneumatic plugs and couplers next to it.*

Also, unlike most stores, you have items hanging overhead. These products are dictated more by weight and size than by profitability. The same goes for extra-heavy items that need to be stored on the floor. And since speed bumps and potholes can jostle your stock, you have a few other considerations a bricks-and-mortar store doesn't. But try to work around those.

Q. **What about layout? Should there be a flow to the products in my truck?**

A. "Place all the *wants* closer to the door," Phibbs says.

That's your high-profit monthly specials and high-volume seasonal items. You should also put your new products up front. Push your closeouts and commodity items to the back of the truck.

"There's a reason they put the eggs and milk in the back of a grocery store," Phibbs says.

The store planner makes you walk past all the other items to get there. And the more you pass, the more likely you are to leave the store with more than you

came in for. (So, if you sell drinks and snacks, consider putting them deeper in your truck.)

Near the door may be a good place to showcase non-tools like a small drone, camera or Bluetooth product (see "Selling On Impulse" from *Professional Distributor*, October 2016 by visiting VehicleServicePros.com/12257770).

You should also promote seasonal items that a customer might use at home.

Q. **What can I do to draw more attention to my specials?**

A. You can highlight your featured products with color, signage and pigs.

COLOR – Using bright colors to draw attention can be a simple, yet effective way to catch a customer's attention.

"Put a little red cloth under an item on your shelf," Phibbs says.

I know one dealer that has a green carpet remnant he calls his "Yard Sale" where he features closeouts. It's one of his most visible and popular sections.

SIGNS – Signs sell. But be professional.

"Handwritten signs with markers are okay for a kid's lemonade stand, but anywhere else they tend to look amateurish," Phibbs says.

Shelf hangers also work wonders. A small bright card with words like "New," "Exclusive" or "Last One" can be powerful silent salesman.

PIGS – Phibbs also suggests using a totally unrelated object to get a customer's attention – like a Kewpie doll or a Billy Bass singing fish. Why? He calls it "a pig in the window." Something odd or out-of-place will naturally attract a customer's eye and pique his or her curiosity. When a customer asks about it you can simply say "Made you look, didn't it?"

And getting a customer's attention is what merchandising is all about, isn't it? **PD**