



## **RTO Design for the Senses**

*By Ray A.P. Anderson and Rex Anderson*

Have you visited Epcot Center with its exhibits of historical monuments to all cultures? How about Las Vegas with its hotel themes ranging from Egyptian, Parisian, Venetian, New York City, MGM, Mandalay, pirate ships, the Romans, etc.? Or maybe you've had the opportunity to visit the Mall of America in Minnesota where visitors have access to all the fun and games found in an amusement park. These are just a few examples of the shifting emphasis away from traditional consumer experiences such as shopping or gambling to entertainment experiences.

If we narrow our focus to the retail/rental world, things are changing as well. When customers go to Home Depot Expo, they see many complete bathroom and kitchen settings. Or at Jordan's Furniture or other retail furniture stores in America today, customers experience 3-D movie theaters, animated figures, celebrity visits and the like. What has all of this got to do with shopping? Nothing, but it does bring people into the store and makes them think they are in a good mood. They see and/or experience things they would have never expected, have a good time and their mind-set has been altered. What was a routine shopping experience has turned into something more enjoyable and consumers are more likely to spend money.

People who order groceries over the Internet or by phone order only what they need. However, if they actually go to the store and walk up and down the aisles, they end up buying more than what they really came for. The point here is: have a store that people want to just go to, not just a store with furniture lined up and a computer with salesmen standing around waiting to pounce.

### **Appearances are Everything**

When consumers look at the rental or rent-to-own stores across America, they discover that the industry, generally, is far behind in visual effects. Nothing has changed in the past 20 years. Merchandise is jammed in and lined up in stores with no drama, no beauty and no message. Oh, there may be a pretty stripe on the walls around the store and lots of signs about credit plans, etc. Everyone agrees that silent salesmen (signs) are necessary. However, there are newer and better ways to get these messages across. The salespeople in the stores also lack knowledge in decorating to help customers. If they knew how to suggest a furniture layout, complete with styles, colors and accessories, they could help their customers have a nicer looking home while writing bigger orders.

How can a store improve its appearance? First, let's look at the initial impression (visual image) customers have when they drive up to a rental store. There are often banners taped all over the windows so customers can't even see the merchandise. If they can see the merchandise, it is lined up - often with the back of the furniture facing the front windows of the store, which should never be done. This kind of presentation is uninviting and looks cheap.

Stores should have groupings/settings that can be seen through the windows. Complete room settings with accessories - pictures, lamps, sculptures, flowers and a background - in the windows visually creates a home environment and establishes a theme that can be frequently changed so as to appear that your store has a variety of product styles and selections. With the changing of accessories each week, this room setting can appear to be modern, country, classic, transitional, eclectic or traditional and can make it seem that a store has a large selection of inventory. It is also important that the housekeeping is

spotless and inviting, right down to the glass windows always being clean. A food critic, when asked how he went about rating a restaurant, once said that when he approached a restaurant with dirty windows, he assumed the kitchen was dirty as well and didn't want to eat there.

Today's rental store also needs to look uncluttered and organized when the customer comes through the front door. A store should be set up by departments, such as living rooms, entertainment centers, bedrooms, dining rooms, dinettes, children's rooms and kitchens or set up as complete packages with a living room, dining room and bedroom, perhaps even with a packaged price (like Rooms To Go).

Many current rental stores have aisles of hard surface flooring - vinyl or wood - because this is practical and saves on carpet wear and tear. Many also make space for handicapped individuals in wheelchairs. However, hard surface flooring creates a "race track" for customers, which causes them to rush through the store and keeps them from getting involved with the merchandise. This also keeps a store design from being flexible. Also, when a store is too open (having no dividers or walls), customers walk in, stand in one spot, look around and say, "I don't see anything I like!" and walk out.

### **Meeting Expectations**

There are more than 8,000 rent-to-own stores in America. These stores are attempting to attract students, temporary business executives, military and transient customers. Thirty percent of RTO customers in the United States are 25-34 years old; 35 percent are in the \$24,000 to \$36,000 income bracket; 52 percent are high school graduates; 70 percent Caucasian; 25 percent African American. Furniture is the most popular rented item (38 percent), then appliances (23 percent) and televisions (12 percent).

These figures illustrate that our customers are intelligent and have been exposed to good taste through magazines, television and high-end fashion in clothing and retail furniture stores. So it stands to reason that rental stores should address the sophistication level of their customers, instead of keeping with the past mindset that rental customers are not concerned with such things as style, color or taste. The customers of today want to be treated with respect.

Salespeople must have at least the same knowledge - preferably more - as the customers they serve in order to help them make the right choices for their lifestyles. Store management must make sure the salespeople are properly trained to be helpful in products, design and public relations.

### **Make a Good Impression**

Stores should have an area for clients to sit down, have a soft drink or coffee and a place for children to play or watch television to keep them happy so their parents can make decisions without interruption. Stores should have display areas for a home office or computer area (desk, homework areas). Stores should have display areas for home entertainment (entertainment center, TV, sofa, chair and tables). Stores should have display areas for children's rooms. Stores should have the same areas for accessories such as lamps, pictures, sculptures and floral arrangements. This all helps to create a more personal shopping experience where customers can more accurately visualize how these products will look in their homes.

Don't ignore lighting! Proper lighting is a critical element to help focus attention on

merchandise. Fluorescent lighting is O.K. for general lighting, but is bad for color, unless you have color-adjusted tubes. Track lighting is best for drama. Spotlights are even better than floods for economical reasons. However, the two should be combined for added focus.

All stores would like to have more space. But, if a store does not have enough space for a lot of merchandise, use light boxes - photographs of individual items or groups - to show clients what is available in inventory or in concepts. This technique will show your customers what else you have available and how these products can be arranged to fit in their living space.

### **Time for Change**

People want to come to a store that has an exciting, special and unique look. More and more, shopping must be transformed into a more memorable experience. The theater, movies and the fun worlds of Disney, Six Flags, etc., have spoiled the people of today. We must do more to capture their attention.

Ask people if they like to shop for furniture. The majority will say "No!" Nevertheless, they can buy a car for \$30,000+ in 24 hours or less. But it takes weeks and months to buy a sofa. They find shopping boring and confusing. It's time to bring show business to the furniture business.

### **Brick and Mortar Are Here to Stay**

The Internet is not going to replace rental furniture stores. Yes, the Internet is wonderful for many people and many products. It is and will be successful in many areas, but for furniture, it is still a question mark. Saying the Internet is going to replace rental furniture stores is like when people were saying shopping centers were losing their charm a few years ago. However, shopping centers have made a comeback because they have incorporated new concepts in design as well as added entertainment.

One of the largest shopping centers in North America is practically a Disney World with rides, shows, displays, etc. It is a place to go have fun. Most people would rather go there to shop and have fun than shop on the Internet.

The same thing is true of furniture stores like Jordan's and others that have 3-D movies, places for children to play and watch television, places for people to relax and make their decisions, displays that are stylish and beautiful to see. People want to sit down on a sofa, to feel the comfort, feel the fabric, look at the colors and get involved with the furniture they plan to buy. They want their furniture delivered immediately and unbroken. If a store updates its displays to a new and exciting look, it can be here to stay.

### **Picture the Future**

The industry has just touched its potential. The door is wide open to expand the client base. So many customers need your services and are not aware of all the advantages the industry offers. The growth is unlimited. Redesigning can be the key to a continued, successful future.

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on television numerous times as an expert in the field.

### Room Layout Tips

Here are some ideas that you can apply to enhance a room-from furniture arrangements to background effects

- Sofa with pair of chairs that face a square coffee table and end tables.
- Sofa with pair of chairs -one on right side and one on left side-use oblong coffee table and end tables.
- Sofa with pair of chairs set at an angle to the sofa. Use round coffee table and end tables.
- Tabletops of wood give warmth to room.
- Tabletops of glass make a room appear larger.
- Tabletops of marble or stone give a feeling of quality.
- Upholstered ottoman in front of sofa gives a feeling of comfort.
- Table with underneath pullout tables offers flexibility and versatility.
- To bring more interest to a room, add a curio cabinet and bookcases (corner units are effective).
- Drawers and door-front chests add interest and storage. Storage benches are convenient and comfortable.
- Be sure to allow 2 to 3 feet of operating space in front of cabinets with doors or drawers.
- Allow 2 to 3 feet behind desk chairs and dining room chairs.
- Occasionally use console tables behind sofas. Place a lamp, sculpture and/or flowers on the table.
- Use a pair of console tables on each side of a large entrance or interior room and use mirrors, pictures and/or sconces above them.
- When selecting end tables, make sure the tables are level with the arm of the sofa.
- To visually create more space in a room, use light colors and monochromatic color schemes.
- To visually change the shape of a room, paint three walls a light color and paint one wall a bright or dark color.
- If you use woodwork (paneling) in a room, the room will feel warmer and more comfortable. However, dark wood makes a room feel smaller; while lighter wood makes a room feel larger. Knotty pine gives a country, casual feeling.

### 10 Ways to Dress Up Your Store

1. Trigger customer senses with a pleasant aroma-from candles or sprays.
2. Use music to create a mood and enhance the store's ambiance.
3. Pay special attention to your lighting, especially on displays where you are trying to create a theatrical effect.
4. Use signs early and often. Keep people informed. Don't leave them guessing.
5. Create an appealing backdrop, with contrasts as well as subtleties, through the colors you use-in paint, fabrics and wall treatments.
6. Each vignette in your store is an opportunity to show consumers how they should put their homes together.
7. Use your decorating talents to create moods.
8. Enhance your presentations with accessories and use props-such as urns, columns and plants to create unique looks.
9. Encourage customers to get involved. Let them have the controls to the home theater. Invite them to touch your products and use them in the store.
10. Set up a design center with new computer software (virtual reality), perspective layouts, sample collections.