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The Theater of Retail:

A How-to Guide for Creating
the Consumer Experience

— *By Kevin Ervin Kelley*

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A How-to Guide for Creating the Consumer Experience

I decided to be an architect when I was six years old, and now that I have over 25 years of experience working in the profession of design, I can honestly say I still love it. As a retail design architect I get the opportunity to shape and influence how people encounter, perceive and experience the built environment. I also get the privilege of helping my consumer-based clients figure out more effective and compelling ways to tell their story and present their brand and products to the general public. This kind of creative work brings me great joy and satisfaction. Surprisingly, I never really considered any other career other than architecture, but if I had to pick something else, I think it would be filmmaking or theatrical design. To be clear, I don't have any interest in being on the stage or in front of the camera. I'm smart enough to know that I don't have the right kind of talent, confidence or looks for that line of work. But I would be very interested in being behind the camera or better yet, in the storyboard room shaping how dramatic scenes come together to tell a story that pulls people in.

Creating the perfect scene that elicits a specific type of emotional response from viewers is precisely what my staff and I try to do in our retail design work.

What fascinates me most about the filmmaking process is how movies are constructed so that audiences can both understand them and respond to them emotionally. When you really think about it, it's somewhat illogical that humans get so engrossed in movies. After all, a movie is just a series of flickering images that are not actual real life events, but are totally made up stories with fake stage sets, paid actors, scripted dialog and compressed timelines. All of us moviegoers know this lie upfront before we even buy our

tickets. Nothing in life could be more fake or un-realistic, and yet the movies that affect us so much—such as those with death-defying car chases, weeping lovers, lost dogs or scary monsters—have the power to make us involuntarily gasp, scream, laugh, cringe and cry as if it were really happening to us. Although the movie is fake, the emotions that rise up and the tears that fall are real. And all of this personal and emotional drama happens in a dark room full of complete strangers. Very few mediums, other than real life events, have the kind of emotional impact on people that movies do.

Why in the world would our highly-evolved, intelligent brains react emotionally to such an obviously constructed fabrication and blatantly produced event? The short answer: Films don't

try to transmit ideas through our intellect, they instead transmit ideas through our emotions. And that is also what really what good retail design should do. Unfortunately, most retail lacks this emotional power.



*Good movies can open doors
in us that ordinarily stay closed
during our everyday lives*

Recent cognitive neuroscience research tells us that good movies exert considerable control over our brain activity and eye movements. Good movies captivate our attention and make us forget the outside world for a brief period of time. They push our emotional buttons and hit our funny bone in ways that surprise and delight us. This is a rather impressive feat, because most of the time humans walk around suppressing or trying to suppress our feelings and emotions in order to keep them under control. But movies effectively neutralize this instinct to suppress, and can even trigger a certain kind of emotional release, which we find enjoyable. Good movies can open doors in us that ordinarily stay closed during our everyday lives.

To a certain degree, the retail store environment offers the same potential for emotional engagement and release that movies provide. Of course, the same people who watch movies are the people we call consumers. And consumers carry their emotional capacities with them wherever they go. Emotions are not something that can be turned on or off at will. They are always there within us, lying dormant oftentimes, but always available to be stoked, triggered, provoked or released at any given moment. The key is to find the right kind of stimuli to wake these emotions up.

Behavior, Perceptions & Environment

For more than two decades now, my colleagues and I have been studying how the physical environment affects behavior and how perceptions are shaped by our sensory stimuli. Most of our work has been focused on retail and food-based settings, but we have also studied a variety of other public settings and institutions such as urban districts, universities, zoos, theme parks and leisure destinations. Over time we have uncovered a wide variety of physical, social and emotional factors that play a key role in influencing how consumers perceive, interpret and experience a retail store environment. These insights are not all that different than what is typically involved in the craft of making a film or creating a theatrical production. In fact, we like our clients to think of their retail store as a performing arts theater that not only has to attract audiences to their show on a daily basis, but also needs to make them feel and react in deliberate ways that are satisfying.

Not unlike the moviemaking process, creating a successful retail theater requires a lot of hard work and collaboration among many talented professionals from a wide array of fields. It also takes a lot of time, trial-and-error, and experience to master the balance of story, craft, business and audience appeal. There are a countless number of technical, logistical, operational, cultural, behavioral, brand, product and merchandising challenges to consider. It's no easy task for sure, but while the process of transforming a retail store into a performing arts center is in-depth, there are three central

questions you should answer first in order to get your retail theater on the right path to success.

WHAT IS THE STORY OF YOUR STORE?



One of the common problems we find with retail stores across the country is the lack of an overarching story that consumers can understand clearly and that taps into the emotional capacity of shoppers. While price, variety, quality, convenience and service are often touted by our clients as their big differentiating factors, these are not so much emotional appeals as they are rational assertions and intellectual arguments. These kinds of statements are usually overt, logical, conscious and literal features that neither move us emotionally, nor even offer us something believable. Believable stories aren't self-congratulatory, they instead drop us into a real world debate and speak to both sides of a situation—the good and the bad, or the positive and the negative. This real world conflict between positive and negative inevitably brings up the issue of values, and this is what makes a story so compelling. Arguments around values include the debates between natural vs. genetically modified food at Whole Foods, or American made vs. foreign made motorcycles at Harley-Davidson. These kinds of debates actually pull customers in.

In truth though, most retailers don't know what their overarching story is, much less where to start looking for one. They offer their wares to the public in big warehouse boxes without any sort of human story, drama or emotional transmission. Left to their own devices, the public usually comes up with their own story for a brand—which is risky. Our suggestion for finding your core story is to start with the values of your company, because within your values is a hidden gem of an idea and a belief about the world that is dying to get out. Part of what makes storytelling so attractive is its ability to reveal what people care about. Admittedly, it takes courage to put yourself out there in the ways that Southwest Airlines, Starbucks or Dove do, but we continually discover that the companies that reveal their

core values are usually far more attractive and captivating to consumers. However, if you're having trouble uncovering your company's values, then try to look more closely at what your leaders, buyers or department heads are picky about in the store, in your products, in your organization, in your buying process or in your presentation and service. Even in some minor details we usually find there is something worth excavating, highlighting and exaggerating. And if none of this works, dig deep to find an insight or anomaly about your leaders or customers. Find something unusual about the way they dress, eat, live, talk or express themselves. Find out what they care about or devote their lives to. Everyone cares about something. And just about every audience is picky about something. Admittedly this sort of deep probing takes time and effort, but over the years we have learned that insight and imagination will always yield us a great story to tell consumers.



Despite the proliferation of TV, movies, books and theater options out there, in practice there aren't really that many different stories to tell. In fact, most storytelling experts say there are only about seven to twelve common stories that we tell over and over. With only a half-dozen to a dozen stories to play with, how can anyone find a unique story? Well the creativity comes in how you tell the story. Successful shows like Sons of Anarchy, Sopranos and Power openly draw from and use classic Shakespearean themes, but each one of them places the story in a different context. Regardless of how many times they've been told, stories don't really have to be new, as much as they need to feel true and relevant to the times. When Whole Foods came out with their "mother earth know's best" story and their somewhat veiled, anti-Big Food campaign, consumers got the message and believed it was true to the point of actually changing the way they ate and putting persistent pressure on the way the traditional food industry operates. Likewise, Harley-Davidson's rebellion story and underlying message of "sticking it to the man" is still as true today for some riders (and many overworked and stressed out non-riders) as it was decades ago. These stories

not only ring true, but they make us feel like we are part of a bigger cause, journey and quest, which is precisely what a good, culturally relevant movie does for audiences.

On one level, good stories are universal and usually speak to our basic human nature, but on another level, stories are made more powerful when they relate in some way to our unique cultural moment. As a firm of visual storytellers, we are always scanning, sorting, sifting and filtering culture to find the hot issues, values and topics of national interest,

because we know that there are really good human stories there that can offer deep insights into where society is heading and where things feel out of balance. It is precisely in this imbalance where consumers' needs, voids and opportunities exist. At the same time we are listening to consumer culture, we also have to uncover our client's unique story as well, which normally takes some digging around and deeper investigation to exhume. Management techniques, best practices and corporate policy often have a corrosive effect on the human stories alive in companies. But somewhere between our client's story and the stories their consumers are talking about in their day to day lives is the seed of a perfect story that should be told in retail theater. Over the last two decades of doing this story research and story design process, we have found that the seed of a perfect story can oftentimes be found in one of the areas listed below:

- Our need*** to belong to a community
- Our love*** of family, kids, friends and ancestors
- Our desire*** for pleasure, laughter, delight and entertainment
- Our need*** to socialize and meet new people
- Our ambition*** to achieve status, wealth and prestige
- Our love*** of art, aesthetics and beauty
- Our desire*** to be healthy and live long, pleasurable lives
- Our thirst*** for knowledge, insights and ideas
- And of course, our desire*** to feel attractive to others

While this list does not represent all of the possible story angles, it is a good place to start thinking about the connection between what you make as a retailer and what your customers seek in their lives. Somewhere between these two points of making and seeking is usually a great story—full of values, positive and negative issues and a potential re-balancing act—that has the power to pull consumers deeper into your store experience.

WHERE DOES YOUR STORE'S STORY TAKE PLACE?



Once you have found your story, you then need to find out where it happens. Does this story happen in the past, like a nostalgic rural house (Cracker Barrel)? Or does it happen in Texas (Lone Star Steakhouse)? Is it in Boston (Boston Market), California (California Pizza Kitchen) or Asia (P.F. Chang's)? Or perhaps this story happens in someone's beautiful home (Restoration Hardware), on a urban, graffiti-filled street (Urban Outfitters) or on a resort island (Tommy Bahama)? The story might happen in a warehouse (Costco) or among a band of carefree, hippie traders out at sea (Trader Joe's). The key to remember is that good stories happen in a time and a place, and the rest of the setting, props and background should help transport us there, temporarily. If you want to increase sales, engagement times, experimentation and overall basket size purchases, you have to get consumers lost in the story of the place. The place of your story makes a huge difference in how effective and believable your storytelling will be.

Admittedly, describing this place and setting is not easy for retailers to find on their own, as it requires bold imagination, creative exploration and brave experimentation to go beyond the literal and functional world. One technique we often use to uncover the place of our client's story is by assembling a "field of meaning." This field of meaning allows us to collect a galaxy of related objects, artifacts, icons and symbols that may relate to our story, and that can help set the scene for a meaningful story. At first we don't try to judge these artifacts, as much as we try to catalog all of them. But eventually we have to select just a few key pieces to focus on. One way to

edit these pieces is to imagine you were doing live theater and were only able to use a few strategically placed props to set the stage. Using this technique, we then ask: What would be the key props and background items you would use to get the audience in the right frame of mind for the story? What pivotal pieces would you need to help communicate and reinforce the story? What elements would have the most meaning or psychological impact to enhance the story? What pieces would lend themselves best for creating a sense of anticipation and foreshadowing for the story?

Once you have a collection of these key symbols and props, you can then find the patterns for how all the pieces are connected and why they would ever make sense together. After some time and exploration we usually find that these props are part of a larger world (real or imagined), which we call the "realm" of the story. Whereas props are usually focused on the micro-setting (a specific scene) of the story, the larger place where all these props exist is the world, universe or realm of our story. If you are fortunate enough to have both a realm and the right props, your story will be much richer, deeper and more relevant. For example, in the show *MadMen* the realm was Madison Avenue in New York, and the props were all the nostalgic and forgotten items like typewriters, pay phones, slide show projector carousels, fedora hats and packs of Lucky Strike cigarettes. Although we rarely see the actual building Don Draper enters, we know he is in the realm of an urban, high rise office building in the 1960's. How did the show communicate this? Primarily through the settings, props and wardrobe. (Ironically enough, *MadMen* was not filmed in NYC, but on various stage sets throughout LA). We know *The Sopranos* happened just across the river in New Jersey because of the strategically featured, yet subliminal opening sequence to the show that highlights key settings like the Lincoln Tunnel, a view of the former World Trade Center (in Tony's rear view mirror), planes taking off (presumably from Newark), Satriale's Pork Store and many other minute but critically important details that all help set the stage and the context of the story. And in the more grandiose stories like *Game of Thrones*, the Tolkienesque fantasy world appears to the average viewer

to take place in some kind of ancient times or other world of swords, sandals and flying dragons. Even when viewers are not expert enough to completely describe the specific place of these worlds, the story is still very easy to enter and, most importantly, believe. The brilliance of all of these shows is that they have the ability to “make us believe” in them, even though we know it is a complete work of fiction.

While perhaps not as grandiose as what might appear on the screen, successful retail stores like Williams-Sonoma (a Napa valley kitchen, perhaps a winery), Anthropologie (a magical, nostalgic attic), Le Pain Quotidien (a French/Belgium country store), Kiehl’s (an old time apothecary shop) and Wegmans (an Italian market street and piazza) all do a wonderful job of placing their stories in a very specific realm and setting with expertly curated props, wardrobe pieces and a uniquely defined field of meaning. While the products these stores offer could just exist in a stripped down warehouse store, that kind of treatment would not only reduce their value, but also their meaning and emotional capacity. Consumers have demonstrated their desire to enter into these kind of retail fantasy realms and their willingness to pay a slight premium to include the experience of the setting as part of the overall purchase equation.

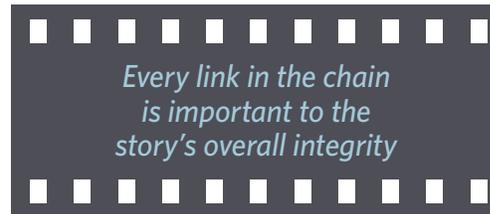
WHAT ARE THE KEY SCENES OF YOUR STORY?



While finding the right story, realm and field of meaning are all critical components, a successful movie and retail store ultimately has to break down the story into a series of distinct scenes. Each scene is essentially a miniature-story that needs to relate, connect and support the larger overarching story. Within each scene there is usually a problem to solve, a value to discuss and debate and an important goal to pursue. In a movie, the scene could be focused around the challenge of making a decision, such as whether to stay with your wounded lover or leave to get help (The English Patient, or Babel). While retail world scenes are a bit more mundane, they are still vitally important for consumers to debate, discuss and decide. For example, you can see debates

happening in the various scenes of a grocery store, where consumers grapple with issues such as grass fed vs. corn fed beef, or free range chicken vs. caged chicken eggs, or organic vs. GMOs. How these debates are framed and presented in these food scenes can have a big influence on consumer decision-making.

Undoubtedly, the hardest part of telling a good story comes down to creating a series of connected scenes that actually make sense together and tell the story in a limited amount of



time. As you may know, most directors shoot about five to ten hours worth of film at

minimum, but then face the daunting challenge of editing all that film down to a concise 90 minute story. While a lot of good material falls on the cutting room floor, this process of editing the story is essential because audiences have limited time and attention spans. The same goes for retail. Consumers only have so much time in their day to shop, and we can generally estimate the average amount of time our story will take. So the key question for retailers to ask is: What are the most essential scenes you need to tell your story?

One way to think about how to move consumers from one scene to the next is to imagine a chain of scenes that represents the overall length of the story from beginning to end. Every link in the chain is important to the story’s overall integrity. It takes just one bad link, one bad scene, to diminish the strength of the whole story, so we have to make sure each link makes sense and contributes to the overall plot line. If a scene doesn’t work or is not adding value, we have to take it out. Sadly though, most retail stores don’t really create scenes in their stores as much as they provide easy access to an inventory of products in aisles or zones. Or if they do have scenes, there are usually too many. The key difference is how you organize products, using fixtures and furniture, into a series of distinct scenes that not only attract the shopper but

pulls them into a larger journey of your store and brand. Each scene's goal is to make consumers want to know more about what is inside the frame and what comes next in the unfolding story of the store experience.

For designing scenes, it often helps to think of each retail scene as having a defined beginning, middle and end. That is to say, each scene should be very clear and pointed. Your scenes should also have a mini climax happening somewhere in between the beginning and end. And your scenes should correspond to the physical dimensions of the human body. As humans we walk vertically and we generally look straight ahead and then side to side. Therefore the vertical aperture of the scene should be framed in a way that attracts and focuses the consumer's eye on the right contextual details. These details (props usually) should reinforce the meaning, power and values of the scene, which is essentially a sub-story of the overarching story. This scene should be clear and focused on one central idea, an important value usually that your brand and store believe in. It should not overlap too much with other scenes, or dissolve into unrelated or random store components. For example, if we believe pizza plays a key part in your overall story, we'll create a distinct pizza scene with key pizza backgrounds and props—such as a wood-fired pizza oven, a classic brick wall, a wooden pizza paddle hanging on the wall, round pizza stone, visible toppings, etc. The climax of a pizza scene might include a classically dressed and slightly plump pizza-master with flour all over his apron who's listening to, or perhaps even singing Italian opera music as he quickly slings dough or whisks a pizza in and out of the oven. Of course, the right kinds of sounds, smells, textures and temperature can play a persuasive role in making this type of scene even more impactful, believable and credible. The key thing to remember is that every piece of the experience communicates something in a retail scene. Therefore, all the details matter in the scene and should be carefully chosen and strategically placed to inform the story. All the things that don't relate or that distract from the story should be removed.

As it relates to the overall store experience, you should think about how the sequence of retail scenes connect and

unfold in a choreographed way. This means you should take a serious look at structuring your story from the opening scene of the retail story to the closing scene, and each of the key scenes in between. Do they make sense in relation to each other? Do they tell an emotional story that matters to consumers? What is the primary point of value in each scene? Do they take consumers on a quest, journey or life goal that helps consumers eat better, live well, look better, save money or save the world? If you want to reach consumers on an emotional level, you need to get beyond the warehouse/lumberyard approach and into the scene-making mindset.

It may be worth mentioning here that there is a big difference between overly themed scenes and more authentic scenes. Oftentimes retailers, or their consultants, will use overly theme-y sets, props and scene techniques which are too overtly fake, or even condescending, to the consumer's eye and mind. These stores look more like theme parks than they do retail theater. In some cases, themed sets can overtake the storyline, which is a problem. Good sets should subliminally and quietly reinforce the power of the story in a less-than-conscious way. In our view, a good scene is not one the consumer notices, but instead one that the consumer convincingly believes. While we all know that a movie like The Matrix could never exist in the real world, it creates its own version of reality that is believable and true to itself. The same goes for retail places. Brands like Starbucks, Apple and Sur La Table create their own worlds that stay true to their own rules.

Just as a bad film can insult a viewer's intelligence and make them walk out of the theater, if not done convincingly the scenes within a store can turn off consumers too. In order to draw consumers into the story of your store, your scenes have to establish a certain level of credibility, believability and authority for the consumer. There has to be some semblance of truth and authenticity to each of your scenes. And ultimately your consumer has to believe in them, which is why they call it "make-believe." To be clear though, you can take consumers to an imaginary place—such as a Texas saloon (Lone Star) located in Chicago, or a Belgium/French

country store (Le Pain Quotidien) located in Los Angeles—through the same suspension of disbelief techniques used in books, film and other theatrical productions. Consumers are okay with this kind of retail fantasy and escapism, but it has to be done in a way that is believable.

In Conclusion

Does having the right story, setting and scenes mean all your retail problems will be solved? Not at all. For better or worse, we live in an era where there are a lot of aggressive and competitive forces—from Walmart, to Amazon, to a slew of price-checking apps—that all attempt to reduce the retail industry to mere commodities. Why pay more? Why deal with the parking? And why even leave the house when you can get it delivered by Amazon, Instacart, Grub Hub, Uber or a drone? So the complaints and arguments go. These are all important intellectual, rational appeals that are not going to go away, but will only increase in the future. And to a certain degree, these intellectual appeals will work, if all you sell are commodities.

Understandably, most retailers are nervous, as they should be, about the new world reality confronting commerce today. But the key for retailers is to not try to compete on the same dimensions or the same playing field that commodity players

thrive in. Sam Walton said it best, when he exclaimed: “If you want to beat me, don’t try to copy me.” But now, with the advent of the internet and online retail, the sense of commodity ruthlessness is only going to get more cutthroat. In order to survive and thrive in the future, brick and mortar retailers have to reconsider what they are selling. They need to shift the game of retail to a different kind of value equation and payoff that goes beyond price, variety and convenience. In our opinion, competing on these limited dimensions is only a game of chicken and a race to the bottom where nobody wins. Based on all that we see happening in retail today, we believe the physical stores of the future will not be able to compete as a commodity or on convenience, but will instead have to infuse their product offerings with other equally important features, such as meaning, entertainment, socializing, adventuring, discovery and belonging. Put simply, the value proposition will go beyond the literal product itself and into satisfying other consumer wants, needs, desires and quests, for which there are many. Despite how much the world has changed, humans never tire of good storytelling. In fact, we probably need stories more now than ever to make sense of our seemingly chaotic world and the hectic pace of our daily lives. Today’s retailers have a tremendous opportunity to create new kind of retail experience and retail theater that taps into consumer emotions through the art, craft and science of storytelling. So let’s dim the stage lights and break a leg!



About The Author:

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