



Dressed to Extremes

Designing the retail experience at The North Face

Once a shopper is inside a store, what's the most influential thing a retailer can do to get consumers to ramp up their purchasing? Better signage? Lower prices? Placing impulse items at the cash register?

According to retail guru Paco Underhill, author of *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping*, it's increasing the time spent on the showroom floor. "The amount of time shoppers spend in a store is perhaps the single-most-important factor in determining how much they will buy," Underhill reports.

That fact isn't lost on marketers at The North Face. Walk into their flagship store on Post Street in San Francisco, and huge flat panel screens deliver a constant stream of videos of athletes at the peak of their form, scaling cliffs, bombing runs, trekking over frozen rivers and hotfooting it across scorching desert valleys. If that doesn't stop consumers in their tracks, the stand-alone interactive kiosks on the showroom floors certainly will. In other words, it's no longer enough to lure shoppers into stores—once there, they must be entertained.

Designed by Fluid, a San Francisco-based new media production company that has pioneered immersive front-end design experiences combined with heavyweight backend engineering chops, these kiosks merge live-action footage, photography and computer graphics in a razzle-dazzle, full-motion experience of the outdoors. For armchair travelers,

mall-rats and those about to load up on expedition-grade gear, standing in front of one of these kiosks conveys the thrill of an ascent up the Karakoram Range, without frostbite, sunburn or the runs.

Featuring a montage of video, astounding photographs and biographies of The North Face-sponsored athletes, the kiosks create an environment that is immersive, first person and visceral. "Our job," says Fluid's chief experience officer Andrew Sirotnik, "was to bring more dimension to the online brand experience, and then intersect the brand and shopping experiences in a meaningful way. A seamless integration of content and commerce."

With The North Face targeting everyone from hard-core endurance trail runners to those of us just running out for a latte, brand experience is an essential part of the retail story. The trick is to sell millions of dollars of apparel to weekend warriors, while reinforcing their heritage as makers of expedition-quality gear for the mountaineer who risks life and limb on a big wall climb. Fluid's solution concentrates on the athletes growing the sport. In this arena where digital storytelling and merchandising mix, athletes become a strategic asset in setting a standard to which the rest of us can only aspire.

It is through their stories—athletes who think nothing of



"The aim of the kiosk design was to create an experience that felt more like television and less like a Web site. Content fills every screen and there are a minimum of interface controls," says Fluid's Andrew Sirotnik. "Customers can move however they wish through the vast amount of content. The flow adapts to different user motivations: the core athlete, the fan and the bored friend whose companion is shopping. Because the kiosk fully blends content and commerce, users always have the products in focus—sometimes peripherally—and can decide to shop when the time is right for them."

creativity

running a 100-mile foot race—that The North Face deepens its relationship with its customers. Fluid designed the kiosks to “extend the in-store experience, and leverage their amazing content,” says Sirotnik. On the retail floor, the kiosks tell stories “about doing, not fashion. The idea is to deliver an experience that inspires them to get active and eventually sell more product.

“It’s all about keeping the consumer engaged,” Sirotnik continues. “You have to meaningfully embed the products within the context of the experience.”

The same principles apply to The North Face Web site, redesigned by Fluid. While not quite as immersive as the kiosks, thenorthface.com spotlights the athletes and their expeditions with video clips, photos, links to blogs and event Webcasts. Behind the scenes, the rich-media experience is backed by an e-commerce catalog that ensures that getting the gear is never more than a few clicks away.

“Functionally, we’re selling feature-rich products in a world that’s all about entertainment and social gratification. We’re striving for the digital equivalent of retail therapy,” says Sirotnik.

Letting it all hang out

Who cares about hangtags? Smart marketers do. Marketers who realize that their one last best chance to sell a product is at the point of sale, when a mall-walking consumer is about to cross the line from browser to buyer. Design a smarter hangtag and you can sell the product harder, save shoppers time and protect the environment.

That’s exactly what San Francisco’s Chen Design Associates (CDA) did for The North Face, in a complete redesign of a



The hangtags are designed as a modular system, ensuring ease-of-use whether one or multiple inserts are enclosed. The specific product and its technological features are clearly and boldly displayed.

retail hangtag and product labeling program that spanned more than 800 SKUs. In addition to making good marketing sense, telling the sustainability story was a matter of walking the walk for The North Face. For decades, it has led the way to exploring the outdoors with high-tech gear built to withstand a trek through the Himalayas. Now the company realized they needed to lead the way toward environmental protection, too. And as Laurie Carrigan, design director at CDA, explains, “Their old hangtag didn’t represent leadership.”

Initially what attracted The North Face to CDA was a simple moving announcement. Printed on overrun from a previous job, the CDA moving announcement not only communicated the company’s new address, the piece told a story about a resourceful, scrappy company that could do more with less, and turn waste into gold.

Judging by the amount of effort put into the hangtags at The North Face, you’d expect the stores to be full of shoppers in heads down mode, patiently wading through the product information conveyed there in four languages. Instead, CDA created a system that facilitates quick scanning. At first glance, the clamshell hangtag reveals a tab cut to reveal a product’s single most important feature, be it “300 WT FLEECE” or “X-VENT MESH BACKPANEL.” Inside the product information is summarized with a single benefit statement, supported by bullet points that describe features. A second sheet illustrates the product itself or a salient feature, complete with numbered callouts indicating functional characteristics.

On the inside of the hangtag, shoppers will find information about The North Face’s “Eco-Friendly Hangtag Program.” Describing the minimum annual savings in production materials, the Hangtag Program, as redesigned by CDA, saved 4,068 trees, 756,902 gallons of water and 3,476 BTUs of energy. The tags themselves are printed on 100 percent post-consumer waste, using soy-based inks.

On the outside of the hangtag, CDA designer Kathrin Blatter



Various illustrations give prominence to The North Face’s technical innovation while evoking a sense of ascension.



Attention to every detail was kept in the design and in the clear hierarchy of important information, to further the way customers interact with the packaging. Each box also features an annual audit highlighting the company's conservation of water, trees, energy and reduction of CO₂. The visibility of The North Face's tagline with large embossed text on the top of the shoebox reinforces the company's mission to push the limits.

created an identity program that differentiates and organizes the product lines logically. To help the consumer make sense of The North Face product lines and distinguish between three levels of quality and pricing, each of the three lines is adorned with its own mountain and series mark. Everest for the premier Summit Series, K2 for the Flight Series for the multi-sport endurance athletes, and Half Dome for the lifestyle line of products pitched to weekend warriors.

Blatter drew each mountain in Illustrator using tightly woven patterns resembling the isobars on a contour map that indicate elevation and steepness. Seen from far away, the illustrations can be read as mountains, close up, they reveal subtle details, snowflake patterns, and for those equipped with a magnifying glass or the eyesight of an eagle, The North Face motto—Never Stop Exploring. Silver hatch marks, familiar to anyone who has backpacked the Appalachian Trail, provide a subtle visual cue. “They are like footsteps climbing the mountain, ascending from the logo to the series mark,” Blatter explains.

In a coup for designers everywhere, CDA was able to actually get the client to reduce the size of The North Face logo. Instead of a “single big, red, square logo, we created multiple layers for consumers to engage with,” founder Joshua Chen says. Noting that clients always want to make their logos larger, Chen was able to steer the client back to their original creative brief, and point out the stated need for “differentiation.” Further distinguishing the product lines, the logo placement varies slightly from



Debossed with the Never Stop Exploring motto, the boxes use a 30 percent printed tint as a fill. The debossed lettering is so graphically strong, it eliminates the need to flood it with ink.

Inside the box, consumers will find The North Face “eco-audit,” along with a size chart, care and warranty info and 100 percent recycled tissue paper. To eliminate waste, a stiff shoe insert helps the shoe keep its shape while further pointing out features and benefits of the footwear. The result is a box cool enough to keep.

Today, the time we spend shopping grows ever more compressed. According to an International Council of Shopping Centers' study, the average time spent at a mall is barely over an hour per trip. That means savvy marketers like The North Face who blend economics with entertainment—be it in-store or on the Web—will take first place when it comes to America's favorite indoor sport: shopping. **CA**



The footforms serve a dual purpose: They provide the customer with detailed information about the shoes' usage (in four languages) and replace the non-recyclable tissue paper previously used to stuff them.

flush left, to center, to flush right.

CDA also redesigned footwear merchandising for The North Face. The challenge, according to Chen was “to convey information about the product, and design an overall brand experience that would elevate brand perception.” The solution: a natural, eco-friendly box that uses as little ink as possible.