

Branding and Visual Promotion in Laramie, Wyoming

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### Abstract

Branding and visual promotion are two key components for a business that can strengthen its stance in the marketplace. This paper looks specifically into how branding and visual promotion, and how that relates to the visual merchandiser, in Laramie, Wyoming. It will also explore how small businesses become successful based on Laramie business owners' perspective and the unique view they offer to visual merchandising in a small college town.

This research started with businesses in downtown Laramie and, after choosing a few businesses, the researcher designed three display windows downtown. After designing and implementing these windows, the owners or managers of each store were interviewed about their roles in visual merchandising, their outlook on owning or running a small business, and how effective they perceived the windows to be.

## Branding and Visual Promotion in Laramie, WY

The art of display is a simple tool used in multiple facets of life. People put themselves on display through clothing, automobile, or decorating choices, and businesses put themselves and their products on display through branding and visual promotion. Each display and advertisement created for a business speaks volumes to the type of company a business wants to be and the clients whom they expect to cater. While branding can be extremely important, it is equally important that a company's visual promotion, which is a part of branding, of their merchandise attracts clients to enter and spend. The merchandise is what usually entices customers first, and the branding and store persuades them come back.

Displaying merchandise is just about as old as trading merchandise itself (Marcus, 1978, p. 13). Displaying merchandise today can easily be broken into two categories: window displays and in-store displays. This paper and project focuses more on the window displays specifically in Laramie, Wyoming and so the background information will pertain to the American window display. I researched the history of window displays and looked into different design concepts and how that plays with window displays versus other types of design. I then requested permission of three businesses in downtown Laramie, Wyoming that subsequently allowed me to design each of their windows. The process required me to go through the design and set-up process myself, including working with the business to identify shop goals, mission, and desired clientele. I treated this process as if I was an independent visual merchandiser working with clients. I explored with the owners and managers of each location what went into creating a small business, what factors influence how their merchandise is displayed, and their opinions of

my window displays. The three businesses that I worked with were Mimi's, a consignment store; Mountain Valley Bridal, a bridal salon; and NU2U, a consignment store.

### **Contextual Review and Concept**

The history of visual promotion is an old practice that goes hand-in-hand with trade but window displays did not begin in America until the 1800s and became a "science" in the 1900s (Marcus, 1978, p. 13-16). Window dressing, or 'trimming', became a profession and prizes were given out to businesses with the best window. This created a job and push for visual promotion because of the flood of people that were moving into the cities from the country. In 1910, New York retailers began to "gauge the success of their windows by the amount of sales of stock they had featured in their window" (Marcus, 1978, p. 19). These shop displays were allowed to not only be ways to bring customers in and promote merchandise, but also as works of art, ways to cheer people up as they walked by, social commentary for what was happening to the world around them, and to sustain the brand image (Marcus, 1978 and Stanlia & Bratucu, 2013). Because of this, some visual merchandisers claim that the window display is the most important type of display, including the downtown Laramie business owners. The significance of the window display is as important to Laramie, Wyoming retailers as it is anywhere else.

Looking closer at visual merchandisers, which a lot of businesses now hire today, there is a difference between them and someone who simply designs a window display (Swanson & Everett, 2007). A visual merchandiser not only promotes the physical merchandise through display but also creates an image for the store through these displays (Ralston & Foster, 1985). Visual merchandisers use window displays to convey the type of merchandise and promote the corporation itself (Stanlia & Bratucu, 2013). Visual merchandisers need to be able to expose,

entertain, inform, and entice the public to and for the merchandise. There are many elements of design and principles of display that play into these factors (Ralston & Foster, 1985). These will be discussed in a later paragraph. While window displays have greatly changed throughout the decades, from additions of mannequins to a more artistic form of display, they have remained a talking point to this day for many different companies and businesses. New York retailers spend a lot of money on their window displays every year, especially around Christmas time (Schneier, 2015). Many travel to gaze at these window displays and it impacts brand's value as well.

The companies that spend time on their display seem to have better merchandise and desire for their products. It is a way to brand the company as a company with great artistic taste and products that are worth spending money on to advertise them. A strong brand compels buyers to go into that store first, or desire that store's products over other stores'. Brands are written through the company, their consumer, and the culture that surrounds them (Hameide, 2011). Brands allow companies to set themselves apart from one another and are much more than a simple name or logo for a product or service. "A brand is an entity with a distinctive idea expressed in a set of functional and experiential features with a promise of a value reward relevant to its end user, and an economic return to its producers" (Hameide, 2011, p. 5). Effective branding guides people's want to buy branded products because it reduces risk; an effectively branded product tells a consumer that they will like it or that it will fit based purely on trust in the brand. When a consumer knows and trusts the brand, he knows and trusts the products that the brand reflects. He can expect the same quality time and time

again from that brand. This creates brand loyalty in consumers and they will come back to buy specific branded merchandise.

Branding is obviously an important concept that companies should focus on. Branding can be initiated through the use of window displays, which is why so many companies put so much focus and money into them (Stanila & Bratucu, 2013). Ralston & Foster describe window displays as economical, versatile, and effective. They utilize the space and materials that you already have, can be changed to fit the business' needs, and shows customers a tangible advertisement that is a "vivid presentation" of the merchandise and the store (Ralston & Foster, 1985, p. 7). Because of the success and impact window displays can have on the merchandise, the company, and sales, retail establishments want to make sure their displays both reflect the branding and persuade customers to enter the stores. To do that, professionals suggest some great little tidbits of information. First, it is important to not overwhelm passersby with cluttered or busy displays. Second, design themes should maintain consistency throughout the displays and store. Finally, price points should reflect and match the design theme. Ralston & Foster have five golden rules that they push window designers to keep in mind; one, remember what customers you are designing for, two, do not damage the merchandise, three, realize time limitations, four, be willing to learn, five, remember the basics—to be both emotional and informational (Ralston & Foster, 1985, p. 16). Cahan & Robinson (1985) also have a few tips for designers to keep in mind when designing a window display:

1. What is the image of the store?
2. Who are the customers the window is trying to attract?
3. What is the concept for the merchandise in the display?
4. How will location determine the window design?

#### 5. Why is this merchandise being put on display?

I took these tips into account while I was designing the window displays for the Laramie windows. I looked at the different types of the stores and how each of them normally communicated to their customers. The location and type of the window also determined my window design. The merchandise that was being put on display either played to the holiday that was happening at the time or a sale that was going on which corresponded with the concept for each window.

#### **Aesthetic Properties and Visual Impact**

There are multiple elements and principles of design which can be used in window displays, and some concepts that also need to be thought about for window design. The design elements include point/mark, line, shape, form, space, color, and texture (Park, n.d.). The design principles include balance, proportion, perspective, emphasis, movement, pattern, repetition, rhythm, variety, harmony, and unity (Park, n.d.). While these are the basic ideas for the “look” of the window, a display designer should also focus on light, color, proportion, balance, movement, props, signage, and positive and negative space (Cahan & Robinson, 1984, p. 69 and Swanson & Everett, 2007, pp. 469-471). I took these factors into account while designing each window and they can be seen throughout the window. In particular, I focused on signage, especially with NU2U and Mountain Valley Bridal. Cahan & Robinson (1984, p. 216) explain that “signing is gaining in importance every year. Signing and lettering mean the same thing: identification”. This is why I hired a talented lettering artist to design the chalkboard for the windows. My goal for this choice was to draw people in and create more branding.

### Mimi's Consignment

Color provided the elemental focus for the window at Mimi's. Mary, the owner of Mimi's, wanted a Valentine's Day themed window so I picked the color red with dashes of white. The



white contrasted nicely with the red reflecting the principle of variety. I also balanced the space using tall pieces on either side of the window with a low center. Visually, this allowed movement around the space, along with the pieces I set up such as the scarves and umbrella to continue the eye across the window. You can see these in the pictures above. I added a sign to sit outside of the store as another way to visually bring people inside. This and more pictures can be found in Appendix A.

### Mountain Valley Bridal

I focused on the principle of balance with Mountain Valley Bridal. Balance puts people at ease (Ralston & Foster, 1985). This is important because bridal stores tend to have emotional, sometimes stressed, clients where a sense of ease is necessary. It is also important because wedding fashions themselves often take up tremendous amounts of physical, as well as psychological, space. I created variety between each window with different color schemes but created harmony throughout the whole store front with the repetition of the two dresses on



each side. I wanted to focus on the proportion of the windows because they are so tall. The dresses are set to about two-thirds of the window because breaking things into thirds is visually pleasing (Park, n.d.). I played around with perspective to try and enlarge the window



spaces by placing the hand-made flower balls in different areas in space, hoping to bring the eye back towards the store. These can be seen in the window above. Mountain Valley Bridal wanted a spring time theme so I used color selections to reflect this focus. The eye is drawn to the darker dress first, representing winter, which moves across to a lighter, more spring pastel pink. Color choices articulate a temporal movement to spring while also highlighting the different dresses that they had to offer in the store. The signage advertises an upcoming sale that Mountain Valley Bridal was holding while using the color scheme throughout the display. More pictures can be found in Appendix B.

## **NU2U**

I focused on color with the NU2U store as well. Each item of clothing was a shade of green. They wanted a spring window that reminded customers to buy green for St. Patrick's Day without necessarily going totally Irish. The window includes several eclectic looks; NU2U is a thrift store with a diverse client base rather than one primary target consumer. The window is

substantively different from both Mimi's and Mountain Valley Bridal as it is both tall and wide and it, in fact, provides an entire wall for the shop. I created balance on either side of the chalkboard with height and amount of mannequins without being too symmetrical or boring.



Unity is brought into this window from the color selections, use of accessories, and overall use of space. You can see this in the window above. More pictures can be found in Appendix C.

### **Process, Technique, and Execution**

I had open-back windows with a straight front window, corner front, and arcade front (Swanson & Everett, 2007). This required me to think about the backgrounds so the store behind which window would not distract from the design. (Ralston & Foster, 1985). People love holiday themes which is why I focused my displays around a holiday or seasonal theme (Swanson & Everett, 2007). Mimi's was based around Valentine's Day, Mountain Valley Bridal focused around their spring sale, and NU2U focused around springtime and St. Patrick's Day. The three locations had such different situations and needs from type of merchandise, type of store, type of window, and desire for how each window looked. These differences from window to window demonstrate that I had a rigorous process. I needed to create separate and appropriate designs for each one; I could not use a one-size fits all model for the designs.

Mimi's is a consignment store with many types of items that need to be showcased, including home décor, fashion, and furniture. By focusing on color, I was able to show the range of merchandise that she had in stock. Mountain Valley Bridal has items that can be specially ordered and repurchased. Because of the potential for sun damage, the items in their windows need to be changed out constantly, so I needed a simple layout that acted as a backdrop so multiple dresses would look good on display reflecting different sales goals. NU2U has unique items and a wide range of customers. I wanted to showcase the uniqueness of the items that they had in store, like the vintage dresses, and the range of merchandise they had for all consumers, ranging from toddlers to adults, including both women and men. Proper application of design principles and elements allows for a unified look for each store's brand indicating design technique mastery. The thought and dedication gone into each window reflects high quality work from the products I chose, the quality of props, and the cleanliness of each design. It was also rigorous because of the preparation that I had to do for the interviews and getting that material signed and approved. I also researched about different windows and sketched out ideas before going into each window.

### **Interview Methods**

For all of my interviews, I met with the person in charge of decorating the windows most often at each specific store. My list of questions to each store includes:

1. What is your job title?
2. What are your duties/responsibilities in this position?
3. In what year did this business open?
4. What was your main motivation in starting this business?
5. What steps did you take to start this business?
6. What is the most helpful advice you would give to someone looking to start a small business?
7. What is one major goal you hope to accomplish within the next five years?

8. In small businesses, such as yourself, do you design all the merchandise display areas in the store, or do you hire an outside visual merchandiser?
9. What are your visual merchandiser's responsibilities for your business?
10. What factors influence how you decide what to include in your window display?
11. What factors influence how you decide on the merchandise to showcase for the window display?
12. What factors influence how you decide on the merchandise to showcase for in-store displays?
13. Do you spend more time on the window displays or the in-store displays?
14. Are the window displays or in-store displays more important to you?
15. How many hours do you spend on window and in-store displays each week?
16. What other ways do you visually promote merchandise?
17. Do you notice a relationship between foot traffic in your store and the displays you design?
18. Do you notice a relationship between sales and the displays you design?
19. If yes to 17 or 18, what types of displays do you think generate more foot traffic and/or sales?
20. What is your impression of the display that I designed?

### **Results from interviews**

All three of the businesses that I interviewed agreed that the windows are extremely important, but they had differing opinions on in-store displays. They surprisingly all had very similar suggestions to running a small business that were extremely helpful. The first thing they all said when asked what they would suggest to a person considering opening a small business is to really think about it; decide if it is important enough to you to dedicate all your time and money to that business. Once you commit to opening a business, they agreed that it was very important to do research on the town, the competition, the market, and the merchandise you will be offering. Make sure your goals and the characteristics of your location match up and that you are wanted where you are thinking about setting up. The last thing that they all agreed on was the importance of getting involved in the community and getting to know the customers. Having good relationships, especially when starting, will help develop repeat customers and positive word-of mouth referrals.

### **Mimi's Consignment**

Mary from Mimi's had great advice on starting a small business and overall displays for her store. I appreciated her "steps" to her own opening of the store. She created a five-year plan, saved money, found a location, and did a ton of research. This was also her suggestion for those opening their own small business: research. She noted that it was important to understand the market that you are in, especially in a small town like Laramie. She does all the branding and displaying herself, which she noted is a lot of work with behind the scenes preparation that most people do not think about. This includes making the outside look nice, washing windows, and changing out displays and merchandise frequently.

When designing a window, Mary focuses on the holiday, color, or a certain product to play with. Her main goal is to create something that will draw people into the store. She decides on merchandise for each display by carefully considering the merchandise she has in stock at any given time. Because Mary runs a consignment shop, her stock depends on what people bring her which, in turn, influences what type of window she can create. She said the windows take more time because they provide a concentrated area that people stare at. But both in-store and window displays were important to her. The window display needs to draw people in but the inside display are what entice people to buy things. It can get cluttered quickly if she does not clean up each night by rearranging the displays or putting things back the way they are supposed to be. She focused on staging; sometimes all she needs to do to make a sale is to move an item from one place to another to get noticed. People also are used to department stores so she organizes the inside of her store into departments because it helps people find things and puts them at ease when shopping. She notices a difference in sales when

her window display is coordinated with an event that is going on around the town, such as prom. The window display encourages people to walk in. Once there, they realize that she may be carrying something they need for their next event.

### **Mountain Valley Bridal**

Amanda, from Mountain Valley Bridal, offered good advice about starting a new business and really inspired me about working with a small business. I liked her way of running the business with a focus on meeting people. That meant a lot to me since I enjoy going to stores where I feel important to the employee and she said that she set out to do that. I would want to do that if I opened a store of my own because customers would be the reason to get into the business in the first place. I appreciated her advice having a solid business plan and to not run into a business just because it feels like a good idea. Similarly to Mary, Amanda suggested having a business plan, getting money, and doing lots of research. She also told me to be prepared that opening a small business is tough. She is hoping to continue growing with the community, which is something NU2U also thought was very important. When designing displays, Mountain Valley Bridal focuses primarily on windows because they do not have space for in-store displays. Mountain Valley Bridal focus on the dresses as enough display because they are so large and beautiful on their own. Their windows need constantly changed because of the sun damage that can occur to their dresses and props. They tend to design around a color or a sale. While windows do help bring in foot traffic, their merchandise is not the type that people stop by and purchase. However, the windows do invite people to come in, get to know the employees, and look around the store to hopefully book an appointment. Selection and pricing help with the sales, not necessarily the windows themselves. The experience of the

store allows for sales while the windows may help with foot traffic. Windows also help with the growth and community because other companies that are associated with bridal will advertise in their windows or even help students, like myself.

## **NU2U**

Chelsea from NU2U had much to say about starting a business and how to properly run one and display items. NU2U was definitely the biggest business that I worked with from the amount of merchandise, number of windows, and two store locations. Because it is such a big company, Chelsea and her husband, Rob, have decided to split different tasks between each of them so running the business does not seem so overwhelming. They took over the business from Rob's parents and wanted to expand their consumer base and brand name in Laramie. They looked at the previous business and decided that to make it better they would computerize everything and move their main location to a more consumer friendly building that was closer to downtown. They also created more jobs for the town because they are now operating in two locations.

Chelsea's biggest suggestion to opening a small business is to do research and not to be too set on anything at first. It is important to understand whether or not the type of business you want to open will work in the town the business is located. She also stressed the importance of understanding that a business grows. The company must make money to be able to be successful. It is important to open the doors even if the "look" is not exactly what you are going for. Money cannot be spent on the design of the store front to the point of "perfection" because it will not be made back fast enough. Allow room and time for the business to grow and the community and customers can push it in a direction that is right for the community.

Another thing to keep in mind is how much stress it is to be a business owner. It takes all of your time and if something isn't going right, then it is your job to worry about it and fix it. She said finding the right people to work for the business is one of the hardest jobs, especially in Laramie since it is such a transient town.

Chelsea and Rob chose the new clothing retail location partly because of how many windows it had. This is a great resource to get people in the door because it shows off merchandise. Because there is only one of each item in the store people feel the need to buy it immediately if they like it in the window. The windows are a significant project because there are so many of them and items can be purchased right from the display. It is critical to keep up with sales so that there are no naked mannequins. In addition, Chelsea tries to pick things that are 'timeless' to display because it will make people look at old clothes in a new way. She focuses on color, the latest trends, and seasons when deciding what to include in a window. She wants to make each of the items are extraordinary in the window. She wants to promote the eclectic-ness of the store while showing wearable outfits. She emphasized the importance of placing different styles in the window to cater to a larger audience.

The in-store displays are also important to keep updated and fresh. Chelsea makes sure that they are changed every few days and no mannequin is without clothing. Each mannequin is dressed according to what it is next to (kid's, women's, and men's) much like a department store. It will bring people to that section for what they are looking for.

The windows help create sales and foot traffic, especially the UWYO window. NU2U may not be the first place customers think of when purchasing UWYO apparel, but returning customers may bring people from out of town for a less expensive alternative in buying UWYO



merchandise. Windows generate more foot traffic as people are walking around downtown. Presentation of the items correctly makes people want to come in. The foot traffic creates more sales but the in-store displays have more visible sales because you can see someone buying something off of the rack. The windows are important to her because it is a way to give the passerby a first impression of the store, the owners, the business, and the type of customers they want in the store. This plays to the experience that people will have in store.

### **My Display**

Overall feedback for my displays were positive. Mary, from Mimi's, said my window was excellent, wonderful, and got lots of positive feedback. Amanda's feedback on my window at Mountain Valley Bridal was also very positive. She said that she loved it and many of her customers loved it; more than a few people who read the sign, came in, and booked an appointment. I feel like because of the increase in appointments made, this was my most successful window. Chelsea's feedback was that she appreciated my work on the NU2U window. This was the window that was hardest for me to create. While I enjoyed my overall idea and the window was well shopped, in the future I would take the idea a little bit farther. Chelsea felt like I was a real designer because I made the space my own by completely tearing down her previous display and putting up my own design and layout. I also used the props she had in new ways and she thought the chalkboard was inspiring. The only critique she had was that the clothing was modest and safe. While it was very consumer friendly, she would have liked to have seen something a bit more adventurous that would get the customer's mind thinking about clothing in a new way. She did say that this is not always a bad thing since the window does not want to stray too far from the business' look and feel.

I faced two main challenges in designing the three windows: an inability to plan and lacking a complete understanding of the basics of window design. I came into visual merchandising fairly recently and it was a new experience having “clients”. Working for a client entails designing for someone else. This adds a significant amount of stress around successfully designing the windows and worrying whether the client would like my work. This was a great learning experience as I am hoping to work with clients for my future career in event coordination. The inability to plan was a challenge for Mimi’s Consignment and NU2U because their merchandise is unique and could sell from the time that I sketched an idea to when I actually put the window up. Because of this, I designed those windows on the spot. While this was a challenge, it was a lot of fun and allowed me to use my intuition for design. These windows were the most stressful, but ended up being the most fun.

### **Conclusion**

This project was such a rewarding experience both academically and personally. Academically, it allowed me to further my education in design and a different type of design that I am used to working with. It was quite different thinking about a window as a piece of art and advertisement with merchandise and certain props as my tools. It also allowed me to work with clients which is something I will need to use in my future career. It gave me a good idea of how to work with my own artistic abilities, design tastes, and the client’s needs. I look forward to continue learning about this. I also was able to work with different windows which I had to mold my ideas around. Especially for Mimi’s and NU2U, I really could not plan that much about the windows until I got there because their items are what they have in stock. It was difficult to plan because the item you want to plan around might be sold by the time you get to design the

window. This is why I focused on color with these two windows heavily, this way I was not looking for a specific piece of merchandise that may not exist.

Personally, this was a great experience because I got to interact with actual business owners about opening a small business which is something that I have always been interested in. It was helpful to learn from people who have opened a small business to get their perspectives on what was most useful opening up and staying in business. I look forward to using this information to not only possibly open my own business someday but also to help any company that I am working for.

While my designs can always improve, I am glad that I chose to focus on window displays because they seem to be the ones that are most important to businesses, especially to really bring people in and get started to show people what the business is all about.

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Appendix A: Mimi's



Appendix B: Mountain Valley Bridal



Appendix C: NU2U

