

Stuttgart-based Graziano Di Cintio studied marketing management before becoming a visual-merchandising apprentice. He was dressing windows in the 1990s, right around the time big American chains like Gap were bringing visual merchandising to the forefront by using tricks and techniques to guide customers through a store and increase turnover. Europe soon jumped on the bandwagon, and the profession – as we know it – was born.

Having worked for Gap and Hugo Boss – ‘the best schools I ever had’ – Di Cintio is now a freelance visual-merchandising consultant and fashion stylist for department stores and agencies such as Dfrost. He witnessed visual merchandising and window-dressing part ways in the mid-2000s, but the disciplines appear to have joined forces again. As Di Cintio puts it: ‘Visual merchandising starts outside the store and pulls you in.’

What elements are key to successful visual merchandising? Graziano Di Cintio: It’s a psychological game, and its objective is to maximize turnover. Visual merchandising is really nothing more than a channel that unites all the elements of a brand to make people spend money.

First you need to draw customers inside – that’s what shop windows and marketing campaigns are for. Once they’re in, it’s important to give them a clear overview of the entire store. They shouldn’t be overwhelmed. Then it’s about making them feel comfortable. The more time they spend in the store, the more they try and, hopefully, buy. The comfort factor works hand in hand with the interior design.

Once the customer is that far into the process, whether or not they buy something depends on other things, such as personal taste.

I once heard that women always walk to the right when they enter a store. Is that true? In general, most people – not just women – do walk right when they go into a shop. That’s the way many of us operate: we read left to

right and are right-handed. Once they’re inside, though, sexes do behave differently. That’s where the layout comes in. There should be main walkways, tables and a back wall – and you need an overview of it all. You wouldn’t build a high partition that shields something important; merchandise shouldn’t be hidden.

Does visual merchandising inside the store change as often as the window displays? Most luxury brands change only twice a year, whereas labels like Hugo Boss might change every four weeks or so. Younger, affordable brands want to show visitors a different collection on each visit; they change things almost every week at H&M. When customers see a new style, it makes them feel as if they need to catch up.

How do you avoid confusing people? The affordable brands actually *want* to confuse people. When a customer goes into a shop once and sees a pair of trousers hanging in a specific spot, if it’s still there on her next visit, she feels as if she’s seen everything already; stock becomes stale. But the minute she sees those trousers in another area, they look new

again. And if a dress is hanging where the trousers were originally, her attention is on something new. So now she’s thinking about the dress *and* the trousers. The basic collection – T-shirts, jeans and so on – generally remains in the same spot. Shoppers should know where to go to get the basics.

A brand like Hermès builds its seasonal visual merchandising around a long-term theme that runs for a year. The windows may change often, but the theme remains the same – creating a world for repeat customers. **How does technology fit in with all this? What role will it play in the future of visual merchandising?** So many people are shopping online these days. Visual merchandising plays a huge role there, too. You click on a dress, and items that will complete the outfit pop up as suggestions.

The future is in a combination of all channels – advertising, internet, shop windows, physical experience – to increase the desire for merchandise. It’s about generating a lifestyle through these media and reinforcing the atmosphere in-store. grazianodicintio.com



Window displays that offer passers-by an optimal field of vision are crucial to a retailer’s relationship with potential customers.

The VM Method

- 1 Draw customers inside
- 2 Provide a clear overview of the store
- 3 Make shoppers feel comfortable

Diagram showing the three zones of visual merchandising: tables, rails and wall displays.

