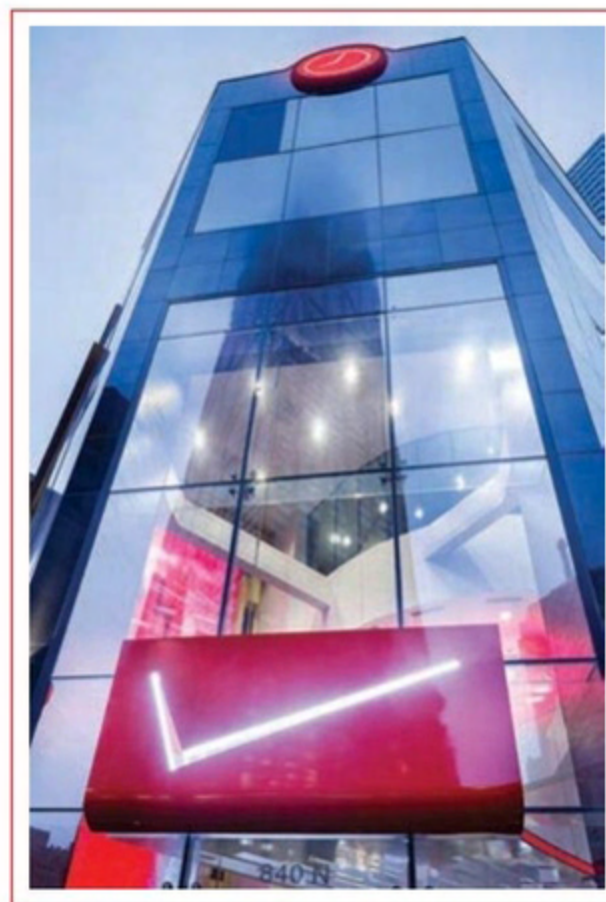


Wireless Wonderland



Verizon's Chicago destination store makes a gleaming black gem of a statement on the Magnificent Mile

By ERIN M. LOEWE

Photos by MARK STEELE PHOTOGRAPHY INC.



↑ Interactive touchscreens offer customers immersive product detail.

here is no shortage of excellent shopping on Chicago's famed Magnificent Mile.

But, while schlepping to the nearest wireless carrier doesn't rank high on most peoples' endless to-do lists, a walk through Verizon Wireless' second destination store—which opened in November 2014, a year after its Mall of America flagship and just weeks before a Houston one—might change the minds of even the most tech-averse among us.

With the help of longtime design partner, Columbus, Ohio-based Chute Gerdeman, Verizon completely gutted the 20,000-sq.-ft. space, which had been sitting vacant for a couple of years since Escada vacated it. The result was 10,000 sq. ft. of retail space spanning two floors to help the Basking Ridge, N.J.-based company project itself as a lifestyle brand for everyone.

Adam Limbach, vice president of brand communications at Chute Gerdeman, says there is quite a view of the city looking from the inside out. “We

really wanted to showcase the interior design of the space,” he says. “There’s a ton of technology in the space, and we wanted to make sure the energy got through to the outside.”

On the exterior, limestone veneer gave way to black granite and a structural glass curtain-wall, lending a clear view of the three-story video wall. The wall soars upward through the atrium in front, acting as a digital billboard to the outside.

A concrete tile floor winds between a faux wood porcelain floor, tracing a white ceiling ribbon sculptural element that pulls customers through to the back of the store. This is, of course, no coincidence, according to Lynn Rosenbaum, vice president of environments at Chute Gerdeman. “You have this really strong sense of progression and exploration, like there’s always something more intriguing that you’re getting to,” he explains.

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The goal was to get a shopper to see how his lifestyle fit with the store, rather than with a device.

↑ Accessories are toward the front of the store on the first floor, while devices are housed toward the back.

→ A pizza truck fixture pays homage to Chicago, while offering an App Wall geared toward small business.





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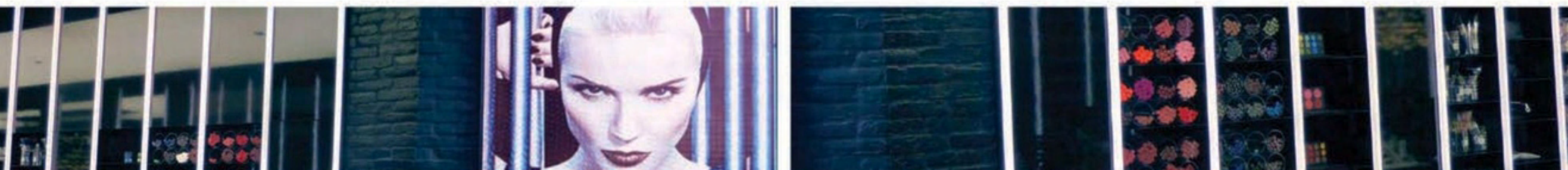
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At its core is a digital branded “monolith,” which visually sweeps up through the store’s center and subtly nudges customers to continue their exploration upstairs. An added bonus is a charging concierge behind the monolith, where people can securely drop off their phones for a quick in-store power-up.

Kathleen Allen, a senior designer on Chute Gerdeman’s brand communications team, says the stairway in the back gives a nod to the store’s Chicago heritage. “We used the trestles of the ‘L’ train and the signage of the CTA (Chicago Transit Authority) in the stairwell,” she says.

Along the journey, shoppers encounter “lifestyle zones”—including fitness, home security, business solutions, gaming and music—and peruse accessories before they even get to the phones and tablets. Rosenbaum says the goal was to get a shopper to see how his lifestyle fit with the store, rather than with a device. “We wanted to make them go through the store experience, so they could get to the back of the store,” he says. “It’s a new twist for any mobile device retailer.”

In the Get Fit area, customers actually can try various fitness trackers before buying, by using the treadmill, bike or vertical jump area. The business area features a Chicago-branded pizza truck where customers can experience an electronic point-of-sale system and view an App Wall with software ideas for businesses (App Walls are scattered throughout different areas of the store as well).

“Verizon actually has a lot of great products for small businesses that aren’t sexy, but this is a good way to showcase their product offerings,” Allen says.

The Customize It area has two unique opportunities for shoppers to create their own phone cases. There also is a Photobooth area with a green screen to take case personalization to another level. Finished products are ready in about 45 minutes and are delivered to the work area via pneumatic tube.

Upstairs near the atrium, the Drone Cage is an area where people can fly drones and robotic toys with phones and tablets. Limbach says while the area is geared toward fun, it offers ample views of the city as well. “Because the buildings aren’t really close, with all of the windows at this location, you can see a church, trees and the Hancock Building,” he says. “It’s really nice how Chicago comes through both literally and figuratively in our design.”

This store is not without its practical applications though. There is an executive briefing center on the third floor for Verizon employee education and conferencing. And like other destination stores, the



Chicago location holds wireless workshops each day where customers can learn how to get the most out of their operating systems.

As for stores on this scale in 2015, Verizon’s Director of Retail Design and Merchandising Kevin Fernandes says the company will continue to explore possibilities for destination stores. But overall, he says customer response has been extremely positive. “At the end of day, we design these destination stores to be world-class experiences for our customers, and I think we are doing that,” he adds. “I think we are following through on their expectations and experiences.”

↑ [Top] Shoppers can customize a phone cover in-store, where it is delivered via pneumatic tube.

↑ [Bottom] Fitness enthusiasts can test out the latest trackers in the Get Fit area.