



Meet the people who support their company's brand image—*and your store*—by merchandising concept shops.

field work

WANTED: People who are enthusiastic, have a strong work ethic, a positive attitude, extreme attention to detail, excellent customer service skills, job flexibility, are in good physical condition, able to regularly lift and carry 55 pounds, comfortable with climbing ladders and able to stand/walk for extended periods of time.

if you think this ad describes a construction worker, house painter or billboard installer, you'd be wrong. It is an amalgam of descriptions pulled from the web from companies seeking visual merchandisers.

"Visual merchandising" is the art of implementing effective design ideas to increase store traffic and sales volume. The mainstream big boys employ visual merchandisers to ensure consistency of product presentation, display and branding. In the last decade or so, more outdoor companies have invested in merchandisers for the very same reasons. Most employ "field merchandisers" who visit company retail accounts and company stores regularly to ensure their brand is well represented.

We were curious about the inner workings of this unique job and interviewed field merchandisers from various outdoor companies. The goal was to find out what kind of accounts they work with, what they actually do during visits, and to probe to see if their visits increase sales and benefit retailers in other ways.

Each field merchandiser we talked to brought a different level of experience to the position:

- » Being bought by a multi-billion-dollar company like Liz Claiborne allowed Prana to bring on **Lisa Hensel** as a full-time visual merchandiser in the last year after working part time for three years.
- » **Ali Levy** started as a field merchandiser with Cloudveil Mountain Works in March 2005 after a stint with Marmot as a visual merchandiser.

- » **Patti Roll** has been full time with Mountain Hardwear since April 2003, installing brand shops.
- » **Jennifer Baird** has worked for Columbia Sportswear for four years as a field visual merchandiser.
- » **Cathy Weisz** has been in visual merchandising at Patagonia for 17 years, starting in wholesale marketing and dealer programming, and now is the director of visual merchandising and store design.

SUPPORTING BRAND IMAGE

There is a common thread that motivates these merchandisers, and that is to support their company's brand image. The larger companies focus primarily on creating apparel-based concept or brand shops for their retail accounts. Hardgoods are generally merchandised elsewhere in the stores by category. Accessories are often



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included in concept shops to enhance the apparel selection, and savvy merchandisers will cross-merchandise footwear and travel products in these areas to add interest.

Most companies keep the requirements for installing concept shops close to the vest, and they all have different criteria by which they judge the potential sales rewards. It's safe to say, though, qualifying retailers agree to commit enough floor space to house a sufficient and broad inventory of apparel to support the company's brand image, give a concept shop time to become established (meaning more than one or two seasons) and keep it filled year-round with product. The decision to place concept shops sits with sales managers and reps and those shops are supported by the merchandisers.

When Roll started at Mountain Hardwear in 2003, she worked full time on installing brand shops and set up 30 that fall. Each season since, the number of concept shops has grown to the point that 60 percent of the company's accounts that meet the qualifications are in its brand shop program. Stores qualify for a brand shop if they buy a pre-determined dollar amount and assortment of apparel.

"Our goal is to include as many of our accounts in the program as possible," Roll said. "We will never have 100-percent

concept shops in outdoor stores and 60 percent on Patagonia's stores. "There are many factors that apply when we are deciding on concept shops," said Weisz. "Accounts don't have to buy a certain amount to qualify. We don't have a set program."

In 2007, Cloudveil is instituting an "Inspired Mountain Retailers" program in which it plans to install concept shops in gateway communities like Telluride, Colo.; Bozeman, Mont.; and Stowe, Vt. "These will not necessarily be our biggest accounts," Levy said. "If a community embraces their environment, we would like to support them."

As of now, Prana hasn't developed a concept shop program, but is beginning to develop a fixturing program that in 2007 will be offered to 250 accounts nationally, mostly outdoor specialty and yoga shops. "They must have the room and enough merchandise to make a good impression," Hensel said. "And they need the desire to make it work."

While supporting brand image and working with retail stores are the primary goals of these merchandisers, they are asked to do a lot more. Their duties often include designing and overseeing the production of fixtures, signage and point-of-purchase materials. Some are also involved in designing the company's trade show booths. Weisz headed the Patagonia team that conceptualized and worked with designers to create the booth that won the SNEWS® "Top BOB" (Best of Booth) Award at the 2006 Outdoor Retailer Winter Market. Others, like Cloudveil's Levy, are pressed into service to dress trade show mannequins and work on color stories for the workbook. Many also travel with company sales reps and work with them to merchandise the line.

IN THE FIELD

Field visual merchandisers are travelers, and spend a great deal of their time on the road visiting shops. Those that are part of a larger merchandise team are spread out regionally.

Mountain Hardwear's Roll heads a three-person field team with each person responsible for 100 accounts. Because their time is tight, they get into the stores once a season. Once in a store, they make sure the Mountain Hardwear clothing is in a prominent position and is merchandised effectively.



Patti Roll of Mountain Hardwear merchandising at Hudson Valley Outfitters.

In between visits, Roll's crew provides retailers with three to five tip sheets that instruct how to hang and fold apparel, how to use mannequins and how to cross merchandise. Because they are not necessarily in the shops when the product is in good supply, they will supply photos showing how to freshen up existing merchandise and "planagrams" to show how to merchandise products on fixtures throughout the season as inventory levels fluctuate.

Although it varies, most field merchandisers agree they spend a day in each store they visit. In the case of Columbia's Baird, she arranges her visit with a store contact two weeks ahead of time and discusses what is to be accomplished the day of her visit. She arrives just after the store opens, and has either her store contact or an apparel associate assist her. They work together to make sure Columbia's merchandising directives are in place and concentrate on shop maintenance and straightening. In the fall, her main focus is outerwear, making sure pieces are separated by style and size, as well as zipped. If the store carries hunting and fishing, she spends time in those departments as well.

"Throughout the day, I gather feedback about what is selling, what customers are requesting, and specific likes and dislikes about the product," Baird said. "Before I leave for the day, I do a walk-through with my store contact giving tips for improving the presentation and letting them know when I'll be returning."

PROS AND CONS FOR RETAILERS

Do field merchandisers increase sales for retailers and the companies they represent? That's a hard one to answer. No one with whom GearTrends® spoke could quantify the impact the merchandisers have on sales. It's more a good faith issue. Anecdotally, companies believe they have value. If they didn't, why would they employ merchandisers and invest resources? Mountain Hardwear and Cloudveil both said they spend about 30 percent of their marketing budget on merchandisers and merchandising programs.

Retailers agree that field merchandisers are important in communicating brand stories. Their visits put their company's products top of mind with store staff and make their lines more shoppable. They also provide important merchandising training that store managers don't have the time to do.

Ryan Raymond, manager of Pine Needle Mountaineering in Durango, Colo., said he likes having merchandisers in the



Patagonia merchandisers—Terri Brady, Sunday Rylander, Michele Marone and Hillary Fleming—review the color trends and color palette for the upcoming season.

participation because some shops do their own fixturing, but we have at least another 200 dealers that are nearing the qualification amount."

As Columbia's field merchandiser, Baird only visits stores that have concept shops. "That being said, when I'm in a store, I touch and report on all the Columbia Sportswear product within the store: apparel, outerwear, footwear, hunting and fishing," she said. "If Columbia made it, I merchandise it!"

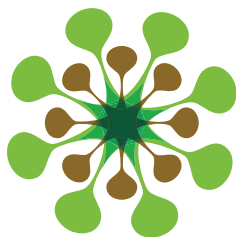
At Patagonia, Weisz leads a group of six field merchandisers who work with select dealers and Patagonia's own retail shops. About 30 percent of their work is focused on



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shop because they bring in new ideas. But, he warned, if merchandisers only work with their own lines and insist on putting men's and women's together in a concept-like area, it may work against the store's philosophy.

"If you have good merchandisers on staff, having an outside merchandiser come in and rearrange product is a once-a-year fix," Raymond said. "As soon as they leave, we put things back the way they were because we don't merchandise by brand."

In my work, I've found sometimes you need to be careful what you wish for when it comes to inviting merchandising help. Retailers have a responsibility to communicate their store's goals and vision, as well as their expectations of the lines they allow in. Retailers must always remember that the most important branding in their store is that of the store itself.

In turn, we, as merchandisers, need to understand a store's product placement philosophy. Some retailers prefer to merchandise by brand, others by gender or category. When merchandising Mountain Hardwear apparel, Roll said she creates



Prana's
Lisa Hensel

dising techniques from concept shops that can be used throughout the store. As a result, entire stores are looking better and drawing customers in.

Prana's Hensel pointed out that being in the stores gives her the opportunity to know what the stores want and don't want, what works and doesn't work. She's become a valuable conduit between the stores and Prana's account managers. "I know the connections I make and the energy I expend creates energy around the brand and places Prana top of mind with the store's staff," she said. "It gives the brand a presence and shows we care. That results in sales."

Merchandising is all about sell-through, no question about it. Sell-in is important,

"Merchandising definitely *increases sales*. Every store should have access to a merchandiser." —Sheryl DeBoard, buyer for Beaver Sports

branded environments within gender categories. "Of our 110-plus dealers, almost all separate men's and women's apparel," she said. "We don't go into stores and take ownership of the space. We provide fixturing and merchandising support that works within the store environment."

Sheryl DeBoard, a buyer for Beaver Sports in Fairbanks, Alaska, is high on the benefits of merchandisers and merchandising. "Merchandising definitely increases sales," she said. "Every store should have access to a merchandiser. We see 25 percent to 30 percent increases after a visit by Mountain Hardwear's Roll. When she creates an outfit, we have women say they want the whole set. And she cross-merchandises her brand with hardgoods and other lines, so sales increase storewide."

But DeBoard stressed that, for merchandisers to have value, they need to know the demographics of the store, its customers and the locale to better understand what will work.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Columbia's Baird noted that concept shops definitely make a difference in retail, and retailers reap multiple benefits from concept shops. In addition to a cohesive branded message for the company featured, retailers are learning merchan-

but, as I've found in my work merchandising over the years, the real test is how well the product sells. Strong sales determine the size of subsequent orders. Whether it can be quantified or not, merchandising makes a difference. When products are displayed effectively, customers are persuaded to buy.

"Visual merchandising is showing the Patagonia brand in a 3D environment and telling pertinent stories," Weisz said. "It's really a sell-through and buying component." At Patagonia, "merchants" pick the product that will appear in the catalog, online and in the company stores. Then the merchandisers take the buy and figure out how to tell the stories and sell the product.

It is encouraging that both large and small companies understand the importance of merchandising and are devoting money and resources to creating and maintaining merchandising programs and putting merchandisers in the field. The outdoor industry has come a long way in that respect. We'd like to see more companies adopt broad-based merchandising programs. And, of course, those would include merchandisers who can regularly lift and carry 55 pounds and are comfortable climbing ladders! 🧗

» To read more merchandising ideas and tips from Sharon Leicham, go to www.snewsnet.com/merchandising.

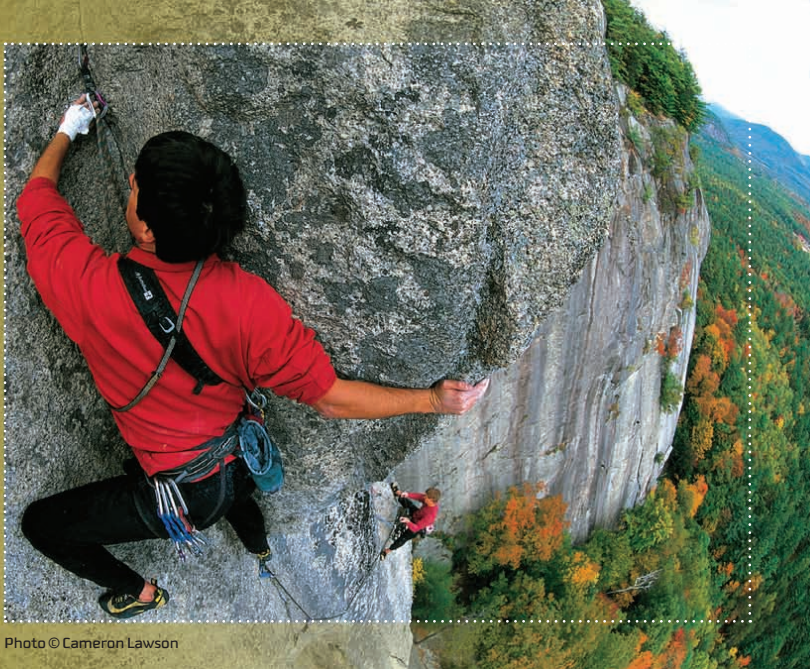


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