



Best Buy zones in

Experiential design takes retail to the future

Remember when a retailer's mantra was, "The customer is always right"? Now it's, "Get the customer involved." Hence, the industry's new buzzword: "customer-centric." Best Buy, the Richman, Minn.-based consumer electronics retailer, helped to coin the term. After launching five customer-centric lab stores a year and a half ago, the company opened yet another concept store in May. Located on Santa Monica Boulevard in West Hollywood, Calif., it brings together many of the lab stores' concepts, and introduces more.

"This particular store is considered a new direction the company is taking around the customer-driven, experiential retail concept," says James Damian, senior vice president, Experience Development Group, at Best Buy. "It embraces many of the same notions that the [existing] lab stores are embracing—that is, selling the experience or benefit of what products do, as opposed to the old game of just pushing product."

"The biggest and most noticeable difference between the customer-centricity work and the West Hollywood project is the 'holistic' approach," says Sharon Lessard, director of design, Store Experience, Experience Development Group, at Best Buy. "West Hollywood was created with one eye, and every segment was considered in the space. All the customer experiences are connected and cohesive."

The project's goal was ambitious: to re-invent the big-box shopping experience. "From a design perspective, big-box retailers are usually shunned by the retail community," says Damian. "When I first saw Best Buy [in '98, when I joined the company], I realized the consumer had already made a decision: they were interested in shopping [Best Buy]. It's the gear that empowers individuals to be more creative, more productive—to embrace entertainment on a new level. Yet the way the store was presenting itself to the public was almost like a supermarket warehouse. They didn't treat product any differently than the way a

grocer treats cereal. There was no visual merchandising competency, or shopping ease for customers. The store was not organized properly. It was visually polluted with too much signage; it was not easy to shop—but consumers were shopping there anyway because the assortment and the products were so cool."

But the company realized it had to move forward to keep consumers' attention. "Product-centricity will only get you so far," says Damian. "If it remained about the assortment, it would not continue to grow. If we invite customers into the process and give them an environment that is experience-based—where they can share, play, create—we will build loyalty," he adds. "By building an authentic relationship, customers trust us as the place that helps them find solutions for their lifestyle—we develop loyalty, and as loyalty grows, profits grow."

In creating the new format, Best Buy worked closely with New York-based ESI Designs and its principal designer, Dr. Edwin Schlossberg. Internationally renowned Schlossberg has been designing interactive, participatory experiences—from the American Family Immigration History Center, Ellis Island, NY, to The Children's Museum of Los Angeles—for more than 25 years. In the retail arena, his first project was the Sony Plaza and Sony Wonder Technology Lab in New York in 1993. When Damian, who knew Schlossberg and the Sony project, decided to put together a "new mode of merchandising in an experience-based setting," he sought out ESI.

The project, which was completed in just six months, was as interactive as the store itself. "This was definitely a collaborative—two teams working as one," says Schlossberg. "It was an experiential development group. We brought together a very collaborative partnership between the teams at Best Buy and ESI, including interactive designers, graphic designers, fixture designers and environment designers."



ESI's approach is decidedly unique, especially in the retail industry. "We try to imagine and define the experience we want customers to have," says Schlossberg, "to work inward rather than from the equipment out; to understand how we want people to look, feel and act—and figure out design, based on those aspirations."

The 45,000-sq.-ft. store, located at the corner of La Brea and Santa Monica Boulevard, in the West Hollywood Gateway mall, is Best Buy's prototype size. But almost everything else about it is different. Except for the prominently displayed signature yellow tag, the exterior of the store was governed by the mall's developer, says Damian. "The palette and finishes are very California: pale, with lots of stucco."

Inside, too, the store has a new, softer palette in tones of blue, gray and white. Hard aisles are pale gray sealed concrete.

The open layout, which follows a hub concept, includes six distinct "experience zones." At the hub is the Entertainment Connection, where customers can play movies, games and music. In other zones, which extend out from the hub and along the walls, customers can sit and check out plasma TVs and surround sound in the completely furnished Home Theater zone. They can also visit the Geek Squad (a 24/7 computer service brand purchased by Best Buy in 2002) and get repairs or memory-uploads to their computers; or stop in to

the Computers zone to try out a new one. At Mobile Entertainment, they can experience the latest on-the-road audio-video technology; and in Appliances' three separate kitchen vignettes, they can find computers for researching recipes, and under-the-counter TVs and DVDs for entertainment.

"It's a very animated environment, with a lot of sight and sound," says Damian. "Consumers actively participate in testing, experiencing and seeing benefits of products before they buy."

Experience zones are designated by overhead white floating scrim, screenprinted with the name of each. Areas are further defined by blue square carpet tiles on the departments' infield; and distinct color palettes that Schlossberg chose to set specific moods: yellow in the Appliance zone; white and pale blonde wood in Computers; red in Home Theater; blue and white in Mobile Entertainment. The Geek Squad retains its distinctive orange, black and white colorway.

Graphics include lifestyle images, showing products in use, and invitations to come in and participate in specific activities. Interactives also have step-by-step graphics explaining how to use equipment.

The areas are also defined by multiple levels of lighting, says Lessard. "We removed quite a few of the warehouse lights and added track lighting, highlighting the experience zones, focusing on the large overhead scrim and giving the overall store a 'warmer' feel, like home," she says. The Home Theater's halogen track fixtures are more effective for viewing flat screen TVs. Appliances has a mix of task and general lighting.

A flexible wiring system deploys power from above, instead of from underneath, the retail floor. "When we want to move anything, the power can be dropped anywhere in the store very efficiently and quickly," says Damian.

Modular, flexible fixturing can also be reconfigured. Consisting of a basic mainframe, and a kit of parts that can be

re-deployed in different types of layouts, as well as long or short runs, the system can be changed to accommodate a specific selection of merchandise.

Best Buy is still testing, changing, refining and streamlining concepts in its West Hollywood store. But both designer and retailer are extremely proud of the results so far. "One of the distinctions of the store is, it not only looks good, it works well," says Schlossberg. "It's efficient, it can be changed out easily—but the store also has a new set of effective tools that enhance the bottom line of the store. The format represents the next generation of retail."

"As Best Buy has become the number-one consumer electronics company, everybody was looking to emulate it," says Damian. "It is the obligation of every retailer to continue to develop and grow with its customers. This is about developing a real conversation with the audience that's been supporting you."



Above: The Geek Squad, a brand purchased by Best Buy and incorporated in the new store, stands out with its orange, black and white color scheme, and sales associates dressed in narrow-legged black pants, white shirts (with pocket protectors) and string ties.



Right: In the Home Theater experience zone, customers can relax and check out plasma TVs and surround sound



Right: Best Buy's new West Hollywood concept store opens to an airy, hub configuration that allows consumers to see the entire store from the entrance.