



Exposed brick walls and modular aluminum fixtures give ESCAPE a hip, modern feel.

The chance to **ESCAPE**

Best Buy couples the newest in gaming and gadgets with a hip, club-like setting aimed at guys

By Erin McCarthy, Contributor

In an effort to build on its already strong gaming business, Minneapolis-based Best Buy Inc. opened its first ESCAPE concept store in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood in November 2004. The "post-work, pre-bar" 3,600-sq.-ft.-hangout was built into an old brick police station and was designed to resonate with single, young men in their mid- to late 20s, it features the most cutting-edge technology in gaming, MP3 players and other electronic gizmos.

Best Buy sought out New York-based experiential design firm ESI Design to develop a "community-centric" retailing plan that emphasized the social nature of the console gamer target that was identified through its research. Once the key demographic was identified, the company surveyed multiple focus groups among that target audience to find out what kind of place they would want to hang out in, and what kind of products should

be available. Julie St. Marie, director of innovation development at Best Buy, says the groups helped her team develop the business model for ESCAPE. "Instead of designing a store in a traditional way, which is typically by product and by what we believe in our heads to be the right way to design a store, we designed it from the way the community wanted," she says.

James Damian, senior vice president of the Experience Development Group at Best Buy, says the design plan was based on three main principles. "It would be a store; it would have its own Website so the customers' creativity could be posted and shared among the community; and an [ESCAPE Lincoln Navigator] outfitted with gear so that we can participate with the customers at music events, campus events and in their neighborhoods," he says.

Matthew Moore, director of environmental design at ESI, says his firm wanted the store to have a 'wow' feel so customers would know it

wasn't just another consumer electronic store. "I think this customer really wants this feeling of coolness; he feels he's participating in something special," Moore says. "So we looked at having an edgy feel and making the space a little rawer so the product, in contrast, could shine even more."

ESI accomplished this by using much of what the original building provided. The 19th-century building formerly housed a Gap, and ESI wanted to preserve as much of the original building as possible. So the team gutted it, removing the slatwall and dressing rooms to uncover the raw nature of the space and to expose as much brick as possible. Damian says the team also kept the old floor—which was trademark Gap maple—and refinished the wood with dark walnut stain.

Damian says more than anything, ESCAPE has an atmosphere that is connected with this consumer's life and reflects his lifestyle. "The



Photos: Michael Skott Photography, Easisound, Wash.

environmental atmosphere looks more like his studio apartment than a big-box store," he says. "It's a club-like atmosphere, it's a hangout and it's industrial tech." But even though the store is geared toward young men, Damian points out there is a "halo effect" that also draws in girlfriends and older men who may be young at heart.

Making ESCAPE a viable hangout for the group involved coming up with creative alternatives to the typical big-box environment. In order to use any of the services, customers must become members (for a fee of \$9.99 per year). After that, all amenities can be rented by the hour. Four game pods feature PlayStation2 and Xbox consoles and the latest and most popular video games. Each pod hosts a different theme, like "auto racing" or "stadium," which features actual seats from Wrigley Field.

Moore says ESI came up with the idea for "luxury boxes," which can also be rented to accommodate up to 10 people. They put most peoples' living rooms to shame with their comfy furniture, plasma TVs and the latest audio and home theater equipment. Members can also opt to have food catered.

The boxes are partitioned off from the rest of the store by garage doors. The doors fit with the industrial feel of the store and help open up or close off the store as needed. Plus they also solve what Moore describes as an eternal lighting problem. "You can actually close the garage doors and get to the lights above," he says. "Maintenance and access are the bane of every designer, so it actually ended up having a very cool look, as well as being very functional."

ESI used vibrant, colorful lighting to make ESCAPE feel more alive. Moore says they worked with New York-based Horton Lees Brogden Lighting Design Inc. and incorporated fluorescent lighting with theatrical gel sleeves in the fixtures (shining through some of the white acrylic tops) and above the garage doors. Low-voltage MR-16 halogen spotlights highlighted the products.

"The uplit bars are always sort of a great look, and one that our customer would probably be familiar with, so we get a little resonance there," Moore says. "And the color and vibrancy gives it a little bit of a club-like atmosphere."

Fixtures were another big factor in Best Buy's design philosophy for the store. "It must be a modular, flexible kit of parts, so we think of it as everything on roller skates," Damian says. "This is so it can expand and contract according to any location, because when building a store in the urban centers of the U.S., you have to take what that urban environment gives you." To make this vision a reality, Best Buy turned to Burlingame, Calif.-based B&N Industries, a company that specializes in lightweight, modular aluminum fixtures.

The Sorbetti System by B&N Industries was one of the main fixture systems used in ESCAPE. It's a pole-based system, so freestanding poles can be located anywhere in the space and a variety of accessories can be hung on the poles.

For ESCAPE's retro/history wall, ESI coupled the Sorbetti system with other cabling hardware from B&N Industries, to create a cool, minimalist cabinet. Kevin McPhee, image

director at B&N, says the Sorbetti system is a flexible choice for this kind of store because it is modular and interchangeable. "It can span underlit cabinets, shelves, grid wall or any other kind of panel-based system you could stand between the poles," he says.

The Sorbetti pole system was also incorporated into the rolling cart fixtures by Warren, R.I.-based Design World Inc. to hold signs, shelves and peg hooks. White acrylic tops the cart fixtures and allows the warm, fluorescent glow to emanate from beneath the products.

The retro wall showcases so-called "old school" systems like Atari and Nintendo that will evoke fond memories from ESCAPE's target clientele. "To be able to see the evolution from the origins of where [gaming] was to where it is today really puts things in perspective," Damian says. "And it's a great conversation piece."

There is not a lot of signage in the store, but Moore says what little there is tends to be terse and edgy. "[Signs] are made on a straightforward graphic template that ESCAPE can update and print in-store," he says.

All of the glass in the store, including in the garage door panels, is translucent safety glass. "We were trying to get the cool, edgy industrial quality of the wire glass, but then make it a little slicker feeling by frosting and lighting behind it," Moore says.

Staying true to its roots, the store invites feedback from its customers in a myriad of ways. At the food counter, there are "staff picks" menus next to the food menus, featuring staff and customer preferences for the latest technologies they've tried at ESCAPE. "Whether it's a movie, a piece of music, a particular piece of equipment, or anything they've used or purchased, we invite the customers and staff to put on the menu what they'd like and what's 'hot' for them," Damian says.

St. Marie says the store also has an electronic survey program in the store that also travels on the road. Best Buy reviews the feedback every six weeks and tries to incorporate customers' likes and dislikes into its evolving plan of what it will change in the store, on the Website and the events it visits via the ESCAPE Lincoln Navigator. "It truly is a lab store," she says.

In Moore's opinion, ESCAPE is a prime example of experiential retailing. If ESCAPE can draw customers in on a regular basis via its ever-changing merchandise or events, in theory, the customers will buy more. Having an online presence and in local neighborhoods through its on-the-road vehicle means more opportunities to create loyalty customers. "As opposed to just paying lip service to experiential retailing, this actually seems to be experiential retailing," Moore says.