

Retail Lighting: It's time to focus on the importance of light

Most retailers don't sell floors, walls or ceilings. Instead they sell merchandise ranging from clothing to stationery to food and beverage and a vast array in between.

This is an important mantra worth remembering when considering the lighting in any store, whether high street or boutique it is the lighting that provides key emphasis and focus on the wares that are on sale.

Having worked with many retailers to improve the quality of light we've seen sales increases of up to 20% - purely through getting the lighting right so it's important not to underestimate the power of light.

But what do we mean by 'getting lighting right'?

The key to getting light right is in the correct use of contrast; the balance of light between merchandise and surrounding environment. Some retailers have taken it to extremes – take Abercrombie for instance where the contrast ratio is as high as 50:1 in favour of merchandise or at the other end of the spectrum, TK Maxx where the ratios are almost 1:1.

Note that nobody who carefully plans their lighting has contrast ratios that tip the other way, to illuminate the circulation or surrounding space to a higher level of illumination than the merchandise sort of defeats the object of retailing! Believe me it happens; we were recently called to a very large retailer in Oxford Street who couldn't work out why their lighting looked so bad. Needless to say it was because everything except merchandise was illuminated.

So how do we achieve this?

The obvious thing to say is 'point the lights in the right direction' but it's a little more complicated than that. As lighting designers we typically talk about a 'layered' approach to lighting that more often than not includes three 'layers' of light:

1. Background illumination
2. Accent lighting
3. Feature lighting

Background Illumination is the base level of light that generally illuminates the store merchandise and circulation zones via a 'soft wash'; this simply provides safe and functional illuminance levels.

Accent lighting provides direct illumination of merchandise, usually through the use of spotlights. It is this layer of illumination that visually elevates the merchandise within the space.

Feature lighting comes in many forms, from illumination of vitrines and display cases to chandeliers and artwork. No matter what the form they always have one role; to create feature that draws the eye into the space. These are particularly useful devices in shop windows for catching the eye of passers by. Kurt Geiger recently developed large feature 'shoe chandeliers' that are internally illuminated and provide a stunning way of stopping passers by and drawing footfall into the store.

Interestingly, many high-end retailers have dispensed with the first layer altogether and rely on accent lighting to provide enough general ambient light within the space. Take for example two flagship stores we have recently completed; Superdry and DKNY on London's Regent and Bond Streets respectively.



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Both stores have no luminaires providing general ambient illumination, instead both rely on accent and feature illumination. However, Superdry is dark and moody like a nightclub with contrast values of around 12:1 whereas DKNY is brighter, sophisticated and calm, with contrast values of around 5:1. Superdry utilises a narrow beam spotlight while DKNY a medium beam: A small technicality that adds up to a big difference.

Both also utilise internally illuminated displays and feature chandeliers to further attract the eye.

The key in both instances has been to ensure that all luminaires are correctly and carefully focused onto merchandise.

