

How consumer behaviour affects design decisions

"Design is a marriage between art and science," said Callie van der Merwe, CEO of Design Partnership, at the 4th Annual Research Conference, recently held by the South African Council of Shopping Centres (SACSC). "The head and the heart, essentially emotions, affect everything, even our stock-market!"



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The focus of this year's conference was technology, shopper demographics and experiential shopping.

"We are not architects. We are not traditional store designers, nor a traditional agency nor a marketing company," says van der Merwe. Instead, he believes that his Design Partnership team is a combination of all of the above. They are "retails curators".

Van der Merwe's aim is to construct environments, based on human behaviour and customer needs. He believes that successful curators stitch disconnected objects together seamlessly in order to tell a cohesive, and engaging story that is also human-centric. "As retail curators, we marry science and art, balance form and function and are sensitive to where head meets heart," says van der Merwe.

This is achieved by understanding the consumer, their user behaviour and what makes them tick. The core is to understand people and more specifically how they engage naturally within space and with objects.

"For us, research lies in the trenches," says van der Merve, "part of the solution is to spend time in the retail environment and to observe how people behave. Why they do things is less important than what they do. We cannot change how people behave, but can certainly tap into this and maximize good design in retail spaces."

It can be argued that this approach not only creates a human-centric environment, that is appealing to the consumer, but it also helps to maximize the brand offering and further extend value within the retail space.

After spending the past 20 years in the industry, van der Merwe reveals five key lessons that he and his team aim to apply

in all of their retail projects.

- **Balancing form and function**

People ignore design that ignores people! Design is not merely art. It's easy to make something beautiful, however creating something beautiful that is also functional, and that succeeds in communicating a clear message to a core audience, on a very human level, is what design is about.

Man-made objects are incomplete until someone creates a use out of them. As designers, we not only have the job of creating aesthetically appealing forms, but also need to consider the needs of the target audience.

Success lies in identifying the things that our audience finds appealing. It is important to understand what catches their eye and piques their interest. No matter how gorgeous a design, it is imperative that the message translates to the audience, and is in line with the brand identity.

- **Design comes last**

Most designers start designing too soon, when in truth, the longer the delay to commence the design process, the better the outcome. The key is to do the research, unearth the facts and script the brief. Only then, should one start designing.

- **Fail early and succeed sooner**

There is value in prototyping at an early stage, and so Design Partnership prototypes off-site and produces the first store as quickly as possible. The point is to learn from live and real feedback sooner than later, as opposed to relying on theory relating to how we think people may behave. The principle is based on doing design as opposed to thinking design.

- **Think inside the box**

The collaboration of store designers working together with below-the-line-agencies is how most processes work. Van der Merwe's approach however is different in order to avoid the space becoming too complicated and the message confused. In order to ensure that the messaging is clear, it is important to control the entire curation and communication process from within the retail box, by setting up "silent salesman".

- **Ask questions**

Design approach is not about finding the right answers, but rather about finding the right questions. Often, a client's questions are answered when they should in fact be challenged. It is important to interrogate the brief by asking difficult questions. These questions need to be actively sought and will ultimately lead to better design solutions.

As economic conditions continue the world over in a permanent state of flux, it is essential that the buying decisions and experiences of all customers are addressed at every possible level. When it comes to store design inside and out, it is overwhelmingly evident just how inseparable consumer behaviour and design decisions have become.

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