

The Genius of Apple's Store Patents

By Jen Moss crop

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Apple has once again rewritten the rules of business. Its request to trademark the “Distinctive Design & Layout” of its stores has been granted by the U.S. Patent & Trademark Office. And so, as unconventional as it may seem, the Apple store’s distinctive minimalist design and Genius Bar service are now as protected as the rounded corners and user interface of the company’s mobile devices.

While the move gives Apple the power to force fake Apple stores to shut down, it has a more far-reaching and provocative impact on the retail industry. The patents suggest a new way of thinking about retail store design: What if we considered our stores as products? Most companies employ a rigorous product development process to produce a steady stream of innovative new products; perhaps retailers should adopt a thorough, systematic, ongoing approach to developing new retail store designs.

If we approached developing stores the way we develop products, we’d start with a clear design brief. Replacing free-flowing discussions about creative vision with designers and architects would be a document informed by rigorous market research and analysis – and intended to ensure collective understanding of the desired outcome among all stakeholders.

The brief would delineate the problem we want solve or opportunity we want to seize. Our goals would be clearly articulated, as would the constraints – time, budget, physical real estate, etc. And, we’d lay out the full set of requirements, starting with the brand strategy, including target customer segments and brand positioning, and the desired customer experience. As with product design, the intent of the brief would be to frame – not squelch – creativity.

A product-development approach to store design would also require new capabilities in concept testing and rapid prototyping. Product development has undergone a sea-change in recent years, as rapidly evolving markets and technologies have necessitated an accelerated speed of innovation, and a recessionary economy has called for greater risk management. New incremental development approaches have arisen and there is an opportunity to apply them to store design.

We would borrow techniques from agile software development to break down new designs into pieces that are tested quickly and iteratively, and assemble preliminary mock-ups to gauge feasibility earlier in the development process. Our goal would be to make failure far cheaper and learning far faster.

A faster learning cycle would be necessary because a product approach to store design changes the timing and objectives of refreshes and remodels. Instead of adhering to the standard industry five to seven year time-frame for facelifts, we would create a pipeline of innovations to be released at frequent intervals based on today's product lifecycle management principles.

Just as we use planned obsolescence to encourage customers to replace products sooner and from the same manufacturer, we would design our stores to encourage customers to patronize the same stores with greater frequency. We would consistently incorporate new technologies, new services, and new visuals to make static store designs feel out of date. We would also employ new retail concepts like fashion trucks, digital stores, and pop-up locations to produce a steady stream of news.

Thinking of stores as assets and facilities results in designs constrained by structures and materials. A product mentality opens up new possibilities inspired by the customer and a new process that's more in tune with today's business needs. Patented or not, our store designs should reflect our unique brand identity as do our products – if not more.

Denise Lee Yohn has been inspiring and teaching companies how to operationalize their brands to grow their businesses for 25 years. World-class brands and leading retailers including Sony, Frito-Lay, Burger King, and Brookstone have called on Denise, a brand-building expert, speaker, and writer.

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