DESIGN TALK

‘Design means solution’

Pantaloons, the newly acquired fashion brand of The Aditya Birla Group, has been a preferred choice of today’s generation since its launch in 1997. Having a fashion spread of 28000 sq. ft. the brand has 81 stores across 40 cities which has redefined the style quotient of the Indian apparel industry. VM&RD chats up with Nagesh C, Head Design & Visual Merchandising of Pantaloons Fashion and Retail Limited to know more about the current retail design philosophy of the brand which is getting a new look this FY. Read on......

Nagesh C
Head Design & Visual Merchandising
Pantaloons Fashion and Retail Limited

What is the basic retail design strategy introduced by Pantaloons after the brand was shifted from the Future Group to the Aditya Birla Group?

Pantaloons has played the quintessential role of modernising the Indian consumers and helped them evolve by offering varied brands and merchandise at great value. Post the transfer of management rights from the Future Group, we are in the process of building on strengths and exploiting the opportunities for now and the years to come. Coming to the point on retail design strategy, we would be focusing on tailor made retail design improvements to bring in critical facets of the store experience. At the same time, we would be looking at the next 3 years on the aesthetic strategy to not only bring up the retailing standards in India but also delight our customers with a shopping experience that’s very own Pantaloons.

The store design primarily was built as a modern-fast-fashion retail concept with an attempt to give a distinct treatment for each of the departments with a touch of warmth added through certain elements of design. However, when we looked at delivering the new business vision and promise to the customers the store design needed a bit of tweaking. Pantaloons’ new vision stands for: 
- exclusive brands, fashionable merchandise and great value. Hence the retail design must deliver- brand experience, fixtures must deliver fashionable merchandise through coordinated ensembles and communicate great value fashionably in the vital touch points of the worlds.

Therefore the immediate retail design strategy is to look at -

(a) branding: brand specific props, brand marking, brand specific elevations, brand visuals – to significantly improve brand presentation.
(b) Responsive fixture design, floor re-laying, contemporary mannequins, cluster and focal point assembly, lighting etc., to deliver fashion store experience.
(c) Contemporary cash n wrap, customer service department, effective signage system
Antaloon, the newly acquired fashion brand of The Aditya Birla Group, has been a referred choice of today’s generation since its launch in 1997. Having a fashion spread of 8000 sq. ft, the brand has 81 stores across 40 cities which has redefined the style quotient in the Indian apparel industry. VM&RD chats up with Nagesh C, Head Design & Visual Merchandising of Pantaloon Fashion and Retail Limited to know more about the current retail design philosophy of the brand which is getting a new look this FY. Read on…..

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Therefore the immediate retail design strategy is to look at -

(a) Branding: brand specific props, brand markings, brand specific elevations, brand visuals – to significantly improve brand presentation.

(b) Responsive fixture design, floor re-lay, outlaying, contemporary mannequins, cluster and focal point assembly, lighting etc. to deliver fashion store experience.

(c) Contemporary cash n wrap, customer service department, effective signage system

- to establish the new image and value proposition.

How do the various design elements translate into business benefits in terms of sales for Pantaloon?

If my view anything you do around the brand has two important deliverables. One is customer promise delivered through experiencing the brand which in turn translates in to brand building and the second is business goals. Well, both have to be delivered 100% not one over the other. The design elements at store are improvised in order to deliver both the above.

Let’s take the example of significantly improving the brand presentation for Annabelle or Trisha, for which we introduced embossed brand plates, brand specific props, new brand imagery through high point visuals, customised brand elevations and presented the brands with seasonal planograms with colour blocking and suggestive coordinates etc. This is clearly showing results in increased brand traction and recognition. While in the short term it is showing improvement in sales around 20%, it would also deliver equity for each of the exclusive brands at the store. Likewise the contemporary mannequins, which usually played a role of style and trend educators for our customers. What is displayed on the mannequins have always moved faster resulting in better sell than through the merchandised displays on SKUs.

What has been your approach to the use of store design as a business tool? Any real experience you can cite which decides in the aspect of budgeting for VM and for specific aspects such as flooring, lighting, mannequins etc.

Store design does respond to business goals in terms of capital expenditure as well as top line targets. If the capex is managed tightly with design and material solutions, either we can open more stores or have control on interest and depreciation. At the same time store design delivered close proximity to the way we would like the merchandise to sell, then it would impact the top line inquirily. We have been able to bring the per square feet expenditure down by about 5-8% with alternate materials etc., without compromising on the desired aesthetics. We reinvested some of the savings in to LED lighting, contemporary mannequins etc.

For example, LED lighting has been probed as best solution of open control while investment in the capex is higher compared to CDMT. We chose to go for 100% LED lighting for 3 to 4 recent projects like MIB Road Bangalore, Kalyan, Seashore Mall Pune stores. Another example is, earlier we had higher floor display versus wall display. This resulted in to wall contribution being lower compared to floor. And also floor looked too cluttered, where the customers used to find is difficult to browse through. At present, we have increased wall display capacity by about 20% at an average, which frees up a lot of space on the floor which is showing good results. Also now the brand wise targets for the week are sharply monitored with sharp estimates on ROIs.

What has been the biggest challenge for Pantaloon in the Indian retail market in terms of satisfying internal customers?

At the core of its existence Pantaloon has been able to bring modernity to Indian customers with ease of shopping and an environment which is not intimidating. Converting customers from tailor made to ready made, converting Indian women to experiencing western wear without shedding their modesty, allowing men to come out of their stereotype one look for all occasions to occasion specific wardrobe solutions, eclectic and appealing kidswear, inducting customers in to fashion accessories, lifestyle and grooming products has made Pantaloon a friend and a guide to modernity for most Indian men, women, and that too at an accessible price.

The challenge now is that the markets are shifting, customers are having choice between various retail formats. Unless one is relevant and constantly upgrading to the customer needs by capturing consumer insights and market realities, one would not be able to retain the base and attract new walk-ins to convert. Pantaloon, has been a very strong brand in consumers’ mind. The challenge now is to give them differential and very own Pantaloon experience with a new twist and new story. That’s why we are focusing now on branded fashion instead of fashion.

How have the VM Team been able to get exposure to global store design trends and practice?

It is very important to be updated on global trends on store design and VM and at the same time be in tune with what is happening to the retail landscape in India. We visit International retail in London, Dubai and Hong Kong every 6 months to capture updates in (like minded) retail stores and also benchmark retail. Also subscriptions to WGSN also help understand global trends in store, VM, store design and retail therapy. Also, Euroshop is a must too.

How important is the need for retail designers to integrate with visual merchandising and visual communication when it comes to a brand like Pantaloon?
What has been your experience on this front in the Indian context?

INTERNATIONALLY THE PRACTICE HAS BEEN WORKING IN SILO, AS THEY ARE TREATED AS EXPERTS WITH SHARP VIEWPOINT. I THINK IT’S ALL ABOUT SEAMLESSNESS AND WORKING TOGETHER LIKE A TEAM TO DELIVER DESIRED SET OF RESULTS. MY ROLE CRITICALLY IS TO LINK ALL THE PIECES TOGETHER, LIKE A THREAD IN THE BEADS TO MAKE A BEAUTIFUL NECKPIECE. WE WORK TOWARDS DELIVERING CONCEPT TO CONSUMER WITH PURITY OF THOUGHT. THEREFORE AT PANTALOONS RETAIL DESIGNERS, VISUAL MERCHANDISERS, VISUAL COMMUNICATION EXPERTS WORK HAND IN HAND TO ENSURE THAT THE SYNERGY COMES ALIVE AT THE STORES.

What has been Pantaloon’s experience with implementation of design concepts with Indian resources?

WE HAD ABOUT 30% OF ITEMS SOURCED FROM ABROAD FOR SPECIFIC FINISHES AND QUALITY IN STORE DESIGN. BUT TODAY WE CAN SAY THAT WE HAVE BEEN ABLE TO SOURCE MOSTLY FROM INDIA EXCEPT FOR SOME KEY ITEMS WHICH ARE NOT READILY AVAILABLE. INDIAN VENDORS HAVE BEEN ABLE TO PROGRESS AND HAVE BEEN ABLE TO INVEST IN THEIR R&D, INFRASTRUCTURE, RESOURCE MANAGEMENT, CAPACITY AUGMENTATION AND TECHNICAL TALENT POOL, THUS, WE NOW LOOK AT INDIAN RESOURCES TO DELIVER STORES WITHIN STIPULATED DEADLINES. FOR EXAMPLE, WE ARE OPENING 14 NEW STORES IN FY14 AND LOOKING AT EXPANDING THE STORE COUNT TO 106 BY THE END OF FY15. WITH SUCH AGGRESSIVE EXPANSION PLANS WE LOOK AT OUR VENDORS IN INDIA AS PARTNERS IN GROWTH AND CUT THE LONG LEAD TIMES OF TRANSIT.

What do you think of the talent resources for training and learning available in India for Retail Design?

AS WE ALL ARE AWARE, IN INDIA THE SPURT IN RETAIL HAS TAKEN PLACE ONLY WITH BOOM IN REAL ESTATE THROUGH MALLS AND IS STILL A LESS THAN 10 YEARS PHENOMENON. HENCE THE TALENT CANNOT BE FULLY AVAILABLE INDIGENOUSLY. THEREFORE THERE ARE INTERNATIONAL DESIGN FIRMS EITHER DIRECTLY OR COLLABORATION WITH INDIAN PARTNERS AND HAVE SET UP THEIR OFFICES TO OFFER STORE DESIGN, VM, BRANDING AND COMMUNICATION SERVICES IN INDIA. WHILE IT’S NOT THE QUESTION OF RESOURCES OR LEARNING AVAILABLE IN INDIA, THE REAL QUESTION IS THE “TRANSLATION OF BRIEF”. IN MY VIEW DESIGN MEANS SOLUTION. IT’S APPLIED ARTS, HENCE THE TRANSLATION OF BRIEF IS IMPORTANT TO DELIVER BUSINESS GOALS AS WELL AS BRAND EXPERIENCE. MOST OF THE TIME ONE JUST WANTS TO REPLICATE THE LATEST TRENDS IN INTERNATIONAL STORE DESIGN, WHILE WHAT’S RIGHT IS TO APPROPRIATE THE DESIGN ELEMENTS TO DELIVER YOUR BRAND PROMISE AND EXPERIENCE AT RETAIL. IT HAS STILL A LARGE SCOPE OF IMPROVEMENT AS FAR AS INDIA IS CONCERNED.

What has been the impact of globalization on Indian retail design? Please give us some examples with respect to Pantaloon as a well recognised apparel brand.

THERE HAS BEEN A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT OF GLOBALIZATION ON INDIAN RETAIL DESIGN AND PANTALOONS IS INCLUDED IN THAT. PANTALOONS, STARTED AS A LARGE FORMAT DISCOUNT STORE IN THE 90’S WITH STORE DESIGN HAVING A ‘LOOK & FEEL’ TO UPGRADE CUSTOMERS FROM STREET SHOPPING TO ORGANIZED RETAIL. IN THE MIDDLE OF LAST DECADE IT TRANSFORMED AS AN ALTERNATE DESTINATION AS FAMILY STORE TO UPGRADE CUSTOMERS FROM TYPICAL M&B, MUSHROOMING. IN THE YEAR 2010 IT FINALLY TRANSFORMED AS A FASHION DESTINATION FOR YOUNG INDIA WITH STORE DESIGN DEVELOPED IN COLLABORATION WITH A RENOWNED GERMAN DESIGN FIRM. THE FASHION PROMISE BY PANTALOONS IS TO DELIVER FAST FASHION AT AN ACCESSIBLE PRICE POINT. HENCE THE STORE DESIGN MAINTAINS THE LOOK AND FEEL AS A MODERN DAY FAST FASHION RETAIL CHAIN AT THE SAME TIME MAINTAINS THE QUINTESSENTIAL INDIAN ETHNICITY WHICH PANTALOONS DERIVES INSPIRATION FROM. SO WE ARE IN A WAY DEEPLY IMPACTED BY GLOBALIZATION TO KEEP PACE WITH CHANGING LIFESTYLE NEEDS OF INDIAN CONSUMER TO KEEP PARITY WITH FOOD, CARS, ELECTRONICS, MOBILES AND REAL ESTATE MAKEOVERS IN THE COUNTRY.

Any other thoughts you would like to share?

At Pantaloon’s, we believe in consumer engagement by connecting with them at an emotional platform. That is why delivering intangibles like warmth and feel good factor in retail store design becomes paramount. That’s in our DNA and we engage with our customers every day. As we say no one understands Indian customers’ fashion needs the way we do at Pantaloons -- “Pantaloons... in love with fashion”.

Nabamita Chatterjee

How do you plan to use interactive digital technologies in-store for greater shopper experience as part of the whole store feel?

WE ARE IN THE PROCESS OF STUDYING SUITABLE INTERACTIVE DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY TO BRING FUNCTIONAL SOLUTIONS TO OUR CUSTOMERS. IT IS STILL AT A PRELIMINARY STAGE, BUT FOR SURE WE KNOW THE IMPORTANCE AND WE WOULD BE LOOKING AT SUCH TOOLS TO DELIGHT OUR CUSTOMERS. AS OF NOW WE HAVE ADDED DIGITAL SCREENS THROUGH A RENOWNED MEDIA PARTNER TO ENABLE EFFECTIVE FASHION COMMUNICATION AT THE STORES TO PROJECT SEASONAL FASHION TRENDS, CAMPAIGN VISUALS AND BEHIND THE SCENES ETC.