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Design isn't just about the visuals. By harnessing the power of all five senses, designers can create powerful customer experiences.

By Sarah Fister Gale

Good looks only go so far. To create a truly immersive experience that takes users where you want them to go, designers must fire on all senses. While the visuals grant our first impression of a place, balancing visual elements with scent, sound, taste, and touch, is what makes a space truly shine.

About one-third of the brain's neurons are dedicated to processing what we see. Another 20 to 30 percent are devoted to touch and sound, with additional, smaller percentages for taste and smell, says Charles Spence, professor of experimental psychology and head of the Crossmodal Research Laboratory at the University of Oxford, Oxford, England. But those other senses shouldn't be ignored.

"It's the nonvisual senses where much of the opportunity for differentiation lies," Spence says. "There aren't many unturned rocks in visual design, but there is often a world of possibility as far as the other nonvisual senses are concerned."

"Humans are complicated, and they interact with the world through all of their senses," says Joy Monice Malnar, AIA, co-author of *Sensory Design* and professor emerita of architecture at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, Illinois, USA. "Designers need to put themselves in the head of users and think about their journey with the space or the brand." They should think about how each sense is triggered to make a journey memorable.

"The goal should be to create spaces where people can obtain boundless sensory information," says Frank Vodvarka, co-author of *Sensory Design* and professor emeritus of fine arts at Loyola University Chicago,

Lowe's Holoroom is a virtual reality visualization tool that empowers homeowners with an immersive, intuitive experience.



L'Occitane's new flagship store in London, England, designed by FutureBrand UXUS, aims to immerse visitors in the French beauty brand's botanical vibe.



Chicago, Illinois, USA. "Once designers and their clients see a positive return on designing rich memorable experiences, these trends will catch on."

Visual Aids

This is where it all begins. "Visual perception is still the most important part to consider during the design process," says Barbara Seidelmann, managing director, 5 Star Plus Retail Design, Beijing, China.

To step up their game—and the experience—designers must link visual experiences with other senses.

Take L'Occitane's new flagship store in London, England. Designed by FutureBrand UXUS, the shop aims to immerse visitors in the botanical world of the French beauty brand. Upon entering, shoppers immediately are hit with the smell of real roses and lavender. While waiting for services, they are offered classic French macaroons. When guests are browsing, they can smell and test products at the hand-care bar. These elements are reinforced through the

Photo by: Lowes

visual design, including warm yellow tiles, touches of rose gold, and a harvest table that come together to create the feeling of sunny, Provencal France, which is at the heart of the brand.

To fully exploit the sense of sight, designers should experiment with dynamic, programmatic visuals, says Michael Neuman, digital experience design director, Gensler, San Francisco, California, USA. He notes that current trends in design visuals include cloth displays featuring color-changing smart threads that transform fabric into a computerized display. Researchers at the University of California, Berkeley in Berkeley, California, are developing one version of this technology. "It reflects color beautifully," Neuman says. It also absorbs sound, making it more appealing because it reduces the din of white noise.

The technology also can be interactive. For one of Gensler's clients, a coworking space focused on data science, Neuman and his team prototyped a fabric smart

map that can act as a display for geospatial data. "It can read a data feed and visualize geographic stories, such as weather patterns, taxi movements, or city trees," he says. "Because of its material and location within the open space, it has the added benefit of reducing ambient noise levels."

Then there are the spaces that offer full virtual reality experiences, which let people interact with products in new ways. U.S. hardware chain Lowes, for example, installed Holorooms in 19 stores where shoppers can enter a 3D mock-up of their renovation plans and move around, testing various products.

These design choices create experiences that sear a space or a brand in a user's mind, Seidelmann says.

Designers, however, must make sure tech elements add value to a brand. Video screens or massive art installations can overwhelm users, shortening the time they are willing to be in a commercial space, says Alison Carr, NCIDQ, retail design director, Gensler, San Francisco. "These choices have to be relevant to the user journey or they won't make sense."

Listen First

Commercial spaces all too often treat sound like an afterthought. Loud music playing over cheap, tinny speakers, bad acoustics, or constant white noise detracts from the user experience, Spence says. Overly loud settings can prevent restaurant customers from hearing specials, keep patients awake in hospitals, and cause retail shoppers to flee in frustration. "Most people don't realize how noise and other stimuli affect their experience of a place, but they all play a role," he says.

Carefully crafted soundscapes can create a positive psychological experience, stimulating retail shoppers, energizing employees, or calming patients in a doctor's office.

When creating a space, Julian Treasure, a sound and communication consultant in Orkney, Scotland, founder of The Sound Agency, an audio branding consultancy, and author of *How to be Heard* and *Sound Business*, says designers should consider the four pillars of good sound: acoustics, ambient noise, sound system quality, and the actual sound or music used. "If the first three are terrible, there is no point in the fourth," he says.

But these considerations can't wait until the end of the project.

Vodvarka points to Lincoln Center, the famous music hall in New York City, New York, USA, that was designed to have great sight lines from every seat at the expense of acoustics. "The sound was so bad the New York Philharmonic demanded retrofitting," he says.

Although that's an extreme case, many designers face the challenge of convincing clients to invest in high-quality

acoustics from the start, Treasure says. "It's much more expensive to retrofit acoustics than to start from scratch," he says.

Designers also should help clients consider how to create different sound experiences within a space to accommodate different needs. Malnar points to Morimoto, a high-end Japanese restaurant in New York that uses glass privacy walls to create quiet spaces around tables while providing customers with a view of the entire restaurant.

"Conversations can flourish, but you still feel like you are part of the community experience," she says.

The Signature of a Space

"Few people think about having a signature scent, but it can define a brand," Spence says. "The research shows that just because you may not be aware of the ambient scent that doesn't mean that it isn't influencing you."

The Tillary Hotel in New York, which opened last September, for example, wanted to create a signature scent that would draw off of the space and reinforce the brand, so it concocted *white svede*.

"When developing the scent, we stood in the lobby and talked about the space, what we feel about it, and what adjectives we used to describe it," Vanessa Vitale, general manager of The Tillary Hotel, told Hotel Management. "White svede has both feminine and masculine attributes, and we worked with a company to evoke those feelings."

Companies that want to create an unforgettable experience should consider what role scent can play in defining the space. But the scent has to be relevant to the story to make sense, Spence says. For example, he has worked with a global burger chain that was interested in redesigning its outlets to be more health conscious. Along with changing the menu and the color palette to reflect its more health conscious focus, they worked with a fragrance consultant to develop an innocuous floral fragrance that suggests fresh, healthy foods rather than the frying oil that is synonymous with most burger joints.

While this chain worked with consultants and focus groups to define exactly the right fragrance, scent doesn't have to be an elaborate investment, Spence says. He's worked with low-end hotel chains who pipe bacon smells out in the morning to encourage customers to buy breakfast, as well as theme bars in the United States that use diffusers to blow ocean scents or burning woodchips to create a certain atmosphere.

"Scent can be used to create a scene or nudge certain behavior," he says. And it's not limited to food. As retailers become aware of the power of creating a signature scent, they are incorporating them into their designs. U.S. clothing chain Anthropologie, for example, has Capri Blue's Volcano candle burning in every one of its clothing

High-end Japanese restaurant Morimoto uses glass privacy walls to create quiet spaces around tables while providing customers with a view of the entire restaurant.



The Tillary Hotel in New York, New York, USA created a signature scent that would draw off of the space and reinforce the brand.

Photo by: (left) Morimoto; (right) The Tillary Hotel

stores to create a calm, spa-like vibe for its shoppers.

As with every sense, scent can work for or against you. "In the worst case scenario, you pump out a scent that is so strong it drives people away," Carr says.

She points to bath product stores that assault customers with a barrage of perfumes, or young men's clothing stores where the smell of men's cologne sticks to your skin the moment you enter. "A scent consultant can make sure the choice is subtle and doesn't overwhelm."

Spence encourages interior designers to consider scent designers if they want to craft a signature experience. "Bring them on later in process once the other elements of design have been sorted," he says. "Then, it may be easier to try and find/develop a scent that matches or accentuates those other cues."

Altered By the Elements

The environment around us profoundly influences the way we perceive food and drink. "The feel of a chair, the paint color, the noise, and the temperature will all impact how food tastes," Spence says. He notes for example that loud noise suppresses the ability to taste sweet and salty.

Conversely, the right visual and auditory elements can enhance taste. Spence recalls conducting a 3,000-person wine tasting experiment in London where changing the lighting to red was shown to bring out the fruity notes in a red wine, while turning the lights green brought out the freshness/acidity of the wine instead.

"Furthermore, we could accentuate the effects of lighting by adding 'sweet' music to red lighting and 'sour' music to green lighting," he says. "Participants were amazed by how much their taste experience changed as a function of the ambient lighting/music."

This is obviously most important in restaurants and food venues, notes Seidelmann. When her team designs for food and beverage retail sites, all of the design elements are chosen to complement the food palate. "We chose darker earthy tones for restaurants that serve steak or BBQ, or add color accents in green, yellow, orange, or red for brands that work with juices or vegetables."

Scent also has a powerful impact on taste, as both senses are involved in flavor perception. Designers who are thoughtful about how scent impacts taste can use it to their advantage. It can work against them, though, Spence says. In the same way that piping the smell of hot popcorn or sizzling bacon into a mall will draw people to a food kiosk, the smell from an open garbage bin or a smoking oven will drive them away, he says. When working with restaurants or other food

establishments, designers need to assess every aspect of the environment to be sure it won't negatively impact the food produced.

Malnar notes that sensory design can be used to enhance the taste experience by creating a setting that is conducive to enjoying a meal. Creating a sound environment that allows for quiet conversation, for example, creates a sense of intimacy and slows the pace of the meal so diners can savor every bite.

At the same time, the other four senses can influence what patrons want to taste altogether. Spence has written extensively about research that shows when restaurants play music from a certain region, for example, customers tend to buy more wine from that region.

Designed to Feel

When consumers enter any environment, touch is a natural part of the interaction. Whether they pick up a product and start testing it out, feel fabric on a guest bed, or settle into a plush chair, users value touch. Designers should keep that in mind when making every design decision, Vodvarka says. "You want material that begs to be touched."

Designers always have been thoughtful about fabric choices and the way furniture or flooring feels. But the experience of touch goes further.

"Tactile elements allow people to try out products, which leaves a strong imprint in a person," Seidelmann says. "This leads to the creation of a connection between a customer and a brand, improving brand loyalty and identification."

Retail showroom b8ta lets tech companies rent kiosks where consumers can get a feel for their products.



Nespresso used touch—such as Alpi wood tables adorned with ground coffee that shoppers can run their fingers over while browsing—to enhance the design of its new boutique store in New York, New York, USA.

Touch also can help tell a brand's story. Nespresso, for example, adorned the Alpi wood tables in their new New York-based concept store with ground coffee that shoppers can run their fingers over while browsing.

And b8ta, a retail showroom in San Francisco that Gensler designed, lets tech companies rent display space where consumers can test their products. Each display is designed to provide easy access to products where customers can learn and play. Tablet displays also collect data on how customers engage with each product.

Innovative designers also are looking at new ways to make even the most conventional touch points more touch sensitive. Seidelmann recently created a new store design concept for Hoka One One, a global athletic shoe company, that lets customers test running shoes on different surfaces in the store that simulate gravel and concrete, among other surfaces. "It lets them feel like a professional runner," she says. The new design will be used for stand-alone and partner stores with the first outlets expected to open this year. ■

Photo by: (top) Nespresso; (left) b8ta; Hoka One

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