



Design Plus

Today's food retailing environment requires a growing roster of design services.

By Bob Ingram



ISLAND OASIS
For Albrecht's Sentry Market — named Good to Great winner in the Best Store Remodel/ \$3 million-\$6 million budget category in PC's 2015 Store Design Contest (page 42)— Mehmert Store Services created a series of concentric islands, including a new specialty cheese department.

Twenty-first-century supermarket firms are much like their shoppers in that they're increasingly seeking one-stop solutions to many of their needs, including store design, with the result that many design firms are rebranding themselves as "design services" suppliers.

"We are not just drawing lines on paper or taking directions from merchandisers and wholesalers, like days gone by," affirms Steve Mehmert, president of Sussex, Wis.-based Mehmert Store Services Inc., which is focused on independent retailers. "We have become food experts. We are expanding our role as specialists in demographics, merchandising, in-store production, safe food handling, kitchen designs, storage designs, productivity, lighting, décor, equipment energy efficiency, building energy efficiency, life cycles, and on and on. Our design process runs deep into the facility, the equipment, the merchandising and the operations of our customers' stores."

Mehmert notes that 3D design continues to fully define the future of his customers' new stores or remodels by allowing retailers to experience the store before design is even complete, thus eliminating costly changes.

"We are also receiving better support from the equipment manufacturers related to design, with departmental representations that allow for greater review and merchandising exercises than ever before," he says. "The ability to define materials and colors continues to improve as software and hardware continue to evolve. All of this works toward eliminating delays, lowering construction costs and eliminating equipment change orders, as we now have the ability to define the store for our customers at such a higher level."

According to Mehmert, differentiation is still an everyday challenge, and the term accurately defines what customers expect from the firms they hire: a store that showcases their uniqueness, clearly defines the brand, highlights strengths, describes



MATERIAL DISCOVERY
King Retail Solutions' design for Whole Foods Market's Davie, Fla., location — which earns top honors as the Best Organic/Natural Format store in *PC's* 2015 Store Design Contest (page 34) — incorporates distinct materials, colors and destination headlines.



community involvement, and defines commitment to local or organic or low prices or fresh, all through “a design that will stand the test of time, be energy-efficient, environmentally friendly and, of course, affordable to build — and have it done before Thanksgiving! Some things never change.”

At GSP, in Clearwater, Fla., VP of Design Services Steven Cohen says, “We provide the complete package, from high-level conceptual ideas through design, and the ability to execute it in the store.”

Cohen adds that GSP’s cohesive branding and marketing services include food photography, trend analysis, in-store point-of-purchase graphics, and industrial design in the form of fixture solutions, lighting and G7 Master printing.

“We’re constantly evolving, like our clients,” Cohen says. “GSP just acquired Great Big Pictures, an 80,000-square-foot large-format graphics production lab, which doubled our capacity and increased our industrial design ability. We also gained an in-house R&D team, extra branding strategy support, and virtual animated 3D store environmental-modeling and architectural-rendering capabilities.”

He notes an increase in professional food photography, because foodservice providers understand that if it’s done well, with great lighting and lifestyle propping that’s suitable to the brand, the visuals can increase revenue.

“We’ve also been having a lot of private label discussions with clients,” he says, “helping them to look at their offerings from not only a value

basis, but [also] as an extension of their brand. The conversations have been eye-opening when they realize the world of possibilities.”

Cohen sees as a continuing trend that of the small, local market feel becoming more upscale and creating a community destination where shoppers want to stay and have coffee, brunch, lunch or dinner; consult with a nutritionist; or take a cooking class. “We see the brands using consumer data to continually evolve, and growing their private label as a differentiator,” he observes.

At King Retail Solutions, in Eugene, Ore., Creative Director Christopher Studach says that the retail food industry is realizing that what a supermarket is at its core will be elemental in all expressions of the store.

“Because of this, we are certainly going into more levels of market conceptualization than ever before,” he notes, “touching more aspects of the overall project. Our jobs typically include dives to really understand the greater retail environment and the customer it serves, and execute at a broader and deeper level. More than simply design, we are integral in helping the retailer conceive and remake their business persona.”

According to Studach, the more a really good design firm can guide a retailer throughout the process — strategic, tactical and developmental — the more cohesive and powerful the result. “Grocery is in a period of rethinking what a supermarket can and should be,” he says, “and retailers are very

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—Steve Mehmert, Mehmert Store Services Inc.

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With this the case, he continues, King Retail Solutions provides needs assessment, brand concept and development, store planning, interior and exterior design, lighting design, and fulfillment-based concept documentation to bring ideas to reality.

Two design trends he sees in reaction to pressure from industry outsiders and consolidations are to come up with “a wildly successful and profitable format given to rollout potential, and finding a way to ‘localize’ standard formats so that they are relevant and feel authentic to every neighborhood they serve.

“At the same time,” continues Studach, “the rapidly growing consumer savvy and inherent skepticism of customers [are] keeping everyone second-guessing and trying to stay ahead of the curve.”

Therefore, the onus on retailers, he feels, is to keep bringing their A game in all areas of the store, including design that sets them apart, looks great, is shoppable, conveys value and stands the test of time.

According to David Yehuda, president of Kings Point, N.Y.-based DY Design: “Helping with the business-making decisions to increase profitability is an example of how and why supermarket design

services have expanded. In the old days, designers were rarely involved in the layout of the store. It was mainly store décor.”

Now, he says, designer involvement with store layout and décor is the norm, with both playing an integral role in how profitable the store will become. New concepts for the store’s traffic flow are directly affecting sales, in addition to the décor, image creation, branding and atmosphere.

“Today,” notes Yehuda, “customers are more knowledgeable about the benefits of fresh food and organic products, so the merchandising is being modified. As a result, the whole image of the store is being created by branding that has gravitated towards using natural materials and natural design elements. Creating a more natural overall look to the store must follow.”

At King-Casey, in Westport, Conn., Principal Howland Blackiston asserts: “For supermarkets, it’s no longer business as usual. Today, the competition is greater and more diverse. New supermarket concepts come along that look different, shop differently, and provide enhanced environments that are more fun and enjoyable to shop, and better meet the unique needs of Millennials — the fastest-growing customer

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MOVEABLE FEAST

This rolling kiosk from GSP is part of the company's design services package.

segment — specifically to educate and entertain.”

New supermarket designs, he adds, recognize that wide aisles, bright lighting and thoughtful space planning are no longer enough. The competitive challenge has become diverse, cutting-edge and complex, with the result that supermarket design services have expanded in response.

“We are a retail consulting and design firm,” Blackiston emphasizes, “so many of the services we offer take place before any design work is underway: strategic positioning, market research, audits and assessments, competitive benchmarking, and innovative ideation. It’s the resulting findings, strategies and business objectives that dictate the design services we provide. King-Casey’s design services include naming, branding, merchandising design, in-store customer communications, store design and layout, kitchen planning and design, and so on.”

In the future, according to Blackiston, supermarket design efforts will focus on those things that respond to the needs, wants, expectations and behaviors of Millennials, including design solutions that address the “wow” factor; the need to feel informed, educated and entertained; the daily, active pursuit of wellness; technology knowledge; the



brand’s commitment to the improvement of social, economic and environmental issues; and the need to be heard through social media. **PG**

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