

Title: A brief history of VM: the problems, possibilities, and progress?

Abstract:

Visual Merchandising(VM) has developed from the days of stallholders and shopkeepers best displaying their wares, and the development of plate-glass revealing huge display opportunities for 19<sup>th</sup> century department stores, to today's store retailing as the best means of communicating the brand, attracting attention, and helping to sell merchandise.

The least quantifiable element of fashion retailing and marketing, VM tends to suffer most in adverse economic conditions and is sometimes subsumed in to store operations or fashion retail where it finds an unhappy home. Although 'window display' courses have long existed, today its practitioners are drawn from many disciplines including: fine art, textiles, theatre design, fashion, graphics, and more recently dedicated an undergraduate-level VM courses, and this reveals the multidisciplinary aspect of the role, which is tailored to the needs of a specific brand. It is not just about windows: it also encompasses the entire store, from in-store display to exterior display including events, and done well it is, and should be, in essence the life-blood of a retail company. It has an impact on buying and merchandising as well as being as a direct cost, of which good VM practitioners are usually mindful, given investment of time, money, and (always) limited resources.

Today, with the increase in on-line retailing - which at present must be considered as akin to moving from a beautiful store showcasing desirable merchandise into the behind-the-scenes stockroom - it is under threat as stores continue to board-up windows to increase sales space, and reduce exterior displays. Technology has encroached on VM – occasionally with delightful results – but more often creating a new and potentially more expensive need to be satisfied: showcasing the most recent runway show is not sufficient to satisfy today's discerning customers. This paper concludes by taking a look at the growing importance of branding in retailing today and argues that VM is needed more than ever.