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- Columnists
- Connecticut
- Education
- Health
- Latest News
- Lottery
- Nation/World
- Photo/Video Gallery
- Politics
- Special Reports
- Today's Courant
- Towns
- Traffic
- Weather

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- Arts & Theater
- Attractions
- Columnists
- Dining
- Events
- Movies
- Music
- TV & Radio
- TV Listings

Sports

- Auto Racing
- Baseball
- Basketball
- College Sports
- Columnists
- Golf
- Football
- High School Sports
- Hockey
- Husky Hardcores
- Scores & Stats
- UConn Football

Business

- Columnists
- Real Estate
- Technology
- Web 100

Lifestyle

- Books
- Celebrity
- Columnists
- Food
- New England Guide
- Northeast Magazine
- Style & Shopping
- Travel

Opinion

- Columnists
- Commentary
- Editorials
- Letters
- Other Opinion

BUSINESS

Visual Aides

July 14, 2003

By SUJATA SRINIVASAN, Special To The Courant

Amanda Doyle loves to go shopping. She basks in the alluring window dressings and inviting merchandise, displayed in a burst of warm colors.

"Trendy and fashionable clothes in the window display is what initially draws me into a store," the 22-year-old from Hebron said recently at the Buckland Hills Mall in Manchester.

Visual merchandisers await moments such as these, when their bright and captivating arrangements bring customers into their stores.

But unlike sales associates, visual staff work like elves behind the scenes. They take stores through a metamorphosis from one season to another, one fashion trend to another.

"Visual people are vital to our store," said Jim Kopp, manager of the J.C. Penney store at Westfarms mall. "They make the merchandise come alive for the customer. Without that, we'd be like anyplace else. So we make the visual department highly regarded in the store."

Cindy Ketz, who has been the visual manager at the store for six years, supervises three visual specialists.

Ketz and her team put the store together, ensuring that the shelves are balanced and symmetrical to the customer's eye.

She points to a wall displaying jeans and shirts. "If you fold that wall in half, it matches perfectly," she said.

In the home department, Ketz creates soft and hard visual statements. Bedding, towels and sheets are grouped; cookware and tableware are grouped to give a hard look.

Penney expects all of its stores to look visually similar and convey the same message to customers. It achieves this through a central visual team in Dallas that issues guidelines to Ketz and her peers at other Penney stores.

The guidelines consist of photographs and planograms - diagrams showing how and where products should be placed.

Consistency comes at a price. "We've lost quite a bit of creativity because they really want us to follow the

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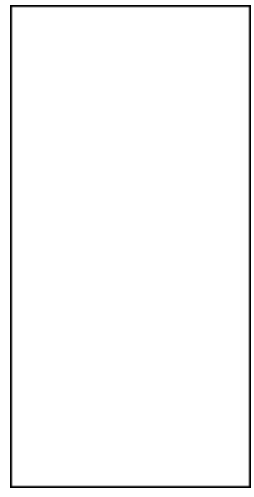
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corporate direction," Ketz said.

But she has some creative freedom. She created a plan for tiering and angling shoes on a table. Her district manager forwarded the plan to the corporate office to show how she was making the schematic work in her store.

Ketz also encourages ingenuity. When visual specialist Jessica Primeau did not receive the corporate planogram for a line of clothing, Primeau created a display based on a magazine ad for the brand.

"She did not get the plan, but she had insight into retail and what customers are looking for," Ketz said.

Kopp said visual managers at Penney earn between \$30,000 and \$60,000 annually, depending on their experience. Visual specialists earn \$8 to \$13 an hour.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics says there were 76,000 merchandise displayers and window trimmers in the United States in 2000. The median income was \$20,930. The highest 10 percent earned more than \$31,130.

Executive salaries in the profession are much higher. A PricewaterhouseCoopers report on retail industry salaries in 1999 said top visual merchandising professionals and executives earned an average of \$80,754.

Tom Raguse, president of the Houston-based Association of Store Design and Visual Merchandising Representatives, despairs that many retail chains consider visual people unnecessary overhead that a centralized corporate team can replace.

However, retailers such as Pier 1 Imports and Nordstrom acknowledge their value.

Todd Loscalzo, regional visual merchandise manager for Nordstrom's Northeast region, oversees the work of visual managers in nine stores.

Loscalzo receives guidelines from a Seattle-based corporate team that comes up with themes, fashion trends, graphics and signs. He travels from store to store, reviewing the appearance of each store with visual managers.

He also sends them a package of photographs and guidelines. However, the in-store visual team has the freedom to modify or build upon it.

Nordstrom merchandises each store differently, based on customer response to employees and regional buyers.

"Our stores are not identical because each of our markets is unique," Loscalzo said. "So the experience is going to be unique each time you enter one of our stores. There's not necessarily a specific plan where everything's going to go, but depending on our market and who our customer is, the store experience is different."

Stores in warm-weather markets carry different

merchandise from stores in cold-weather markets. Although there is similarity in color, signs and graphics, it is up to Nordstrom's departments to display merchandise as they see fit, based on the products.

Loscalzo joined Nordstrom nine years ago as a visual trimmer in Paramus, N.J. He and J.C. Penney's Ketz were not formally trained. They learned on the job, as did Alexandra Knott, divisional visual merchandiser at Pier 1 Imports.

"There's not a lot of structured merchandising training for us," Knott said. "The kind of training I receive is on management and leadership. The visual part is really a one-on-one, hands-on-the-job kind."

Knott oversees five New England states, comprising 70 stores, and oversees the work of three regional managers. She works out of the Norwood office in Massachusetts, and receives visual guidelines from the corporate team in Fort Worth, Texas.

These are not planograms. As at Nordstrom, these are loose tools that allow for creativity at the store level. Some retailers display merchandise in the same location across all stores, said Knott, who believes that each Pier 1 store manager knows best which product sells the most in that store.

"What if the customer doesn't want what's in the prominent display area? We give our stores general direction on color, seasonality and fashion trends, and then we let them go for it," Knott said.

The store managers also decide where the graphics and advertising posters go on the wall, depending on the store's layout.

Knott conducts training programs for regional merchandisers and store managers. She teaches them how to bring emotion into the visual display.

"In some cases, you're dealing with people who've dealt with numbers their whole life. Visual merchandising is all about emotions - what customers are feeling when they walk into the store, and what kind of feeling we want to create."

Knott has been in visuals for 13 years, six of them at Pier 1. One of the fun things about her job is constantly rushing ahead of the seasons. "By the time I set up Christmas in my home, I'm over it!" she said, laughing.

She thinks her profession is underestimated.

"[Customers] aren't even aware of it," she said. "They are more aware of salespeople and products. They're less aware of how the store's put together. But it's what makes you buy."

Sujata Srinivasan is a free-lance writer who lives in

Manchester.

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