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THE MANY FRAGRANCES OF RETAIL DESIGN

*L2M, Inc. Takes Store Design Beyond The Aesthetic
to Create Beautiful Spaces for National Fragrance Retailer*

Retail design takes many shapes and forms. When a designer is working on promoting a single brand identity in multiple locations, markets and regions, often the space offers the starting-point of design. For project manager Brian Donovan and his team at L2M, Inc., an architecture firm in Glen Burnie, Md., the art of maintaining the client's concept where competing building code requirements or a landlord's criteria is dictated is something that consistently challenges and inspires.

An example of this inspiration comes from L2M's client Perfumania, America's largest fragrance retailer. L2M collaborates with Perfumania to develop and renovate more than 40 retail locations per year, reinforcing a consistent brand identity that incorporates unique touches of personality that is consistent with the character of the location.

In each location across the country, L2M creates designs that promote Perfumania's fundamental branding principles while working with landlords, building officials and retail contractors to ensure the design advances the interests of all stake-holders. While the process may seem to employ a "cookie cutter" approach, no two locations are ever the same.

Evaluating the Existing Conditions

The first step in L2M's process is determining the type of "package" the design team is dealing with. While the Perfumania identity and store design remains consistent, the size, shape, style and character of the existing conditions (delivered conditions) – the area where the design project takes place – is different from location to location. In the critical early stages of design, Donovan and his team are constantly evaluating and assessing the type of environment they are working with.

"Once we determine the style of space we are dealing with – the interior of a mall, a shopping center, new construction, existing space – our team goes in to assess what we can salvage in the project as well as what needs to be removed," said Donovan. "As we evaluate the situation and determine what can be used, saved or scrapped, the design elements begin to take shape."

Nearly 90 percent of Perfumania projects are designed in existing locations where other retailers have had a presence. As such, leases are often written for Perfumania to accept the space "as is" and L2M must evaluate systems left behind that still have value and can be leveraged in the new design. Each location requires a site survey, and in some cases, a variety of contractors are brought in to assist in the evaluation of electrical panels and HVAC systems (for example). Once reviewed, L2M will provide the landlord and client an evaluation of what is usable in the space and will incorporate existing systems into the design or specifies the removal of the unusable items in the design plan. This process significantly reduces time and funding needed for the renovation.

Once the plan to incorporate or remove existing elements is complete, the design requirements are established and prototypical elements of the brand identity – including signage, fixturing and finishes and the overall aesthetic – begins to take shape.

Incorporating Existing Look Into New Feel

Once the space has been evaluated and stripped down to the "white box," L2M begins incorporating the retailer's brand identity into the design of the space. Because Perfumania is a national chain, the overall look and feel remains consistent, but each store design must be considered an individual effort due to the requirements of the tenant criteria outlined by the developer and any local code amendments where the store is located. In each case, L2M works closely with the landlord's team to ensure the integrity of the space created is consistent with the overall character of the property. With L2M typically working in concert with Perfumania and a landlord, a considerable amount of time is saved thanks to L2M's collaborative design style. More than ever before, both the client and the landlord are watching the bottom line and it is critical that space considerations meet the requirements of the landlord / developer while brand identity meets expectations of the client.

Throughout the design collaboration between L2M, the landlord and Perfumania, L2M is also working behind the scenes to secure the various building permits that are necessary to begin work immediately. While most Perfumania projects are built-out within an existing space, having all the proper permits on hand when work is ready to begin is a vital step.

"Having the proper permits at the beginning of a project can make or break a project," said Donovan. "Because time is money on every project we engage, knowing what needs to be secured before the work begins allows all the moving parts to begin together and start right away. We work diligently to avoid a "dark rent" situation or when the design and construction process takes longer than allowed by the lease where a tenant must begin to pay rent before the store opens and generates sales."

Strong Team Design Leads to Budget Impact

Designing more than 150 Perfumania stores over the past five years, Donovan says the key to developing strong projects is to build teams or studios that work together on more than one project at a time for a client like Perfumania. Unlike a residential project that is built at the lowest price with expensive add-on items to increase profitability, each Perfumania is built with similar materials and prototypical elements to create an economy of scale which helps to keep building costs in line and construction schedules timely. With the understanding that profitability rests solely with the flow of the project, the teams assembled by L2M understand how each component of the design impacts the timeline and budget. With a keen eye on synergy and efficiencies, time is the key detail, significantly impacting a project's bottom line.

"Team building is critical with our Perfumania work," said Donovan. "Understanding the team of people working on the design coupled with the various tertiary people who move in and out of the project allows us to anticipate needs, understand the various languages on a site and helps incorporate best practices designed to impact the budget."

Strong teams also allow for quick brand identity updates. As is typical in the world of retail, a brand identity or the identity of a client's curb appeal will generally evolve over the time of a standard lease. As the lease ends and redesign is discussed, L2M team members can easily identify brand identity updates quickly to save time, energy. What's more, if the scope of work requires a complete redesign, teams familiar with the existing space can work quickly to meet the design requirements of the new lease structure.

Designing spaces for a well-known national retail brand like Perfumania may seem cookie-cutter on the surface but beyond the bright lights and polished exterior is a well thought out plan that involves countless decisions and a tireless attention to detail. Each project is tackled by a team of seasoned designers ready to take on new challenges and unique opportunities. The result is a recognizable design that creates an inviting environment for Perfumania shoppers as well as a solution that maximizes the "white box" and reinforces the character of the existing center.