

Local retailers have woken up to the 'wow factor' of the window display, and its vital role in luring shoppers into their stores. It's a make-believe world that promises a new, improved you.

Their displays pull us in with promises of a more exciting, luxurious, stylish and, ultimately, more satisfying life. Yet as global economies wax and wane, shop windows have to work harder than ever at being more inviting and engaging. Global consumer practices have changed substantially in recent years owing to economic influences, internet shopping and new brands emerging – and shoppers are becoming savvier and expecting to experience a brand before expressing any loyalty by buying it.

Trend forecaster and founder of Flux Trends, Dion Chang, described this new trend in his Retail Revolution presentation last November. "The relationship between brands and shoppers has shifted completely. It is imperative that retailers create an enhanced experience based on brand values, design, interactive elements and exciting and relevant merchandising," he said.

You may not be aware of it but artistically arranged scenes in a shop window are designed to appeal to you on many levels. Whether you are a career climber, concerned parent, food and wine connoisseur or dedicated follower of fashion, there's a window dresser who has you in mind.

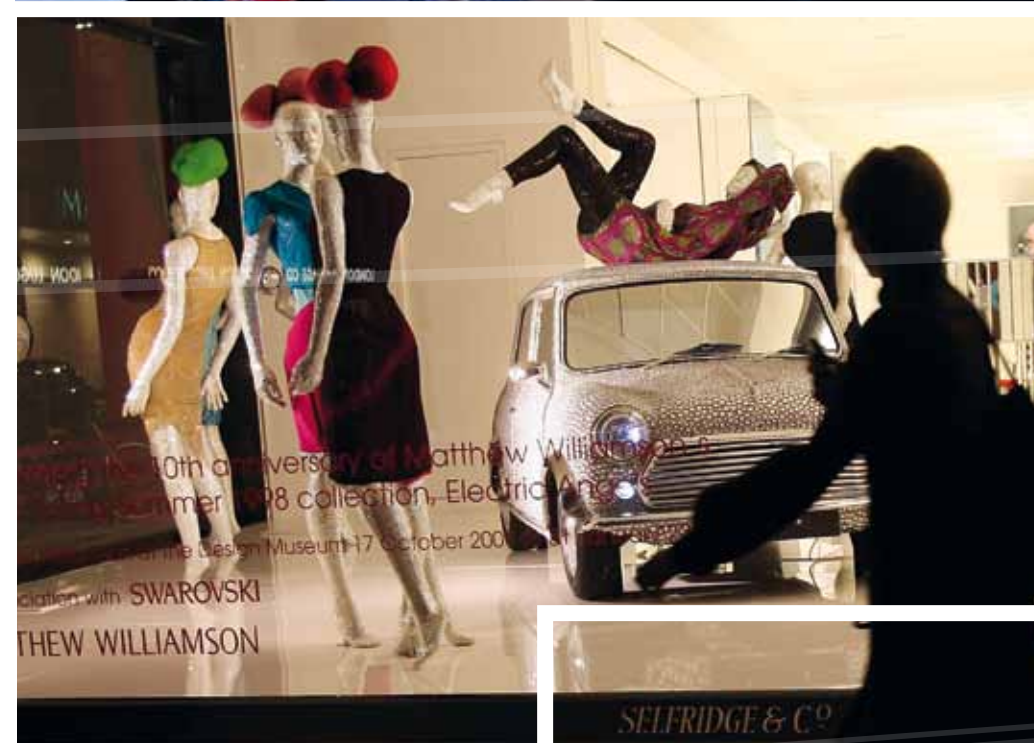
COMPETITIVE EDGE

Visual merchandising is part of daily conversation abroad as retailers constantly try to outdo each other with creative window campaigns. Visit London or New York and one of your must-see trips will probably be to check out the windows of Selfridges and Harrods in London or Barneys and Macy's in New York.

The UK's Mary Portas, an expert in retail and brand communication, has been a leading proponent of the culture of subtly engaging consumers. Mary has dominated her field since the 1980s and is now one of the most influential figures in the development of the British High Street. She has led the creative direction of British megastores such as Harrods, Topshop and Harvey Nichols.

# THE GLASS FRONTIER

BY CHIPO MAPONDERA  
PORTRAITS DIAAN DE BEER, BRETT RUBIN



Clockwise from top left: the 2011 festive season windows at Harrods; mannequins get the Kate Moss look in Topshop's windows; Solie Herselman does visual merchandising for high-end international brands in South Africa; a Dorothy lookalike and giant red shoes at Harrods; Barneys in New York is using live models in its windows this year; an eye-catchingly fun and colourful display at Selfridges.

PHOTOGRAPHS GALLO/GETTY IMAGES



*'Tomorrow's retailing will be much less about product, and far more about giving customers a retail experience.'* – Mary Portas

Thanks to her influence, visual merchandising is a hot topic with the British public, who have enjoyed her unabashed criticism of high-street retailers in her award-winning television series *Mary Queen of Shops* and, most recently, *Portas: Secret Shopper*. She has published two merchandising guides, *Window: The Art of Retail Display* and *How to Shop*, and contributes a weekly column, 'Shop!', in the Saturday *Telegraph* magazine, which has spawned the annual *Telegraph Best Shops in Britain Awards*.

Reinvention is popular among British visual merchandisers, and Topshop is a firm favourite with customers. It recently ran a campaign in collaboration with style icon and fashion editor of *Wonderland* magazine, Julia Sarr-Jamois. The campaign was a hit: shoppers wanted to buy into her style using the 'Julia Sarr-Jamois Edits' concept, which was promoted through a dedicated window at Topshop's Oxford Street store.

In Paris, über lifestyle boutique Colette celebrated its 15th birthday in March with the Colette Carnivale, a weekend of art, music and fashion that was promoted in the store's windows with hundreds of shiny balloons, art installations and the exhibition '150/15', featuring the cartoon character Darcel Disappoints, created by Australian-born artist Craig Redman. Colette is known for breaking boundaries with its constantly changing displays, inspiring New York photographer Todd Selby to camp in the store window in order to launch his 2010 book, *The Selby is in Your Place*.

The development of young design talent is not being overlooked. In 2007, Louis Vuitton held a competition at the Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design in London for that year's Christmas window display. 'Latitude 48.914/Longitude 02.286', the winning concept by Marcos Villalba and Christopher Lawson, was installed at Louis Vuitton stores around the world – including the Sandton store window, constructed by Sollie Herselman, the visual consultant for some of the most elite international brands in South Africa – providing a platform many

young designers can only imagine.

Currently Selfridges, a store renowned for its dreamy windows, has relaunched its 'Bright Young Things' campaign, giving budding window designers a chance to showcase their vision to as many as 500 000 shoppers a day at its Oxford Street flagship.

Of course, ideas like these not only encourage extraordinary creativity but also offer great PR opportunities for stores by creating larger campaigns around window concepts and enhancing the brand's identity.

## LOOKS COUNT

One of South Africa's most beloved brands, Woolworths, has become such a key part of our lifestyle we refer to it as 'Woolies', buy the ingredients for the suggested meals shown in store windows, and fancy being a rock chick in a pair of hot red RE: Jeans à la Zoë Kravitz, whose image dominated store windows during one of the brand's most memorable campaigns.

Errol Solomon, head of store design and visual merchandising, and an industry stalwart since 1981, says, 'Woolworth's aim is to demonstrate to shoppers how to put together their entire look, as well as highlighting items that will enhance their lifestyle.'

As one of the country's largest retailers, Woolworths has an advanced system behind its in-store image: windows change regularly and reflect specific promotions and campaigns according to three annual themes. Displays take half a day to implement, under the auspices of the merchandising team, who contribute to translating the wider marketing campaign in stores across the country.

'Visual merchandising is integral to the commercial success of a brand,' emphasises Errol. 'It is in-store that consumers directly engage with the product, and we must ensure that this encounter has a positive visual impact that makes the customer want to buy.'

Luxury brands plunge us into the deep end of a fantasy wonderland, aspects of which we procure in the shape of a Louis Vuitton clutch, MaxMara leather pencil skirt or polka-dot Wolford tights. Sollie is an expert



Above & right: Gift Nxgeke, who studied in London, draws customers into local Mango stores with his displays. Opposite top: The latest 'Arrows' window at Louis Vuitton in Sandton is the same as all the LV stores around the world.



in conceptualising highly theatrical displays and creating dreamlike, inspirational images that draw us into high-end stores.

'I have a unique approach for each company, based on the brand's merchandising,' he says.

Louis Vuitton's window themes, which are designed in Paris, are launched on the same day worldwide – so wherever you may be, the displays are uniform. The current theme, Arrows, is an intricate design of 221 rainbow-coloured arrows converging towards their target, a Louis Vuitton product. The Sandton City store display took two days to construct; when I stand in front of the window, I am in awe of the intricate detail in the props and the installation itself, which is where Sollie's expertise is invaluable.

At Mango, visual merchandiser Gift Nxgeke aims for up-to-the-minute fashion and the latest trends for which the brand is renowned. Guidelines are provided each season in the form of Mango's international merchandising manual. 'My job is not simply putting clothing on a mannequin,' he says, 'so I'm able to maintain a significant level of creative licence.'

'The windows are inspired by the current collection and latest trends, which I need to understand and be able to translate.' A window display may take Gift two days to complete, with daily adjustments according to sales. He refers to a weekly sales report and adjusts his product focus based on 'what appeals to shoppers, as well as promoting less popular ranges'. International visual merchandisers visit Mango's stores around the world every six to eight weeks to ensure that the brand's aesthetic is being successfully represented.

## SPARKING THE SENSES

Dion Chang highlights the importance of creating a space that intrigues the consumer's every sense, and entering a Crabtree & Evelyn store is that type of experience. Customers are enthralled by the sight of the lush window display promoting the new La Source range, but the experience is heightened by the scents that suffuse the store. Currently you will catch a hint of orange blossom, jasmine, palm leaves and sea air from the India Hicks Island Living fragrance.

The brand's South African owner, Michele Higginson, says, 'If the store is unattractive, it affects the brand's overall success. Crabtree & Evelyn is a traditionally British brand, but the image must be constantly updated to emphasise its luxurious elements.'

Using the brand's international references, visual merchandiser Genevieve Daw translates global promotions into new displays every month. I watch the three-hour process of putting together a window at the Hyde Park store. Using a combination of products and props sourced from around the world, Genevieve focuses on creating balance in the window, which is scrutinised from all angles once the display is complete. 'It has to make an impact even if it is viewed only peripherally from a distance or from the floor above,' she says.

Crabtree & Evelyn's windows are so important that, during the same week, Genevieve will travel to all the South African stores to tweak the implementation of the concept. Michele attests to how sales increased by 30 percent over a few days due to a few visual adjustments.

## WORLD STANDARD

International concepts are a constant source of inspiration to local visual merchandisers. Sollie attends the Visual Merchandising Expo in Germany and reads global magazines to keep up with trends. Gift describes himself as 'arty', citing international art, fashion and lifestyle as his influences. Errol, who travels overseas three times a year, has a keen interest in technology and the endless opportunities it offers.

Technological innovations are not completely foreign to us. 8ta's 'whispering windows', launched last year by One Digital Media, used technology as an entertaining and



## Learning the ropes

engaging way to draw customers to the store. The displays were functional, allowing shoppers to browse the store's catalogue, and also enticing by making sounds and speech to engage the senses.

Ope Choi, who was visual merchandising manager for Urban Outfitters in London, recently moved to Johannesburg. 'Your job as a visual merchandiser is done when customers can step into a new world,' she says. 'Shopping is about creating a new "you" and this starts with the attraction to the window, then to the store experience and, finally, when the outfit is worn. I think visual merchandising's value to drive sales and feet in store has a lot of room to grow in South Africa,' she adds.

But the tide is turning, and with the establishment of international brands locally, SA retailers are stepping up to meet new standards. 'The industry is becoming more exciting and innovative than when I started in 1989,' says Solly, 'because of the introduction of modern materials and techniques. There is now a more liberated approach to the job.' i

Visual merchandising is one of the most elusive positions in the retail industry, because it has not been popularised as much as other retail careers.

Locally, the main impediment to breaking into visual merchandising is that there is a lack of training at institutions. Mango SA's window whizz Gift Nxgeke, who studied Visual Merchandising & Space Management at the London College of Fashion, benefited from the advanced curriculum at the renowned college and from seeing some of the world's most creative window displays.

Woolworths offers a visual merchandising training programme. 'We are always eager to employ young individuals who show potential and give them the training,' says head of store design Errol Solomon. 'There is a dearth of programmes locally.'

In response to this gap, Sanet Coetzee, who was part of Woolworths' visual merchandising team for 14 years and led the department for the last five years she was there, recently opened VM Central, the country's first SETA-accredited tertiary institute focused on developing the next generation of South African visual merchandisers. The school, at the Woodstock Foundry in Cape Town, offers courses on design principles, working with colour, styling mannequins, lighting and designing windows. <http://vm-central.com>