

Six design lessons from the Apple Store

Here in San Francisco, Apple buffs are rejoicing at finally getting an Apple Store of our very own. (Sure, there's been one across the Bay for months, but it's just not the same.) As the newest of Apple's five "flagship" retail stores, the San Francisco Apple Store reflects the company's latest thinking about how to translate its brand identity from its software and hardware products to the user experience of a retail environment.

There's a lot about the Apple Store experience that we can apply to the design of many other kinds of products — and a few lessons we can take from Apple's missteps as well.

1. Create an experience, not an artifact.

Coaxing visitors up to the second floor of a store is a challenge most retailers have long since given up on. The Apple Store takes up the challenge with a bold statement, making the centerpiece of the store a staircase — a really cool staircase. It's difficult to resist the temptation to set foot on that first solid glass step. Once you're there, you can catch a glimpse of the demo theater at the top of the stairs. And the next thing you know, you've been swept up to the top level before you've even finished (or started!) looking around the first floor yet.

This attention to the customer's line of sight is carried through the whole space. One thing completely obscured from view as you enter the store: the cash registers. It feels more like walking into a hands-on museum than walking into a retail store. Sure, Apple wants to sell products, but their first priority is to make you want the products. And that desire has to begin with your experience of the products in the store.

2. Honor context.

Instead of being organized according to product type — printers over here, cameras over there — the first floor of the store is organized by the context in which people use the products. With digital cameras, photo printers, and Apple's iPhoto software set up together, customers can envision using these products in their own lives. By acknowledging this context in the design of the store, Apple encourages its customers to dream about possibilities.

This acknowledgement of context even carries over to the most mundane part of the Apple Store experience: making a purchase. Cashiers put time and care into the transaction, which makes clear Apple's philosophy that the purchase is not the end of your relationship with them — it's the beginning. This approach feels right when you're buying a computer, but it's a little much when you just want to pop in and grab a FireWire cable. By optimizing the experience to match the context of one type of purchase, Apple may be neglecting other important cases.

3. Prioritize your messages.

The typical retail store is a cacophony of messages: packages, signs, and promotional material are crammed into the customer's field of vision, all jostling and jockeying to catch their attention. The visually spare Apple Store is strikingly different. With rare exceptions, product packages are kept below eye level and relatively few products are on display.

Instead of having to find a place for every message, Apple focuses on the handful of messages that count. Aside from a few strategically placed signs to promote upcoming events, most of the graphics in the store are more general in nature rather than trying to communicate some specific details; more decorative than informational. Product-specific messages are placed and sized so that you notice them after you've already narrowed your focus to a particular product.

4. Institute consistency.

The Apple personality comes through every time the customer encounters the brand, whether on television, in print or outdoor advertising, or through interacting with one of Apple's products. The Apple stores are no different, and Apple is able to project that personality across all these channels by maintaining rigorous consistency of

design.

With all the brushed metallic surfaces on both the exterior and the interior of the store, you can't help but feel as if you're walking inside a product that came off the same assembly line as a PowerBook or an iPod. The grate over the air-conditioning vents may not exactly match the front panel of the Power Mac G5, but the resemblance is undeniable. If the bolts on the staircase and railings seem familiar, you may recognize the design from the neck of your flat-panel iMac. And of course, the graphic and typographic styles throughout the store perfectly match those you'd find in Apple's software interfaces, packaging, and advertising.

5. Design for change.

Where rapid change needs to be accommodated, the Apple Store has mechanisms to support it. The front window displays are rigged using simple flat panels mounted on tracks and cables. This system allows the displays to be changed quickly and easily (and, one would guess, economically) while still allowing a diverse range of possibilities for grabbing the attention of passersby.

It's unclear how well the store as a whole will accommodate change, however. In the last six years, the aesthetic of Apple's products has been overhauled twice: first, when Apple broke from the industry-standard beige boxes with the curvy, colored translucent plastics of the original iMac in 1998; then again when they moved to their current white-and-metallic look, starting with the Titanium PowerBook G4 in 2001.

What will become of the interior design of the Apple stores when the next shift in product design hits? Will the stores close down one by one for renovation to bring them in line with Apple's new design direction? Or will they remain a snapshot of Apple's current motifs, growing further and further outdated?

6. Don't forget the human element.

A retail store isn't just made up of shelves and tables and lights. The people who staff the store form an integral part of the overall experience. Apple Store employees don't look like run-of-the-mill retail workers. Instead of name tags, they have business cards. And they all carry iPods on their belts, creating the impression that they don't just work for Apple — they live the lifestyle Apple is selling to customers. Apple's retail workers are brand emissaries.

This human element is also the San Francisco Apple Store's greatest shortcoming. Apple's brand and products promise a kind of experience with Apple personnel — enthusiastic, approachable, helpful — that the staff does not fulfill. Certainly, some staff members are accommodating, but you're just as likely to encounter a representative who seems aloof and disinterested. Some answer hard questions willingly and thoroughly, while others walk away without a word.

In those moments, you're reminded that this is, after all, just another retail store. It's a letdown after the expectations built up by the lavish attention to every other detail of the store experience. Design will only take you so far; to create a total brand experience, your customer service has to embody the same virtues you've instilled in your design.

I had planned to illustrate this article with photographs of the relevant details from inside the store — if Apple Store staff would attend to customer needs with the same vigor and alacrity that they enforce the company's unexplained no-photography policy, they'd take a major step toward delivering the retail experience their designers intended.

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To keep up with popular demand, Jesse's seminar "The Elements of User Experience" has just been moved to a larger venue. Join Jesse [on July 22 in New York City](#) for a full day of practical advice and strategic thinking on today's user experience challenges.

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