



Minding the Store

**Youngstown State University
Bookstore Beats Industry
Benchmarks for Store Fixture Design
on a \$12.80 Budget**

**by
David Rood**

Youngstown State University (YSU) has taken a fresh look at the bookstore's strategic positioning of departments and store service layout. They have advanced an operational plan to upgrade its image and to entice the community to shop the entire store, not just one or two departments.

Open in August 2005, the total focus of the YSU Bookstore is to serve the present and future needs of students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community with the emphasis of "Service to the Customer." The highly functional and operational new campus bookstore, which includes advanced technology, methodology, planning and design, had to overcome the limitations imposed by the architectural plan. The original design had a 12-foot-wide corridor through the center of the store to link the existing adjacent Kilcawley Center with the new 70,000-square-foot Andrews Student Recreation & Wellness Center.

Selecting a Designer/Consultant

The firm of Strollo Architects of Youngstown, Ohio, and the bookstore administration wanted to find a store planner who could incorporate the 12-foot-wide corridor into the Bookstore to make it a functional single unit operation. We knew two separate stores would effect sales, as students would not want to shop one location for textbooks and the other for general merchandise.

In 2003, YSU made the decision to continue to maintain an institutionally-owned and operated campus bookstore within



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– Michael Lopez

the Kilcawley Center. The rationale was to retain the net returns generated by the bookstore for the University to better serve its students, and to minimize the prices they would pay.

In March 2004, Chuck Sabatino, Director of the YSU bookstore, attended the Campus Market Expo (CAMEX) in San Antonio, Texas, looking to find information that could assist the University and the architect. He visited with store planning and design, and fixture manufacturing firms to learn about their companies and how they work with university bookstores. After the convention, Strollo Architects sent an RFP to seven firms. After reviewing the submitted bids, YSU and Strollo narrowed their prospects to two store planning firms. YSU administrators and Strollo representatives then presented their selection to the University to garner consensus and retain the company that would best serve YSU and the campus community. That choice was Michael Lopez Design, Inc (MLDI) of Troy, Michigan.

The University wanted not only a design concept but also a marketing program to ensure its ability to beat collegiate bookstore benchmarks. YSU's concerns included establishing a sound plan to maintain and achieve high incomes and profits, without sacrificing student friendly margins or pricing. YSU and Strollo made it absolutely clear that they wanted a consultant who would not forget who the customer was, why the firm was there, and what the expectation levels were.

For an institutional retail store, control is key to its success, along with marketing, advertising, in-store promotions, pricing, transactions and return servicing. Planning, merchandising, and design are the strategies that recognize potential for improvement with remodeling/expansion store programs that address levels of improved service, control, presentation of product mix, flexibility, reduction of sales staff headcounts seasonally and after Rush, and organization of the footprint of the property to promote and drive sales. Day-to-day and semester-after-semester, receiving and staging combined with selling/nonselling operations, textbook buyback, volumes of new/used textbooks, and marketing are baseline factors that require foresight and backroom experience. Combining vision, image, bottom-line results and ROI requires a seasoned veteran consultant dedicated to raising the bar and improving industry standards for cost saving. Lopez's design helped YSU drive traffic around the perimeter of the store (considered valuable vertical merchandising real-estate) while creating a fixture package that was well below \$12.80 per square foot. This included all freestanding store fixtures and custom casework.

Quality & Cost

“National benchmarking for book stores of this quality range from \$20 to \$25 per square foot for store fixtures and custom casework,” said Michael Lopez. “After 40 years of experience in the retail planning, design, and merchandising field, along



with manufacturing, I think we can beat that.” Lopez had just returned to serving the collegiate bookstore market after five years as Director of Fixture Design and Development for K-Mart Corporation in Troy, Michigan, to reduce SKU fixture cost and hardware. His success in creating profit-enhancing designs for Washington State University (Pullman), and for the University of Kansas (Lawrence) prior to joining K-Mart were persuasive factors in YSU’s selection of MLDI to work on the project.

“I always seek to incorporate a sense of Retail Theater into the plan,” Lopez said. “I design durable fixtures but place emphasis on the merchandise, without sacrificing image or quality. The key is to design and engineer store fixtures and equipment that can withstand the rigors of day-to-day operations and of seasonal movement, and that can flex with inventories to give the perception that the store is well stocked when the selling season is winding down. The use all of visual stimulants – the bells and whistles – that encourage the shopper to stop, look at, and pick up the merchandise is the first step in creating impulse purchase and creating a customer that will return to the bookstore with family and friends.”

A store planner’s first obligation to the client is to learn as much as possible in the shortest period of time, and the best instructor is the client. No one knows customers better than the storekeeper. Also, the planner must have the ability to observe existing operations and to look for opportunities to reduce transaction time. The period of time for sales transactions and the ease of exiting the store make up the last vivid image of the store experience that customers takes with them. Whether or not they will return when they have more impulse discretionary dollars to spend depends on good facility design.

Teamwork Works

Chuck Sabatino, director of YSU Bookstore worked closely with the consultant to gather information necessary for analyzing the project and developing an economical solution to the traffic problem of the corridor through the store. “From the first day on the job, Michael became a team player. He truly understood our ideas, and we knew he would incorporate those ideas into concepts. He took this job personally, and treated it as if it was his own operation,” said Sabatino.

A collateral goal was to create an exciting store environment with Main Street Credibility (MSC) incorporating branding and a sound marketing program to maximize the potential opportunities for solid future economical growth and remain current for the next 10 to 15 years with marginal reinvestment or adjustments for flexing departments and merchandise.

One objective was to bring the buyers and staff out of the backrooms and onto the sales floor, giving an added sense of security and service, while reducing headcounts and giving the perception of additional staffing. Another objective was to create a bookstore that could reflect the heritage of the

University with graphics and featured merchandise that would reflect campus lifestyle.

The University wanted a store layout that would allow the community to shop the entire store on both sides of the corridor yet allow the bookstore to close off the textbook area after Rush and turn the textbook business into a desk service operation. This was accomplished by partially closing the 12-foot-wide textbook entrance with 11-foot-high glass sliding doors and positioning a desk on heavy-duty wheels, helping to reduce cost of floor coverage staffing. Also included in the 16,000-square-foot space is a 1,000-square-foot convenience store that will be open to the community and the Recreation & Wellness Center long after the bookstore had closed for the day. The convenience store offerings include beverage service, snacks, and healthful frozen microwavable entrées, with special merchandise and apparel appealing to the patrons of the Wellness & Fitness Center. The overhead door at the service counter also looks into the convenience store, allowing a sense of added security. The 12-foot store entrances to the textbook and general sales merchandise sides of the store open directly opposite from each other creating a seamless navigational path for the community to pass through the corridor. Perimeter wall and aisle signage with large, color, campus-life graphics are used extensively throughout the store to promote traffic flow.

YSU's existing 20-year-old store lacked excitement. Everyone involved wanted a new store that would have every merchandising opportunity to flex the display fixtures and have the ability to close off the checkouts after Rush, while still maintaining control over the street entrance of the store, the corridor through the store, and the textbook department and convenience store.

Overcoming Problems of the Old Bookstore

The existing 12,000 square-foot Bookstore had come to the end of its usefulness. Backup merchandise was in the stockroom, making restocking difficult. The receiving dock was limited in space, and there was no room for staging goods. The store had little visual appeal and was dark and under-illuminated with incandescent down-lighting. The textbook portion of the store was difficult to secure, and all offices for the business were behind stockroom walls. The existing teal décor and carpet did not reflect YSU colors or icon identification. The gondola counter had outlived its amortization lifecycle and lacked structural strength.

In collaborating on the layout and design of the new bookstore, each idea for the traffic movement through the space with checkpoints for security was discussed. Chuck Sabatino was insistent that the needs of the entire store be addressed, and that the plan be flexible enough to meet the changing needs of the campus community. MLDI was able to illustrate YSU's ideas during each meeting, indicating that the goal to create a bookstore for tomorrow, not just for today, were clear. YSU wanted to have brand identity worked into the bookstore without compromising the design, and the team



did not want just another vanilla box or rubber-stamped store that is so common with independent collegiate bookstores. They wanted to add warmth and richness to the bookstore's environment.

"If a store is planned to focus on the merchandise and not the fixtures, then customers focus on the merchandise," Lopez said. "In order to create MSC, a store must be planned to entice the shopper to spend longer periods of time in the store, while at the same time spending impulsive discretionary dollars." Functionality with flexibility is planned into components of store fixturing systems. The bookstore is welcoming and inviting, and is geared to generate sales with minimum adjustments from season to season. It is full of sight-lines for the community to focus on and attract their attention to merchandise.

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Chuck Sabatino

A New Look for a New Bookstore

The new bookstore has street exposure – a sweeping semi-circular storefront that allows window displays with featured merchandising on mannequins and platform displayers. The



corridor has floor-to-ceiling glass show windows inviting the community to come in and shop. It is a bookstore of 16,000 square feet designed to have flexibility within departments, and to build in features that, as the business grows, the fixture plan can be easily adjusted to accommodate additional SKU merchandise in the future. Floor counters were designed so extensions can be inserted to increase linear footage of shelving to accommodate textbooks. Many other fixtures are on heavy duty wheels. During Rush, the front of the store has 12 point-of-sale (POS) locations to expedite sales transactions and 4 POS positions at the service counter and encourage additional impulse purchases while standing in checkout lines.

The retail space is filled with natural light from the storefront. The storefront's overhead canopy protects the community from inclement weather. The 12 checkout counters

– all with overhead signage – are opposite the clothing, gift, supplies, and trade book areas. The trade book area, anchored with a 12-foot circular YSU Penguin insignia area carpet, is

About Youngstown State University

The YSU Bookstore is an institutionally owned bookstore and proudly supplies the academic community with textbooks, supplies and tools for the mind. It is an institutional store that has served the community for over 30 years, and has adhered closely to its mission of providing goods and services at the lowest possible prices consistent with sound business policy. Its diverse selection of books, collegiate clothing and supplies reflects the wide variety of backgrounds and interests that make Youngstown State University a world-class institution.

accented with black leather club chairs for the book browser. A second seating area is in the clothing department. The adjacent supply department had slatwall installed in most of the back and end panels, allowing for various combinations of pegged or shelf configurations of merchandise categories and for promotion of interselling. All navigational signage includes the Penguin insignia. It's obvious to shoppers that they are in Penguin Land as they enter the store on a large 16-foot-wide power aisle with an imposing 12-foot water-jet ceramic tile cutout of the YSU mascot.

Checkout counters 1 and 2 were designed with heavy-duty wheels that add a tech feeling to the checkout, and they are easily relocated to the stockroom for storage. Two L-shaped counters that replace checkouts 1 and 2 are used as additional workstations and help to control the store's exterior entrance during non-Rush periods. The main service counter at the street door entrance is designed to control the bookdrop bins, lockers for staff, and coin lockers for students. Bringing the staff lockers onto the sales floor eliminate questionable merchandise in lockers.

Within the service area are offices, space for reservations, an ADA sit-down counter, and an electric overhead metal door with a window to the corridor side for exchanges and returns. The service counter also incorporates shallow built-in showcases to display small security items, as do movable fixtures with multiple offerings for additional impulse sales. The impulse fixtures also assist in helping to define each area of transaction and establish a definitive area for service.

The design is both functional and attractive largely due to the planning and collaboration that went into it. "Minding the store" begins with imagination at the time it is conceived. It appears YSU has done just that. ♦

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About Michael Lopez Designs, Inc (MLDI)

MLDI is a provider of schematic store planning and design services to independent collegiate bookstores. Serving retail communities since 1978, MLDI has processed over five million square feet of retail store space, including trade and collegiate bookstores and department, big-box, sporting goods, specialty, and digital format facilities.

Michael J. Lopez, ASID, is a professional member of the American Society of Interior Designers, author of the *Retail Store Planning Design Manual* (2nd ed., Wiley, 1995; ST Publications, 2000 [3rd ed., 2006]), for which he received ASID's 1996 Joel Polsky-Fixtures Furniture Prize for outstanding contribution to interior design through literature or visual communication. He is member in good standing of the National Association of College Auxiliary Services, the National Association of College Stores, Association College Unions International, and National Association Store of Fixture Manufacturers.

For additional information about MLDI and its schematic store planning services, visit www.mlopezdesigns.com