



Designing for Success : Q&A with Lee Wilson, McCowan Design and Manufacturing Ltd.

C-Store Canada recently had the opportunity to speak with Lee Wilson, regional sales manager for McCowan Design and Manufacturing Ltd., on current design trends in convenience stores. McCowan is Canada's leading manufacturer and supplier of innovative, modular merchandising systems, service counters, forecourt and point-of-sales display products to the convenience store, gas bar and foodservice industries.

What are some of the factors affecting C-store design today?

Wilson: The c-store industry is currently undergoing tremendous change in order to adapt to a new marketplace and customer. Store designs are becoming more complex and have many moving parts. Grocery stores, pharmacies and big-box stores such as Walmart now have later hours or are open 24 hours per day, reducing the demand for groceries and general merchandise within c-stores. With petroleum and tobacco margins being squeezed along with competition from traditional retailers, c-stores are seeing a need to upgrade their interiors and increase their offerings to entice customers into their stores. Recent trends within this market include expanding the ready-made and quick serve food and beverage category along with enhancing the in-store shopping experience. This includes visual design, colours, materials and bright lighting to create easy yet strategic pathways so customers can quickly find the products they want and pick up impulse purchases along the way.

Are you seeing changes in store sizes?

Wilson: We have seen a reduction in store sizes within metropolitan centres. Product mix is focused on confectionery and snack foods, while general merchandise and groceries are often omitted. Urban c-stores are becoming "One-Stop Shops" in order to meet their customers' busy lifestyles. The typical customer may get gas, do their ATM banking, get a coffee and a newspaper, and even grab something for lunch or purchase a prepaid gift card.

On the other hand, in rural areas, there is a growing trend towards larger c-stores and an increasing number of truck stops. In these under-served and/or high traffic rural areas, the customer is even more likely to be grabbing food for the road, or looking for a break from their journey. These sites may have a small gift or grocery section, an expanded fast food selection that could include multiple branded offerings, a seating area with Wi-Fi connectivity, and large, clean rest rooms. Another growing product category in these larger format stores is in automotive and trucking accessories, ranging from oil and cleaning products to electronics, such as radios and GPS systems.



Do these different formats require unique design approaches?

Wilson: Regardless of urban or rural, small or large formats, there are some design characteristics that remain the same. Customers everywhere are time-starved and make their buying decisions quickly. A good store layout highlights the key products and services that you offer to make it easy for customers to see, find what they want to buy, and get on their way. It should allow customer traffic to flow easily through the store, while using all the space effectively by displaying impulse-oriented products in high traffic areas to drive sales. Related products should be grouped together and the space occupied by a product category should be balanced against its contribution to total sales.

What about shelving and work counters?

Wilson: Product merchandising is critical and the shelving used is one of the most important considerations. With a small format store, shelving should not be too large and shelving sections should be sized proportionately to the plan-o-gram sizes being used. Shelving runs should not be too long and where longer runs are desired due to larger store sizes, breaks should be provided so that the customer can still move through the rows. Shelving should all be the same so as not to give your store environment a fragmented look or feel. Shelving colours should be coordinated to suit the overall design style of the store. A good store design allows the customer to walk in the front door and be able to see over the store fixtures right to the back of your store!

No matter what size of store, work counters such as the cash desk and food-service counters are going to get a lot of use and abuse. If you value your investment, these counters need to be made of high grade materials that "can stand the test of time" for years to come. You want your store to look as good as it did when it was brand new! Quality and durability equals longevity. McCowan offers a line of cabinetry products that are designed specifically for this purpose.

How important is lighting and how have LED lights changed design possibilities?

Wilson: Your c-store needs to be bright and inviting to the customer. LEDs provide a bright and crisp light that looks great and enhances your merchandise, counters and signage. The trend is to have entire stores illuminated with LED sources, including floating LED light bars over cash desks and LED-illuminated built-in coolers. LED lighting has tremendously expanded product merchandising capabilities. There is no doubt that illuminating your c-store with LED lighting will result in electrical savings from its superior efficiency over other options. The cost of LED lights has come down over the last few years and this makes LED a viable alternative.

What about signage and colours?

Wilson: For c-store owners that are part of a chain, there is increasing pressure to follow corporate design and branding standards as these chains are seeing the benefit of improved consistency and experience. For independently run c-stores, signage and colour choices often comes down to personal preference. Based on my experience, I think that "bold is beautiful." I am often shown colour pallets that initially leave me feeling a little nervous about the choice, but these are usually the stores that I like best when everything is done. As we are not all interior designers or colour specialists, this is one of those areas that professional help will likely be worthwhile.

By Frank Yeo

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