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'Tis the season

Whether you rejoice or run away at the mention of the holiday retail season, it stands to reason that all the over-the-top decorations, holiday merchandising and high-volume customer traffic—along with the emotionally laden air of celebration and slight panic over gift giving—will continue to be with us for years to come. It's September. Are you ready?

No doubt visual merchandising teams the world over currently are neck-deep in holiday décor production and merchandising plans, with each market or region adding its own unique nuance or personality to the collective melting pot of festivities that comprise the holiday retail season—including, most frequently, Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas and New Year's Eve.

For retailers, finding the right balance in the season's visual merchandising message can be a delicate affair between the various secular, sacred and cultural ingredients that make up the most appealing and eye-catching season's greetings appropriate for the local market and customer base.

While Christmas-themed celebrations continue to grow and adapt worldwide, it is worth reminding ourselves that the celebration of the holiday season—and its retail components—are one part of a global kaleidoscope of celebrations that blend and blur the lines of history, culture, religion, ritual, decorating, celebration and commerce.

India, the mother lode of rituals, pageantry and decorations, has its colorful Holi days and Diwali festival of lights. Mexico has its Dia de los Muertos, where laughing skulls and dancing skeletons are the featured design motif on everything from special merchandise to store decorations. Retail stores, residences and public streets are uniquely decorated as much for Bavarian Oktoberfest, with its blue-and-white bunting and oversized pretzels, as they are in Asia for Chinese New Year's, with the ubiquitous red-and-gold banners, oranges and garlands of firecrackers. So too for Islamic cultures for the month of Ramadan and Eid ul Fitr celebrations—with websites overflowing with decorating ideas and supplies of glittered crescent moons, stars and lanterns.

It is impossible to escape the global community's embrace and love of a good excuse to decorate and the shared desire to celebrate family, friends, charity and kindness.

History has proven that an effort to curb all the celebrating most often does not go over well with the general populous. Did you know that Christmas celebrations were illegal in Boston in the mid 1600s—as it was in several parts of England—due to an effort by the ruling Puritan parliament to restrict the celebratory spirit that they felt overshadowed what to them was the more important focus of Christmas, the birth of Jesus? Needless to say, the populous was not pleased. Rioting ensued and eventually the laws were changed to allow again a more benign, merry approach to the seasonal festivities, with traditional activities including dinner parties, roast apples, card playing, dances and carol singing.



The rise of Christmas as a fashionable holiday and retail opportunity occurred during the mid-19th century, due in part to the great Victorian author Charles Dickens and his wildly popular, "A Christmas Carol." The story helped shift the emphasis of the season away from the more rowdy tradition of the times, whereby bands of drunken young men would go door to door for drinking and merriment, and toward the theme of children's happiness—and presents. In 1870, it became a U.S. holiday.

Today, we tend to have an even more open mind toward what constitutes the best way to express the holiday season in a creative fashion. Many of the most popular seasonal holiday decorations continue to have their roots in both Christian and pre-Christian traditions; decorated trees, mistletoe, holly wreaths and Yule logs all have roots in ancient solstice celebrations as found in northern Europe and the world over. Equally so is the infusion of a whole new range of contemporary stories and characters, as well as new materials and finishes not traditionally associated with Christmas. One look at recent winning holiday window designs reflect themes such as nature, pop culture icons and technology in anything but red and green.

Right or wrong—sacred or secular—the season of celebration and merriment, mixed with the tradition of gift giving and commerce, will be here again soon enough. Finding the right balance for your holiday message and theme, as well as having the energy and enthusiasm for all the color, light and dazzle of the season, will be the key as the world continues to spin and celebrate in all its imaginative and creative glory. **DDi**

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