

RENOVATION – NOT A DIRTY WORD

Retail designer Peter-Tolin Baker tells how to take the fear and stress out of a store makeover with this insider's 10-step guide to effective store renovation.

Then is the best time to plan a store renovation? It could very well be right now, when you are planning for the future with a renewed sense of optimism. The 'go' decision is initiated when a retailer takes a close look at the condition and quality of their existing 'brick-and-mortar' store presence and decides that the surroundings aren't supporting the store's image. A renovation programme, ranging from a basic refurbishment to a major redesign, will help to drive the business upward.

Customers are happier — and encouraged to buy more — when the stores they patronise appear fresh and relevant. The owner's pride in how the store looks sends a strong, positive, non-verbal message. However, if a store environment is looking and feeling tired, shabby and outdated, a negative signal can result in lacklustre sales, wary shoppers, and lower traffic.

Yet for many store owners there is a genuine stress-producing fear – even loathing – of embarking on a store renovation. The thought of facing the costs, design decisions and business disruptions are enough to make a

store owner want to pretend that, for the foreseeable future, the store really doesn't look so bad ... that customers really don't care and will continue to come through the front door to buy.

Well, they won't.

FOCUS

Take an honest, close, look around. The good news is that an effective store renovation can be accomplished with a basic, simple, and focused approach. Funding for any refurbishment or renovation project is always tight, no matter what the scale, and the return on investment needs to be carefully accounted for.

“ **The best store designs enhance, rather than overwhelm, the product.** ”

The following is a list of 10 tips for a successful store renovation plan. These reminders can be applied to keep store renovation plans on track and contribute the most in added value to your business.



1. PURPOSE: a good renovation plan starts with a well-defined purpose or goal.

What is the business priority for your renovation? It can be one particular goal or a combination of many. Before you even begin to meet with a design or construction consultant, consider the following objectives:

- Enhancing your brand or business image;
- Improving customer traffic;
- Increasing sales;
- Elevating the customer experience;
- Expanding product presentation space; or
- Fixing an operational or sales service function.

Get everyone involved in the planning process. Schedule a 'think tank' meeting with your store team. Include all business functions at this point in

the process – sales, operations, marketing, visual, merchandising – perhaps even a favourite customer or two. Each aspect of your business can help identify opportunities for an improved store environment.



2. LIFE CYCLE: consider what the anticipated life cycle for the renovated store will be. Ask yourself: is this a temporary 'quick fix' before your store relocates or possibly expands? Is it a moderate upgrade of finishes before a more significant renovation budget is available? How many years are left on the lease? If the project were to be delayed until a new lease agreement is signed, would the landlord possibly contribute to a larger renovation budget?

Answers to these questions are important and can greatly affect what

is spent and how the exterior and/or interior spaces are designed and constructed. While cheap and flimsy materials are not recommended for any store, having a realistic sense of the expected lifespan of the renovated store will help guide design and material decisions, e.g. using stone and wood versus painted surfaces and veneers.



3. PRIORITISE: make a list. What are all the elements needed to achieve the purpose of the renovation? Consider flooring, wall treatment, fixtures, lighting, signage, furniture, IT equipment, labour, designer fees, building permits, etc. List all that you can think of. Then put them in order of their importance to the renovation's purpose.

As the scope of your project takes shape, begin to add estimated costs for each item needed. Next, review how the expense for each item is prioritised against its benefit to the business and project purpose. What percentage of the budget will be customer-facing versus behind the scenes? This will help isolate out the 'critical to have' versus 'nice to have' and will be useful as final costs are determined.



4. BUDGET EATERS: as the saying goes, set your budget and then double it. Well, perhaps, but not really. Yes, there are things about

any renovation project that can dramatically affect costs. Try to minimise or totally refrain from structural modifications or significant changes to existing plumbing or electrical lines. These items tend to take up significant portions of any budget and often require additional engineering expenses and time-consuming permits.

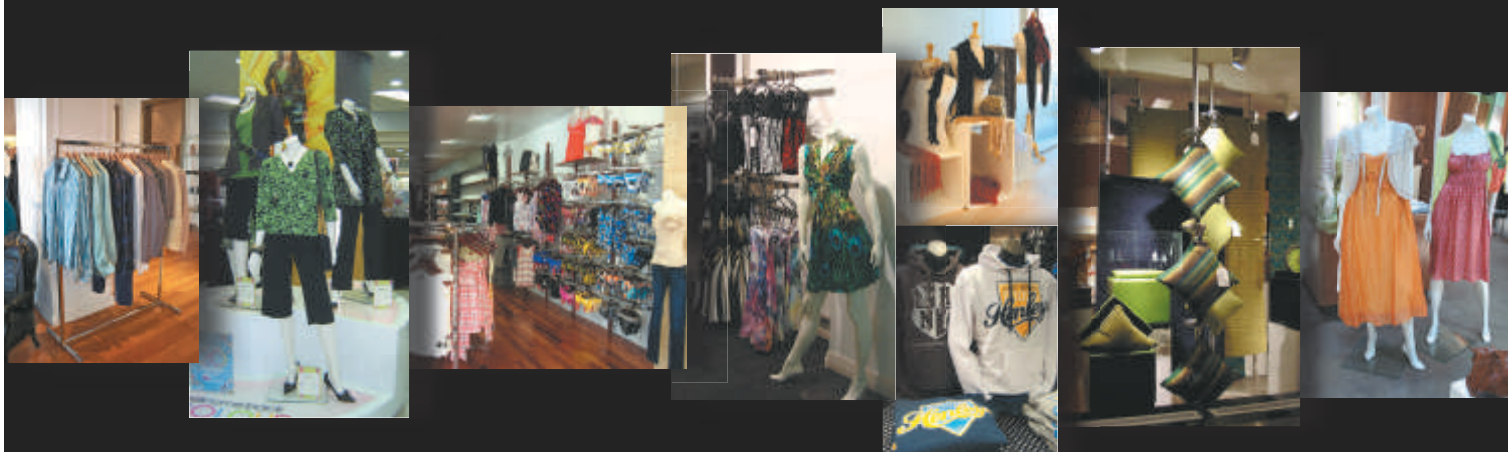
At the same time, don't be afraid to consider a dramatic change to how the store is currently laid out. Simple alterations to wall placements or ceiling heights can dramatically change the look and function of a retail space. Improved lighting can have a significant impact on enhancing product presentations.

Keep an open mind to being prepared for surprises. There are often many unknown factors lurking behind walls, ceilings and floors.



5. LOCAL REGULATIONS: confirm applicable local regulations and permit processes for renovation work. Are there restrictions on what time of day or week or season work can be conducted? If there is going to be demolition work, how can debris be disposed of? What is the landlord's involvement? Is there a historical or community building review board that approves changes to the façade or interior space? Find out if the project site requires union contract work. The cost differences can be significant to the bids submitted from contractors and vendors.

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6. MATERIALS AND FINISHES: do-it-yourself or with a designer consultant or design firm. Consider where each material will be in relation to handling heavy traffic, cleaning, exposure to weather, children, etc. Ensure new materials and finishes are both durable and practical. What finishes are more noticeable to the customer? What is touched every day? What is at eye level?

If children are in the store, what will they be handling and playing with at their various heights? Will they crawl through that chic new artistic grill you mounted on the back wall and become stuck? Will daily vacuuming chip the corner of the new POS counter? Will the fabric on the customer seating or in the dressing rooms hold up to spilled drinks and dirty hands?

Do consider green or sustainable materials. Consider this project as a learning opportunity to find out about the newest developments for green or sustainable products, manufacturing processes, and installation practices. Don't assume that green materials will be more expensive. They may not be in the long term. Using green or sustainable materials can also be a valuable marketing tool to leverage with customers who understand the environmental issues involved.



7. WOW FACTOR: identify at least one specific 'wow factor'. It could be a visual or service sure-to-notice improvement that significantly enhances the customer's shopping experience after the renovation is completed. One technique is to place the more intriguing materials and

presentations in a highly visible area.

Dramatic or memorable 'wow factors' need not be expensive. There are endless examples of creative and dramatic visual centrepieces that utilise inexpensive materials installed in unique ways. Take the time to research design publications, study pictures of award-winning stores (in back issues of *NZRetail*), get out and shop, go to new restaurants, visit new hotel lobbies. Make note of what strikes you as new and exciting as you enter a retail or service space.



8. STOREFRONT: getting customers outside inside. How often do you walk up and enter the front of your own store as though you were a customer?

Surprisingly enough, store owners oftentimes forget to step outside and check out all the details of their own façade and entry – especially if they enter the store from a back entrance. Does your project scope include any change to the appearance or approachability of the store from outside?

As the overall design and project scope takes shape, identify how the renovation will change the perception or interest of a potential customer as they walk or drive by. If they haven't entered the store before, what might change that with the renovation? Don't overlook this factor as you plan your renovation.

Consider the front door – literally. How effective is your signage? What does the store look like during the day, or at night? What is visible as one looks into your store?



9. THE PRODUCT IS THE HERO: will the product be the focal point? With your design and renovation plans almost complete, one last item is worthy of your attention. The

best store designs enhance, rather than overwhelm, the product. A successful renovation allows the product to be the hero: to be both visually appealing and operationally easy to sell. This idea might lead to better decisions on where to spend available budget for such items as improved lighting and new fixtures.



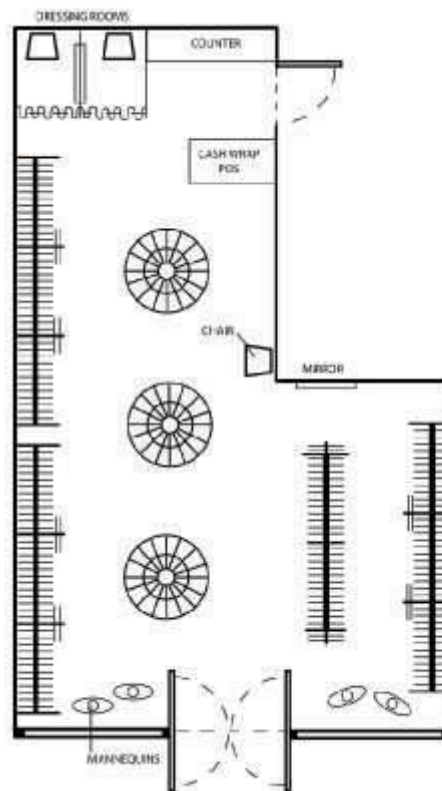
10. OPEN FOR BUSINESS: oddly enough, customers can be drawn to chaos. They seem to take some personal satisfaction in seeing that improvements are being made to a business that they support. The construction programme encompasses safety for employees and customers as well as producing a quality sales experience at its completion.

Have a well-defined plan to keep the doors open for business during renovations. Verify how the project can be approached in phases, off-hours or off-season with minimal disruption to store hours, customer traffic and sales. Directional signage must clearly state the entrances, modified store hours and that, yes, you are open for business.

Consider how you might be able to share with your customers what's happening – perhaps by posting the design plans. Don't just hang a plastic sheet across the space and hope for the best. Make use of the disruption and change of pace. Have some fun!

IN CONCLUSION

Well-defined design and construction plans for a store renovation can lead to many positive things for your

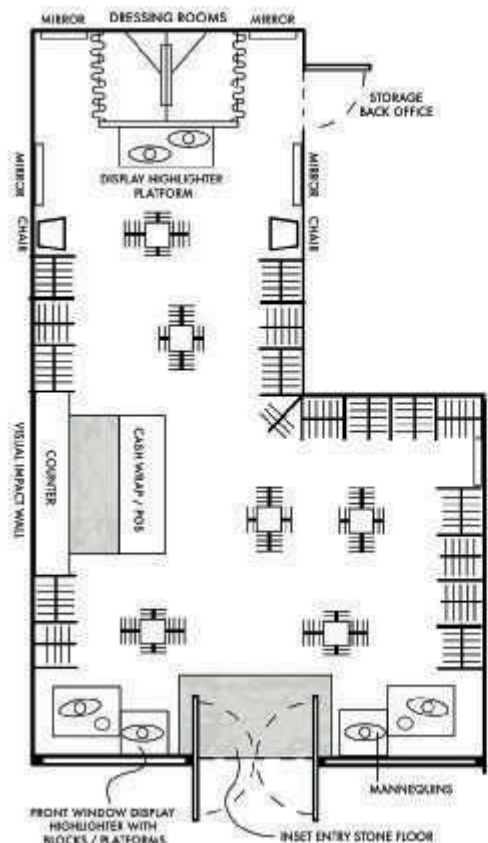


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BEFORE RENOVATION

- Functional but limited visual and merchandising appeal
- Wall Rocks are all side hanging
- Floor fixtures are side hanging
- No focus or "wow" factor
- Cash Wrap/ POS in back of store
- Tight dressing room area
- Single "zone" and continuous merchandising

Retail designer Peter-Tolin Baker drew up these before and after floor plans to demonstrate a renovation that provides better use of floor space and the maximum impact of the merchandise.



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AFTER RENOVATION

- More dynamic traffic flow and visual merchandising appeal
- Cash Wrap/ POS station is more central, with visual impact wall
- Display highlighters - front windows and backwall
- Improved dressing rooms and mirrors
- Wall fixtures combination side hanging and front facing
- Floor fixtures are moveable for flexible, focused product stories

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business. Prepare for an enhanced brand or business image, improved customer traffic, increased sales and an elevated customer experience. Taking a clear view of what your store looks like and how it operates for both customers and staff is essential to making the right improvements.

If you can see it or touch it, so can your customers. And it can look its best in 10 easy steps! ■

By **Peter-Tolin Baker** and edited by **Vilma Barr**, a Philadelphia-based writer and regular contributor to *NZRetail*.



PETER-TOLIN BAKER

As designer and principal of P-T B Design Services in New York, Peter-Tolin Baker provides creative visual design solutions for a range of retail brands and residential interiors. During his tenure at Tiffany & Co., he was responsible for product presentations and display standards within all sales locations worldwide. He launched his visual merchandising retail career with the legendary luxury emporium Henri Bendel on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. Additionally, Baker has worked as scenic designer for dozens of dramatic and musical productions. Despite experience on projects with significant renovation budgets and celebrity architects, Baker often finds the smaller projects with limited budgets the most

rewarding – such as a recent jewellery store project for an emerging jeweller friend. With few funds to spend, the little storefront previously used as an office was transformed under his guidance using found and recycled fixtures, select strategic lighting and interior upgrades – and with the help of the jeweller's entire staff of four on the painting and construction. Baker resides in New York City and Sag Harbor, NY where he is most happy with a hammer or paintbrush in hand renovating his historic home. He can be contacted at: petertolin.baker@gmail.com. www.petertolinbaker.com