



OUTSIDE
THE *Vines*

INSPIRATION FROM BEYOND THE POTTING BENCH

Purpose in Mind

By Ana Olvera

Services and purposeful merchandising have helped furniture store Acme Mid-Century, in Alexandria, Virginia, boost sales and keep the store's products — both big and small — at the center of it all.

Owner Pierre Paret keeps purpose and settings in mind when merchandising furniture and accessories together. Acme Mid-Century carries “moderately priced to high-end furniture” from mid-century and modern eras as well as salvaged and antique items.

“It’s pretty ad-hoc, a lot of it is driven by functionality,” he says. “If we have a bar, we can put a sculpture on it, but it makes more sense to put the cool wooden vintage ice bucket on the bar.”

Displaying items in a particular setting that showcases their functionality can help customers localize how some of the smaller items might work in their existing home or office setting, Paret says.

“You have to put your car keys somewhere. All those little things are the reality of real modern life and to have it staged in that way or to be able to talk to people about using a piece of furniture in a particular way or access it in that way will help you sell it.”

“It provides them context. It shows them usability,” he says. “It’s very useful in that it sells the furniture upon which the items are on and the items themselves.”

The way items are merchandised can also help drive a sale home, especially if an item can be found somewhere else at a lower price, Paret says.

“We’re selling expensive stuff — [for example], a \$750 used sofa,” he says. “It’s a lot of money and it seats three people like the \$500 one you can get at common stores. Why would somebody pay \$750?”

Having a value proposition ready, like furniture as functional art, can help in upselling, Paret says.

“You have to have that value proposition for them: ‘You are not just buying a sofa; you are buying a piece of art. And it’s an investment,’” he says.

In reference to selling outdoor items, Paret says, “It’s not just a yard. It’s a beautiful place to spend time and increase your quality of life.

Those terms can help you upsell the products and services that you sell.”

Don't Forget the Services

Services offered at Acme Mid-Century, including restoration and design consultation, developed organically from Paret’s merchandising technique.

“[Merchandising can] help with the other services,” he says. “People will come in and say, ‘We really like this look. Can you help me figure out how to do this in my home?’”

The store’s consultation and restoration services began after Paret often found himself talking with customers about design or restoration ideas for their home.

“I found myself sitting down with someone and sometimes people would bring in pictures of their living room,” he says.

“[These services are] all organic things. I didn’t have to hire someone or buy new equipment,” he says. “It’s just a little bit of marketing them — adding them to website, newsletter, bringing it up in conversation. It’s organic but you do have to push it a little bit.”

Analyzing what can be done with what’s available is the starting point for offering in-house services, Paret says.

“[It’s] knowing what you have the capacity to do with your existing resources, physical as well as knowledge and skills, and little by little expanding that,” he says. “You already have the product, the knowledge, the resources; it’s just a matter of thinking about it and marketing.

“While [services] are not enough to support a business by itself, it definitely supplements the bottom line.”

Paret says it’s important to recognize when part of a project is beyond the scope of the staff’s knowledge though.

“If it’s something beyond my capabilities, I refer customers to a partner vendor or business,” he says. “It has to be someone I trust and know they’re going to do a good job. And I always ask the customers for feedback (on that referral).”

Referrals, Paret says, help drive business by acting as an “informal networking, where it benefits both your business, ultimately, and other businesses.” **LGR**

