



## Preparing University Students for Future Careers in the Retail Industry: *The Retailer Realities Project*

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Keywords: retailing, merchandising, visuals

### Introduction and Purpose of the Strategy

With currently high unemployment rates, the job market has become increasingly more competitive, leading to more aggressive efforts of recent college graduates to obtain entry-level career positions in merchandising and retailing. While many merchandising students work in retail settings while in college, some never look beyond their current job to explore other retail companies. As merchandising and retailing programs strive to meet the needs of students and employers, university faculty must teach students practical and professional skills through classroom and experiential learning activities while encouraging students to investigate companies that can provide future opportunities. Consequently, the objective of this teaching strategy is to provide senior-level merchandising students with broader knowledge of varied types of retail companies as well as specific companies in order to be able to make better decisions about career choices when evaluating potential employers.

### Project Design and Implementation

At the beginning of the semester, fashion merchandising students enrolled in Retail Buying were assigned the *Retailer Realities Project* that would require them to think critically while researching key retail firms about the factors that affect operations and profitability. The project was defined by the instructor to focus on seven basic retail formats including department stores, specialty department stores, specialty stores, discount stores, off-price stores, category killers, and non-store retailers. To successfully execute the project, the project design was as follows:

1. Dividing the class into seven teams that would each complete the *Retailer Realities Project* within an instructor-developed schedule throughout the semester. Each team consisted of 2 to 3 students while the project consisted of completion of a written research paper, an oral presentation, and a display production.
2. Assigning each team one retail format as a focus for the project. Subsequently, each team was responsible for selecting three retail companies that represented the format. For each company, the team was to research the following factors through trade and business publications, newspapers, company literature, annual reports, site visits, and interviews: history and background; headquarters address; target market; corporate structure with number of stores and subsidiaries and related companies; current status of the company including annual sales, financial status, market

- share, competitors; product mix and merchandising strategies including pricing, merchandise assortment, fashion level, and merchandise procurement methods; services offered; positioning strategies such as image, size and location of facilities, interior décor; strengths of past and current successes; weaknesses of past, current, and future problems; promotional activities including advertising, public relations, publicity, display, floor and merchandising; human resources practices including hiring and firing, training benefits, and career opportunities including promotional activities; plans for growth and expansion or downsizing; and current social issues for the retailer.
3. Assigning each team a written research paper to complete that detailed all of the research information acquired and analyzed about their single retail format.
  4. Assigning each team an oral presentation that included PowerPoint slides to present to the class on the designated day for the specific retail format. Presentations were made in class every two weeks according to the instructor-developed schedule.
  5. Assigning each team a retail format display to design and produce for a 6.5' x 4' display case located in the departmental hallway. Each display had to include a title indicating the retail format, and 38" x 18" presentation boards and merchandise that represented each of the three selected retail companies. Each display was installed and shown for a two-week period beginning on the day of the team's presentation to the class.
  6. Evaluating each team's performance based on the instructor's evaluation of the written report (40%), the class presentation (10%), the display (40%), and the level of the student's personal participation in discussion and evaluation of the company (10%).

#### Effectiveness and Continuation of the Activity

Overall, the outcome of the *Retailer Realities Project* surpassed the expectations of the initial plan. The coordination of a written paper, oral presentation, and window display to complete one comprehensive, retail-focused project proved to be successful based on instructor analysis, university student and faculty comments about the displays, and the sustained interest of the fashion students. Students in the class gained a much greater understanding of the selected retail formats through the wide variety of research methods employed as well as the production of the retail format displays. The display production added an entirely other dimension of learning to an otherwise typical project type because the overall display *had* to communicate the comprehensive essence of the format to many viewers that did not have prior knowledge of the format. Thus, student teams were forced to consider what makes a specific retail format unique and attractive to consumers, and communicate that information visually. Ultimately, critical thinking skills were combined with a hands-on activity that resulted in action rather than just information processing. Therefore, incorporating projects such as the *Retailer Realities Project* into courses allows students to learn via a fluid and dynamic curriculum. This project will continue to be used in a senior-level retail buying course to keep students occupied with their learning activities, and more clearly begin to realize the level of personal engagement required for career success in the ever-changing, global fashion industry.