

PUTTING YOUR BUSINESS ON DISPLAY

*What to Show—
and Why to Show It—
When Designing a
Successful Showroom*

by Megan Headley

Photo courtesy of Hellenbrand Glass.

By expanding its showroom, Hellenbrand Glass can now showcase a wide variety of the windows it carries.

Some people can feel confident making a major purchase sight unseen. Others might use the web or a catalog as a place to collect ideas, but prefer to reserve judgment until they've seen an item up close and personal.

If you think you've covered your bases by advertising your services online and in the phonebook, or you draw in much of your business through word-of-mouth, you may not have considered adding a showroom to your facility. But a great many glass professionals—whether offering a diverse array of services or focusing primarily on commercial construction—consider their showrooms to be an important resource to have available for future customers.

WHY ADD A SHOWROOM?

Ajax Glass in Fort Worth, Texas, owned and operated by brothers Buddy and Arthur Moses, recently moved into a new 52,000-square-foot facility—which includes a 12,000-

square-foot showroom displaying a wide variety of inventory. That's a lot of space to dedicate to a showroom for a company that the owners consider to be focused on installation and replacement. So why devote so much room to putting products on display?

For starters, having a wide variety of products on hand, particularly items like hardware, is useful for the company's own installation business. That immediacy is also appreciated by the contractors who come in to visit.

"People like to spend their money and just carry it out or have it immediately," Buddy Moses says.

But more importantly, these showrooms can become a sort of tactile catalog for end-users lured by the web or designers looking for ideas.

"On the various shower doors, we try to show some of everything so people can see the wide selections, and I think that's important . . . so that people can get a visual of what it may look like at their homes," Buddy Moses says.

Many home and business owners do frequent these showrooms but, as Jane Cook, marketing officer for IGD Industries in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, notes, many of these consumers are accompanied by the contractor with whom they are working.

"So many of our customers are contractors, and they don't have anything to show their customers—so they send them to us to look through a catalog maybe, or to just come out and look at the space with them [to see] what it's going to look like," Cook says.

IGD is the parent company of Allied Glass Products Inc., which opened a showroom in March in its Davenport, Iowa, location. Showrooms for the company's Des Moines and Cedar Rapids, Iowa, branches are to follow.

Hellenbrand Glass LLC, a full-service glass company in Waunakee, Wis., recently has expanded its facility to 34,000 square feet and increased its showroom space to 4,500 square feet to make room for more displays.

"The windows were probably the biggest reason [we expanded]," explains owner Trent Hellenbrand. "With the existing showroom we had we couldn't showcase all of our windows properly."

The showroom now features a wide selection of the products the company installs—or carries for other contractors.

Anchor Ventana in Round Rock, Texas, has had a showroom in each of its two locations for seven years, and is now in the process of revamping the 2,500- and 3,000-square-foot spaces. Owner Felix Munson says that the showroom is an important resource for customers following a lead from a website or advertisement. "It's an educational opportunity for the customer or the end-user because they may go to a website and see something but they want to come in and really get the feel for how the product feels in their hand."

Having a wide variety of products on display "does draw in business," says Chris Mammen, president of Mammen Glass & Mirror in Irving, Texas. "If somebody wants a shower door and they can look at it at my place or not look at it somewhere else, I'm probably going to win that customer."

However, Mammen points out that the benefits can go further than making an on-the-spot sale.

"It also gives us a chance to build our image by designing the showroom the way that we want to, to present the image that we want our customers to see. And I think it also gives you credibility as an established brick-and-mortar business. There are a lot of websites with different shower doors, but you don't know if that's a guy operating out of his garage with a pickup truck or if it's an established business," says Mammen.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

A showroom is just one more tool in the diversification bag. "We can do just about anything anybody wants," says Edward Nethercutt, owner of Woodbridge Glass Co. Inc., a retailer and glazing contractor in Woodbridge, Va. "It keeps you diversified, and I think that's been a big help to us."

But for companies with a commercial focus, is a showroom really relevant?

Some showroom owners say this show-off space can bring in designers looking for products ideas.

"IF SOMEBODY WANTS A SHOWER DOOR AND THEY CAN LOOK AT IT AT MY PLACE OR NOT LOOK AT IT SOMEWHERE ELSE, I'M PROBABLY GOING TO WIN THAT CUSTOMER."

—Chris Mammen, Mammen Glass & Mirror

"We do have some contractors who come in," Munson says, "but generally when somebody has done an architectural rendering, and has specified for a commercial project what they want, you'll get an interior designer who comes in that's working on the project."

As Cook mentioned, many consumers come in at the behest of contractors.

"Sometimes homebuilders will send their clients here to pick out their glass, just like they would send them to a plumbing showroom or a lighting showroom," Mammen says.

But if you're selling to contractors, does that take away from your own installation business?

No way, says Cook. "We do the glass installation. The contractors that we work with don't want anything to do with that, they don't have the skills to do that. So they might finish off the bathroom, the plumbing and the tile work, and they leave the glass enclosure up the homeowner. Or they might help facilitate it, and serve as the general contractor, but we do the actual installation."

In some cases these consumers who

bring in walk-in business—or contractors who visit to get ideas—may lead to new installation business for the showroom owner.

"We hope to be a resource so that we are requested to do the work or ultimately get to do the work," Munson says.

"That's the purpose," Cook says. "We want to get a bigger market share of the glass shower enclosures," she offers as one example. "We also want to get a bigger share of wallet from those consumers because they might need a ... product that we have."

TIPS TO A SUCCESSFUL SHOWROOM

Despite the aforementioned benefits to having a showroom, the area will only be as effective if the display can pique the interest of visitors.

Of course, in creating this three-dimensional catalog, it's important to have a big selection to show off to a visitor.

"Obviously show a lot of product," Buddy Moses says, "but make it roomy enough that people can maneuver and move around."

continued

A showroom can draw in designers looking for ideas of products to use—that these glass shops can then help install.



Photo courtesy of Ajax Glass.



PUTTING YOUR BUSINESS ON DISPLAY

continued

Many glass shops are finding that a showroom can augment their installation business.

On the other hand, having too much selection can be a bit overpowering.

“I’ve been in some showrooms and it seems like if try to you show everything it’s overwhelming and it’s kind of junky,” Mammen comments.

A professional designer can help draw that fine line between too much and just enough.

“We used a professional designer to help us because we are constrained, of course, by space. We just had to decide what do we need to accommodate that space,” says Cook.

To have “just enough,” picking a few representative examples is key. But if you offer a little of everything how do you decide what to set out? These pros say they try to balance a selection of the basics, with a little something unique thrown in as well.

“The showroom doesn’t reflect all of our product offerings, but it does reflect the ones that are not generic,” says Munson. “They’re a little bit out of the norm.”

“We’ve picked and chosen the neatest looking ones as well as some representative samples,” Mammen says. “For example, with the acid-etched patterns, there are dozens of different ones. We’ve picked out two or three and if people are interested we can tell them ‘there’s 30 more available, let me get a brochure out and show you.’”

A professional designer can be a great resource—but as Munson notes, don’t forget to take the customer’s opinion into account as well.

“You’ve got to always find out from your customer what they feel is

needed to help them sell a product because ... this is a contractor’s resource.”

If you’re going to put your best products forward, be sure to have an environment that shows them off to their benefit.

“We try to have them in such a manner that glass samples can be viewed with natural light,” Munson says.

A neat and orderly display is also important.

“I would say a number-one [priority] is keeping things neat and well organized and working properly and having a clean and very professional showroom—and a proper sales staff to answer questions,” says Hellenbrand.

Having knowledgeable staff on hand to offer additional information is important.

“We have four people who are always on the floor area,” says Buddy Moses.

In addition to providing as much information as possible, these pros suggest creating a comfortable environment that encourages looking.

“We like to put up our samples with plain English names and explanations. You don’t want it to be intimidating, you want it to be comfortable

aesthetically speaking as well,” Mammen says.

“We have seats for them to sit in when they come in if they have to wait,” Nethercutt agrees. “They want something cut right now and we do that. And while they wait for it to get cut they have a place to sit down, and we have a magazine rack that they can read if they choose to. Try to keep them relaxed that way they don’t get impatient.”

If there’s nothing else that can be learned from these showroom tips, remember that it’s important to remain open to suggestions on how to make things better. As Munson comments, “Many of our displays are flexible enough where if we get feedback from the customer, which we want, we’ll try to accommodate them and learn from that and develop it in such a manner.” ■

the author



Megan Headley is the editor of USGlass.



TAKE A LOOK

Showrooms displays are varied, but they’re all about getting an up-close look at what’s available. But before visiting showrooms in your area for ideas, take a look for yourself at some of the displays mentioned in the article by visiting our Showroom Slideshow on the Only Online section of www.usglassmag.com.