



# SHOPTALK



By Margie Johnson

## READ THE STREET

*ShopTalk is a continuing series of consumer-oriented retail articles by Margie Johnson, president of ShopTalk, a retail consulting firm that specializes in showing organizations how to become leaders in their marketplaces and industries through customer-centered training. Over the past 15 years, Margie has worked in many Main Street towns throughout the nation. She is passionate about helping small business owners become more successful.*



*Research shows that it only takes about 7 seconds for a passerby to decide whether to enter a business. The storefront is usually the determining factor. In this case, the bright colors and clear signs beckon to potential shoppers.*

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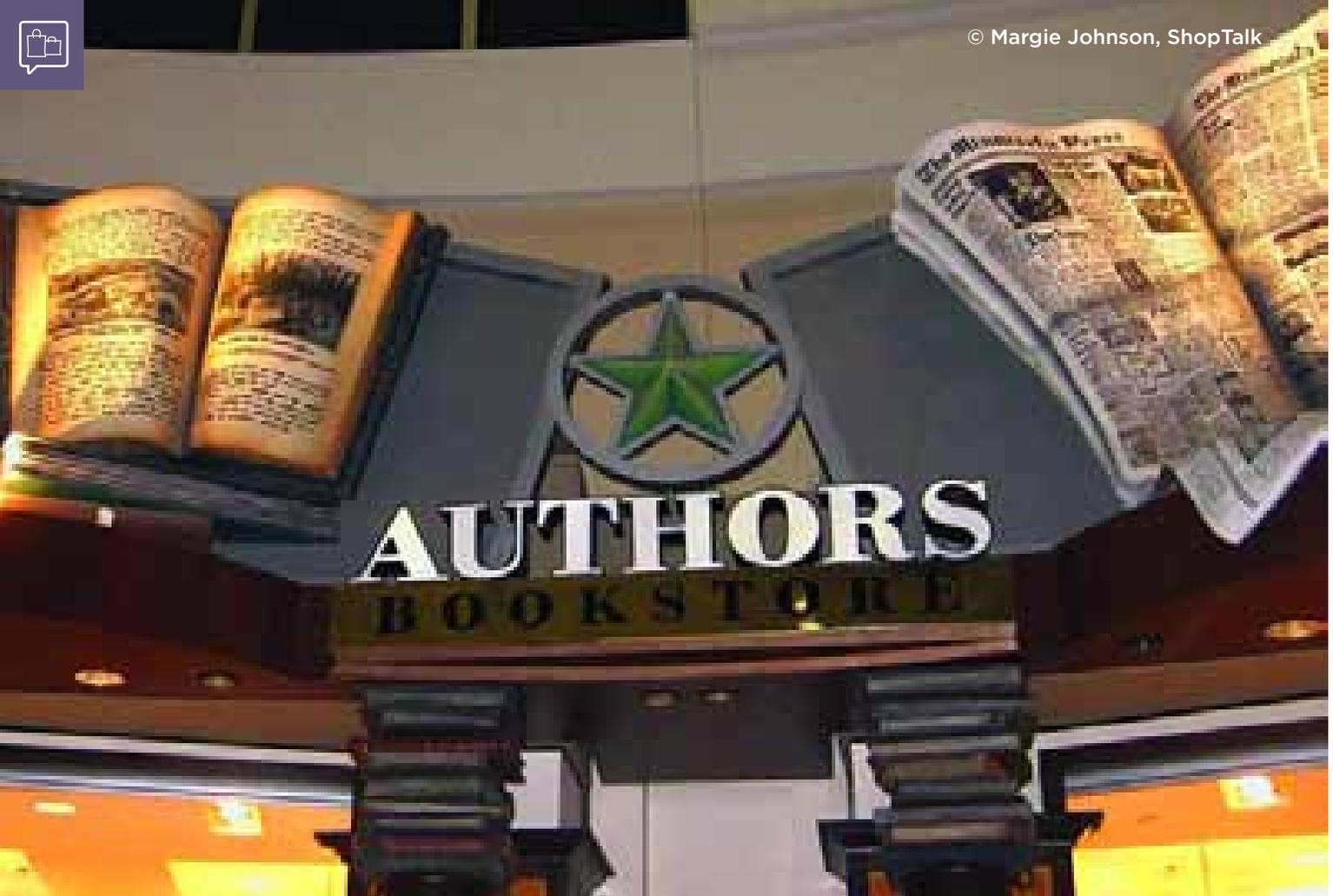
Think of a time recently when you were strolling along Main Street or walking through a mall and suddenly felt yourself being “pulled” toward a specific shop or restaurant. Do you remember what got your attention? Was it the colors of the storefront, the store’s signs, an attractive store window display, or some action or movement that caught your eye? If we analyze what most often convinces a passerby to stop in and visit a new business, it usually comes down to the “*allure of the exterior of the business.*”

When consulting with Main Street business owners, I always encourage them to step outside their business and carefully critique “their billboard”—the front of their store. I am often amused and amazed at how this simple exercise creates a real “ah ha moment” for the owner. Too often I hear “Wow, I haven’t taken a critical look at my storefront in a *long* time!”



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*A retail storefront is a business’s billboard. Its allure to window shoppers can vary widely, from a simple, open front with wide display windows and beautiful plants that embellish merchandise placed out on the sidewalk (above) to an eye-popping “wow, what’s that!” display to entice people inside (left).*



*The old adage “you can’t judge a book by its cover” is the last thing retailers should follow, as can be seen by this “cover,” which provides the perfect image for a bookstore! They should think of the front of the store as the “title” of their business and keep it as clean and creative as possible.*

This simple exercise reminds me of the old adage—“you can’t judge a book by its cover.” But that is exactly what customers do! Most often, they judge a store by its “cover” or exterior. Research tells us that potential customers determine in seven seconds their level of interest in entering a business. I urge merchants to think about the front of their store as the “title” of their book.

As potential customers are deciding whether to enter a place of business, there are many “subliminal clues” that influence whether they will come in and or just walk

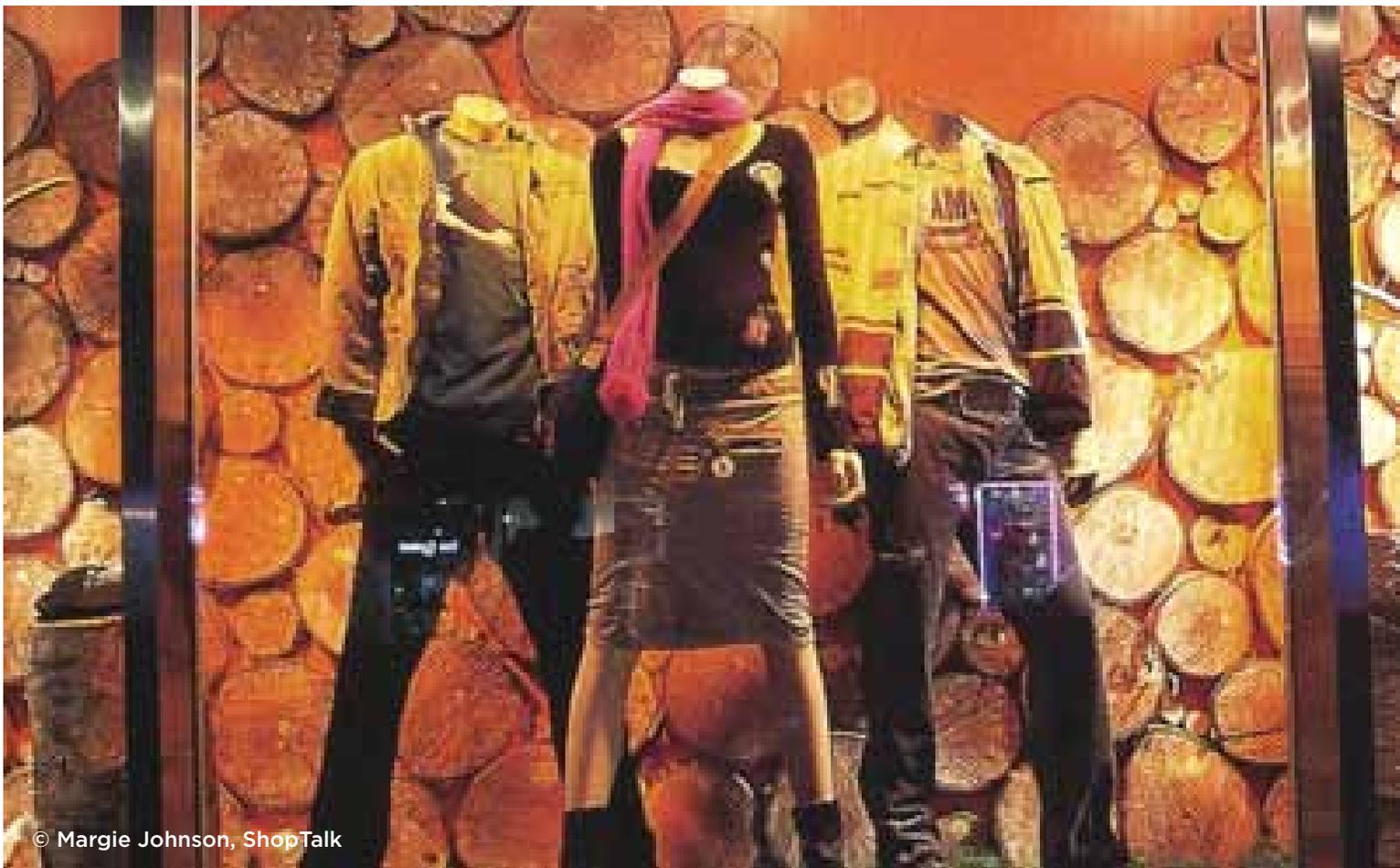
on by. Top among the “turn offs” are dirty windows, visible wires, overall poor lighting, burned-out bulbs, dead plants, out-of-season products still on display, among others. Research tells us that these “clues” imprint in a customer’s mind a sense of general “neglect” and instill doubt about the overall quality of the company.

When working with owners to enhance the storefronts of specialty businesses on Main Streets across the country, I review some basic business thinking that needs careful consideration. As we pursue the “let’s get visual” approach to enticing

customers, we need to consider the key draw for most stores—the display window. A crucial factor in creating successful window displays is to always consider the customer’s vantage point. Are people walking straight down the street or are they in cars passing by? These are important considerations for product placement and determine which direction to angle and place the items, the height of the products, the lighting, etc. A key ingredient in the success of any window display is effective lighting both during the day and at night.

Daytime lighting often helps to deflect the “glare” effect that so often prevents shoppers from clearly seeing into many of the large windows found in older Main Street storefronts. “Glare” on a large window can easily spoil a wonderful, well-designed display. There are simple techniques, however, that can help diffuse harsh glare. One of the easiest ways to deflect glare is to place merchandise closer to the window, use products and props with lighter colors, and focus high-density spotlights on the products.

*A key draw for most stores is the display window. Effective product placement and lighting, both day and night, are essential to a successful window display. During the day, glare can prevent pedestrians from clearly seeing a display. Placing products close to the front of the window and using spotlights to focus on the merchandise can alleviate this problem.*



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At night, well-lit windows should always be a high priority as they can quickly catch the attention of passers-by. These “lighted billboards” often get an extraordinary amount of attention from pedestrians on the street or passengers in cars. This creates a “splendid window of opportunity” to make a memorable branding impression on potential customers, as well as reinforcing the store’s image with current clients.

It is imperative that merchants regard their storefronts as an integral part of their marketing strategy. At first glance, ask if the storefront reinforces the media and advertising messages that are in place. Would the storefront bolster the positive image “planted” in a potential customer’s mind if someone described the store to

them? Great visual merchandising is not just a display technique; it is primarily a *selling and marketing strategy*. The initial “read” of the storefront presents the ultimate “at-a-glance” test to get the attention of potential customers and draw them in.

Remember that prospective shoppers are using those seven seconds to read the store’s signage, the overall architecture, the design of the window displays, the effectiveness of the lighting, and the cleanliness and general condition of the property. Through these impressions, they are formulating an overall image of the business. Potential customers literally “read the street” as they make decisions about the stores that capture their attention and literally pull them in!

*Nighttime lighting of display windows is as important as a clear view of the shop window during the day. These “lighted billboards” capture the attention of both pedestrians and motorists and can make a memorable branding impression on potential shoppers.*



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Signs are nearly as important as the display window. As potential customers “read the street,” one of the first things that will grab their eye are a store’s signs. Retailers need to consider who they are trying to reach with each sign. The “Ma Petite Shoe” sign (left), with its small type and intricate design is clearly aimed at pedestrians. “Miss Lizzie’s” (below left) is just as clearly aimed at people driving by, while “If the Shoe Fits” (right) is a perfect sign to grab the attention of potential shoppers passing by on foot or in a car.



I suggest all store owners take the time to stand back and objectively critique how visually welcoming their business appears. Also, reach out to neighboring business owners and share these thoughts so that they too will examine their “*visual marketing proposition.*” Remember that a cluster or block of stores silently announces what customers might expect not just in one shop, but in the collective area. Strive to present a compelling reason for customers to flock to your stores.

In summary, I hope your business will beckon potential customers to come over and to come in. I often refer to these critical few seconds as the “wave.” This “wave” grabs the eye and the feet follow—leading shoppers into a store with an image that is powerful, intriguing, and dominant among other stores on the street.

Every store owner wants to be *that business—the traffic stopper. So, I urge you to consider these thoughts and get started!*

Happy retailing,  
Margie Johnson

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Presented by Margie Johnson at the National Main Streets Conference in Atlanta, on Tuesday, March 31, noon-3:00 p.m., with colleagues Lyn Falk and Brian Dyches.