

# DECODING DNA: RETAIL'S NATURE/NURTURE EQUILIBRIUM BY: VICKI VASIL

With a strong and deep connection to its fans in your community, a brand can help spread the word tenfold about an event connected to or happening at your shop or a new product in stock. Likewise, they can tell an impactful story about that event and/or product with beautiful merchandising build-outs, point of sale promotional pieces, banners, window graphics and other creative collateral. Enlisting brands to complement your store's marketing and on-floor look can create interest and impact, but like with anything else, the right balance between this nurture and your natural shop uniqueness must be struck.

## EVENT MAPPING

September 2011's Quiksilver Pro in Long Island, N.Y.—though partially stymied by Hurricane Irene's flooding of the city that canceled the concert series portion—was a mainstream attention-grabbing event that had A-list celebrities flocking to the low-key beach community's hangouts instead of the Hamptons. It reintroduced surfing on the U.S.'s east coast to the rest of the world. I'm not sure anyone expected it to be that successful, the reception and reciprocation

to be as warm as it was, or the waves to be as good as they were. But the sheer magnitude of the crowds who came out to support the likes of Kelly Slater, Owen Wright and their own Long Beach native, Balam Stack surprised everyone.

As a result, in addition to the sand-side 11,000 square-foot Quik and Roxy store being packed non-stop, local shops saw a boost to business along with the rest of the city's hospitality industry. More importantly, they continue to see a sharp upturn in participants of the sport that has lasted a year since, increasing interest in other local surf events like the third annual N.Y. Sea Surf Week ([vimeo.com/46024907](http://vimeo.com/46024907)).

On the west coast where the sales rep population is denser and company headquarters are usually nearby, brands often launch shop tours that attract excitement up and down the southern California coast throughout the year. Shops enjoy the opportunity to frequently participate in these smaller, fun activities, like Rip Curl's Taco Tuesday Tour this summer. Significant annual happenings, such as the Hurley U.S. Open, also enable Huntington Beach retailers to partner with brands for some residual business, hanging large banners outside

their windows on Pacific Coast Highway and Main Street and hosting off-the-wall themed events to draw attendees.

When it comes to events, Todd Roberts, owner of ZJ Boarding House in Santa Monica, maintains a store-first focus. "We prefer to utilize our brand partnerships to co-op on our own events customized to support our community," he says. ZJBH hosts a wide range of events annually, from philanthropic cause marketing, like their partnership with Stoked Mentoring, to special school shopping nights where a percentage of the sales are donated to the school. "We survived this long because of our community," reports Roberts, "if we can't make a difference and have fun doing it, then why would we be doing this?"

Coco Tihanyi, one half of Surf Diva and president of Surf Diva Boutique, echoes his sentiments. While the La Jolla boutique participates in larger brand initiatives in San Diego, a majority of her shop's events are Surf Diva-focused and themed around their customers and community. "We make an effort to include a variety of brands to balance our support for them and their support of our community throughout the year," she says. Like ZJBH, Surf Diva backs



**ZJ BOARDING HOUSE**  
GIVE BACK TUESDAYS

**HELP ZJBH DONATE TO LOCAL SCHOOLS**  
**TUESDAY EVENINGS DURING THE HOLIDAYS**  
November 29th - December 20th 3:00pm - 7:00pm

When you shop at ZJ Boarding House we will give **15%** of your purchase to the local school of your choice. Just say the name of your school to our cashier and a donation will be made following the promotion.

A great opportunity for holiday shopping for friends and family while supporting local schools at the same time, ZJ Boarding House is fully stocked with the best surf, skate and snowboard gear as well as a huge variety of clothing and accessories for men, women and kids. Our friendly staff is always on hand to help out. Come down Tuesday nights and share the stoke!

Far Left: ZJ Boarding House offers a well-balanced blend of brand-supplied merchandising racks and its own pieces, like this repurposed green table.

Left: ZJ events most often intertwine with their community. Giveback Tuesdays incentivize special shopping nights where a percentage of sales are donated to local schools. (Photos courtesy ZJ Boarding House)

local schools' PTAs and recently hosted a sweet 16 party, celebrating with their community via a femininely themed *prom night*.

## GENETICS THROUGH MERCHANDISING

Often, brands also nurture retailers with merchandise to help *tell their story*. With this story comes a slat wall, racks, hooks, hangers, posters, sometimes lighting and even A/V in special cases. In addition to providing an impressive visual display, they stand out, drawing customers to their brand or product narrative. They help direct traffic, often sell items at the point of sale and captivate attention in sometimes crowded, boring or flat store layouts.

This trend has waxed and waned but is still used by brands in the business in their most successful retail partner stores. It's an expensive initiative but one that showcases a brand's merchandise the way they intended it. To score these special displays, shops usually have to be selling enough SKUs and volume to warrant the investment, with an established relationship and history with a brand, and of course enough room to make a statement without overpowering everything else.

## BALANCE DOWN TO A SCIENCE

While always appreciative of vendor support, retailers I spoke to are careful in these times to maintain a focus on their own shop's brand. With all the vertical competition popping up, protecting a shop from

looking too much like these corporate stores—or the omnipresent mall chain—is key to the independent shop's survival. "There used to always be six to seven multi-branded stores in our area," ZJBH's Roberts remarks. "Now we only have two competitors left."

Industry reps, especially in California, are close to the store owners they work with weekly, and the *good ones* retailers refer to are those who *get* a shop's personality. Like customizing a product offering to a retailer's identity, vendors afforded prime real estate in these businesses are those that successfully complement the shop story with their brand's. Though ZJBH incorporates several brand-supplied merchandised build-outs, they, for example, choose the ones that blend well with their own collection of displays and racks.

The best branded displays showcase the product in a way that intrigues and interests



The People's Movement Founder, Kevin Flanagan shows off the custom build-out at Surf Diva. (Photo courtesy Surf Diva Boutique)

the customer rather than overwhelming a store layout. Tihanyi encounters an issue with a majority of branded displays because they're larger-scaled than most of hers—too high for her exclusively female customer. Some merchandising options they've been offered take hours for her shop employees to build, not to mention the occasional long wait times to even arrive. "I like our store the way it is," Tihanyi says. However, she cites

The People's Movement as one of the few brand-provided displays that really works for Surf Diva and enhances the shop look. Not only did the reps come into the shop, measuring for the perfect fit, they customized it to work within the rest of the store.

Kevin Flanagan, founder and CEO of The People's Movement, says that after working with Reef and hanging footwear build-outs

*Text continued on page 44*



Surf Diva incorporates several organically designed jewelry and accessory displays into its female-centric boutique in La Jolla, Calif. (Photos courtesy Surf Diva Boutique)



The Quiksilver Pro New York in September 2011 drew enormous crowds of locals excited to have the industry recognize their hometown and surf breaks. (Photo by Morgan Maassen)

continued from page 29

for so many years, he knows how expensive it can be to pre-construct and warehouse a multitude of merchandising. They prefer instead to spend the money—still a significant chunk of their marketing dollars—offering a truly custom design made of recycled cardboard to help set the stage and introduce customers to the brand. “A customer will identify right away *that looks recycled*. It’s the first chapter in our brand story.”

Another company keeping the indie retailer top of mind is Stance. This brainchild of several successful industry execs has arguably reenergized the industry over the past couple of years. A good part of that is socks’ merchandise-ability. Capitalizing on the product’s small imposition, Stance goes a step further with a simple, vertically-branded fixture that uses minimal floor space—a merchandising piece that Director of Marketing, Ryan Kingman calls “truly the back-

bone of our brand’s success at retail. It allows us to present our brand and product to the consumer in a manner we control while generating sales utilizing minimal floor space. Retailers are pleased with the sales of a new category while not having to commit deep dollars or broad real estate.”

### COLLECTIVE SURVIVAL

Advice from these retailers to you? “Shop your competition and get inspired,” recommends Roberts. “Be different. Honor your store’s own brand DNA and believe in yourself and your shop.” Tihanyi, also a co-chairperson for BRA, is a huge advocate for retail collaboration and networking. “Share with each other. What works and what doesn’t? How do you compete against the verticals, the online? Indie shops are in this together—we need to share certain strategies to keep each of us alive as a whole.” **A0B**



**About the Author:** A native of Long Island and its myriad beaches, Vicki fell in love with the action sports industry after discovering snowboarding while attending the win-

tery world of Syracuse University. After graduating with a degree in ad copywriting, she headed back downstate for a five-year stint in the fast-paced, crazy ad agency world of NYC. Vicki has since secured a master’s in sports management and has managed to make the industry she loves her living, working as the Surf Expo’s Boardsports Marketing Manager for five years, and recently securing a position in Wilmington, N.C. as the Director of Marketing for the Board Retailers Association. Vicki is also a contributing writer for several publications and can be found up and down the coast with a surfboard under her arm.

## ADVERTISER INDEX

ADVERTISER	PAGE
Board Retailers . . . . .	IFC
SuperiorLite Bikes . . . . .	5
Ouder Space . . . . .	7
Uncalm . . . . .	11

UNBOXED	PAGE
Bamboosk8 . . . . .	16
Global Surf Industries . . . . .	16
Crescent Moon Snowshoes . . . . .	16
Pearl Izumi . . . . .	16
The House of Marley . . . . .	16
Arnette . . . . .	17
Lifeproof . . . . .	17
Boombotix . . . . .	17
Adidas Eyewear . . . . .	17
Quiksilver . . . . .	17

UNBOXED	PAGE
Dakine . . . . .	18
Wave Sport . . . . .	18
Dagger . . . . .	18
Smith Optics . . . . .	18
Zycle Fix Bicycles . . . . .	18
Point6 . . . . .	19
Serfas . . . . .	19
Light & Motion . . . . .	19
Drift Innovation . . . . .	19
Baffin . . . . .	19
Rumbatime . . . . .	20
Twin Six . . . . .	20
Vasque . . . . .	20
Kaenon . . . . .	20
Wicked Audio . . . . .	20
Industrial Revolution . . . . .	21
Zamberlan . . . . .	21

UNBOXED	PAGE
Wolverine . . . . .	21
BioLite . . . . .	21
D.Light Design . . . . .	21

RETAIL RESOURCES	PAGE
Volusion . . . . .	34
San Diego Media . . . . .	34
Feedback Sports . . . . .	34
Multidev Technologies Inc. . . . .	34
Outer World Computing . . . . .	35
Celerant Technology Corp . . . . .	35
One Step Retail Solutions . . . . .	36
Udizine Display Fixtures . . . . .	36
Lifestyle/Trimco . . . . .	36
Rics Software . . . . .	36

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