



Unstore sells itself

Samsung creates virtual reality experience in New York

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FEBRUARY 01, 2005 -- The new Samsung Experience in New York's Time Warner Center is, in fact, an experience with a capital E.

Photo by: **Harold Hechler Associates, New York**

The 10,000-sq.-ft. space, which opened last September, invites visitors into a multi-sensory odyssey of sight, sound, and most importantly, touch. Described as an "interactive emporium of virtual reality experiences and technology," the Experience showcases hundreds of Samsung products, but it doesn't sell any of them. It is an "unstore" that strives to create the "art of the possible."

"Samsung has gone from being a provider of technology to a creator of digital lifestyle products, designed to fulfill the needs of people who need to engage with content, in their mobile, home or business life," says Peter Weedfald, senior vice president for strategic marketing at Samsung North America, Richfield Park, N.J. "We want to be a docent, a partner, in exposing imagination, creativity and knowledge about the power of digital technology and digital convergence in order to better enrich a person's home, business and mobile lifestyle."

The epitome of today's "customer-centric" design, the Experience opens with an orientation table that features a massive, horizontal map of Manhattan offering a "digital living" experience, where visitors can browse specific venues and interface with hand gestures to summon information and film vignettes. At the "access bar" they can record memories of their experience with personalized postcards and artwork. Interactive stations also utilize hand-gesture interface, enabling visitors to create digital collages in real time, based on Treehouse technology developed by MIT's Media Lab, Cambridge, Mass.

The "welcome experience" includes giant rotating LCD screens, holding visual segments of an interconnected virtual world. The inaugural installation depicts characters in a modern-day "speakeasy," and fashions created expressly for Samsung by Ashleigh Verrier, a rising fashion designer from New York's Parson's School of Design.

The interior is divided into mobile, home and business lifestyle spaces where visitors can try out a vast array of products, many of which have never been seen before. A new clamshell cell phone, for instance, includes a palm pilot, DVD and VHS in one device. The home Internet refrigerator features a detachable 10-in. by 12-in. "home pad" (similar to a laptop without a keypad) that allows users to watch television, send e-mail, surf the Internet or program other devices in the home.

"Creativity allows us to escape the predictable," says Weedfald. "Every human being has three lives [home, mobile and business], and they're looking for devices that are simple to use to manage their lifestyles, to engage their lives and translate what's best for them."

While the space looks more like an interactive art gallery than a retail store, its design is uniquely—but definitely—about branding.

"People buy more on emotional capital, or their own experience base with the brand," says Weedfeld. "Consumers want to learn about a product, not be pressured about it.

"The Experience is not designed for buying," Weedfeld says, "but when visitors see [our] urbane mobile, business and home products, then go to our best channel partners and look for product, they will bring the Samsung Experience with them."

Dr. John Maeda, Allen professor of media arts and sciences at the MIT Media Lab, served as executive advisor on the project, which took approximately one year to complete. While he has been involved in designing projects before, Samsung was his first branding experience. Maeda suggested "blurring of the virtual and physical spaces" and using a "more ambient approach." In the traditional presentation of consumer electronics, he says, "consumers can't conceptualize everything. If you compare that to a furniture store, you can go into the living room or bedroom and get to experience the product. This is similar. They get to experience what it is like to live with these things."

Maeda was also fascinated with the "unstore" concept. "I think people just get excited about things not being marketed to them," he says. "I think society is a bit tired of it. All brands are realizing that traditional ads are not working anymore. There is a trend toward finding new ways to communicate to the consumer."

While Samsung created the Experience concept, it engaged Imagination Inc., an international communications and design consultancy, with offices in New York, to execute its creative vision.

"We use the term 'curating' space for consumers to live, work and play in," says Eduardo A. Braniff, creative director for content at Imagination USA. "We set out to create aspects of the consumers' lifestyle so they understand how Samsung fits in."

In the Experience, everything, including color, texture and lighting is conducive to a calm, relaxing atmosphere. "The space is designed to allow visitors to navigate relative to what they're asking for, but also to take in the full breadth of the experience," says Weedfeld.

Bamboo flooring leads down the center and up ramps along the walls to a raised platform in the back of the space, covered in an organic-design plinyl, and lifestyle spaces are carpeted. A bold "mural" of nature scenes at the rear of the store is actually a giant video wall consisting of nine plasma screens, where images change out every 15 to 20 minutes.

Side walls of the space glow in a series of colors that are programmed to change throughout the day, thanks to LED lighting behind a white matte surface. Lighting fixtures in the environment spaces include classic design pieces from mid-century to current styles. For instance, Tizio lamps provide a high-tech ambience in office vignettes, and an Arco lamp featuring a stainless steel arched arm on a stone base creates a soft glow in the home environment. CyberConduits, designed by Maeda and a team of MIT students, add an interactive element to the office/work areas. The lamps reflect the amount of reactivity to products by changing color.

"Lighting is an incredibly powerful medium in terms of creating mood and impact," says Braniff. "To be able to take a 10,000-sq.-ft. space and shift mood by a simple color change is incredibly efficient in shifting visitors' perception of the experience."

While the venue itself is confined to the third floor of the Time Warner Center, the Experience project includes a unique synergy with the entire center. The Mandarin Oriental Hotel features Samsung televisions in every room. CNN Studios use Samsung LCD display screens and Jazz at

Lincoln Center uses Samsung display monitors.

"We want to collaborate, coordinate and communicate the entire Samsung Experience," says Weedfald.