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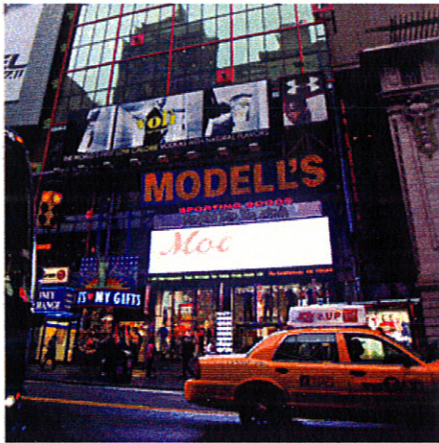
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EXECUTIVE SUITE

Upping Its Game

Modell's remodeled flagship goes for the gold

From Jan 2012 | By [Susan Reda](#) | Tags: [Executive Suite](#), [Merchandising](#)



If you want to be No. 1, you must continually and consistently raise your game to the next level. Athletes know it. Retailers know it. And Mitch Modell, CEO of Modell's Sporting Goods, lives it.

With nearly 150 stores in the Northeast, Modell oversees the nation's oldest family-owned and -operated retailer of sporting goods, sports apparel and athletic footwear. In the fall of 2010, he proudly unveiled the chain's newly renovated 20,000-sq.-ft. Times Square flagship.

Months later at a roundtable discussion, Modell was fortuitously seated next to Steve Schussler, an entrepreneur, author and innovator best known as the creator of the Rainforest Café, T-Rex and Yak & Yeti restaurant concepts. The two native New Yorkers quickly hit it off and Schussler, founder of Schussler Creative, agreed to visit Modell in Manhattan and share his observations — good and bad — about the remodeled flagship.

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With a sharp eye for detail and a keen sense of how Modell and his team could up their game, Schussler outlined a plan that called for tweaking some components, overhauling others and turning up the heat on their competitors with a more dynamic store experience. Warren Eckel, vice president of in-store visual experience, was charged with putting the blueprint in action. Part of the challenge for Eckel and his team: The work had to be done outside of store hours. Still, in a matter of weeks the modifications were in place and it was up to shoppers to vote.



'A real wow'

Fast forward a few months and the results are evident. Volume is up 32 percent and the flagship store, which used to hover in the top five chain-wide in terms of revenue, is now jockeying for the No. 1 spot month after month.

"The flagship looked great when we first debuted it after the renovation, no doubt about it," says Eckel. "But with Schussler's input we've been able to take it to the next level. It's a real wow."

Some of the more substantial changes involved lighting and music. Schussler recommended that all fixtures be lowered by three feet for two key reasons: to redirect the lighting to play up the merchandise, and to enhance the ambiance of the store.

He also was adamant that the rap music and hard rock that pounded through in-store speakers be replaced with something easier on the ears.

"Initially the thinking was that young, urban shoppers like rap music — so that's what they played," Schussler says. "But a store on 42nd Street is going to attract 50 percent of its foot traffic from tourists. If they walk in and they can't talk while they shop because the music is so driving, guess what they're going to do? They're going to walk out."

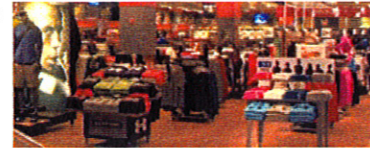
"Switching to tunes that are upbeat and familiar and have a toe-tapping quality set a completely different tone," he says.

Other changes included brightening the once-gray wall color and updating a basketball court from a distressed school-gym feel to an arena-like vibe. The formerly tinted front windows were switched to clear glass, giving passers-by an unobstructed view into the store. One of



the first things to catch visitors' eyes is a now a wall of jerseys featuring the New York team sport most dominant by season.

"There's no question that you've walked into a sporting goods store in the greatest city in the world when you see that wall of jerseys," says Eckel. "It's an unbelievable feeling."



Pushing forward

On the lower level, changes enabled Modell's to expand an already vast footwear department by 20 percent and better showcase brand partners like Under Armour and Nike.

"Some of the changes are subtle — things like being sure that all the footwear on display is facing in the same direction — and others are more prominent," Schussler says. "What retailers need to keep in mind when they're putting together their stores is that there is a lot of psychology in design."

"Why is it that sometimes you walk in a store and you can't wait to buy — even overspend — and other times you walk in and out and you're not sure what turned you off?" Schussler asks rhetorically. "It has a lot to do with understanding the psychology of retail and design."

Schussler commends Modell for his willingness to shoulder the criticism and push forward. "Let's be honest — he spent a fortune revamping the flagship and he was proud of it. Then I come along and tell him I can make it better. That's not an easy pill to swallow. But Mitch [Modell] is not a guy with an ego trip. He wants to run a great business and a great store. And in this instance, he knocked it out of the ballpark."