By Scott C. Brown

Capturing students' attention requires some creativity. First, analyze your career center's location, layout, and furnishings. Then, start thinking like the marketing minds behind IKEA or a chain of grocery stores.
For some time, career services offices have felt increasing expectations from a variety of stakeholders. Yet, career services practitioners struggle with how to get key resources to students who are often overwhelmed in a crowded information environment. How can career services centers compete effectively for students' time and attention? Following is a rationale for a retail-oriented approach to career services, an analysis of a typical career office experience from a retail perspective, and examples of strategies for applying these lessons to your own offices.

Why Career Services Professionals Should Think Like Retailers

First ask, “What can a career services office visit provide that the Internet can not?” A number of things. We can certainly provide the information and resources that students desire. But we can also lessens their fears and apprehensions about the career process in general, and provide more resources than students can even imagine they need. We can also increase the “value” they associate with career offices, which might increase their future engagement with the office and induce them to speak favorably about the experience to their peers, parents, and professors. To maximize the student experience, we need to understand the student experience.

The Science of Shopping

Before we explore career offices in particular, let’s talk about shopping in general. Paco Underhill has done some interesting work in “consumer anthropology,” spending time with consumers and observing the patterns and motivations for their behavior. Underhill observed that people shop in predictable ways, therefore shopping spaces should be designed around these realities. It is interesting, but not surprising, to find that most purchases are impulse buys. If people would only purchase what they came to the store for, the U.S. economy would collapse.

To capitalize on this phenomena, retailers must propel potential buyers to where they want buyers to go. That means retailers must harmonize design (premises), merchandising (the stuff in them), and operations (what employees do). Store visits can be analyzed by tempo, duration, and consumer’s state of mind at various points of the experience. Additionally, stores have different zones where the interactions may be different, and those zones may have different densities.

In the retail experience, sequence of goods and services matters—there are places to present an item that better converge with a consumer’s readiness and interest in the item. For example, delicatessen owners were confused as to why they did not sell more potato chips. The problem was that they put the chips at the beginning of the line before customers had decided what they wanted to eat. By placing chips after the sandwich had been ordered, customers could more specifically complement their sandwiches, and chip sales skyrocketed.

There are several interesting physical and mental issues that affect the shopping experience. Consumers most often purchase what is in their “strike zone,” which is the area above the knees and below eye level. Consumers cannot buy what they cannot carry, so one of the most important innovations was the shopping cart, which dramatically increases the amount of items that consumers can purchase.

Research shows that right-handed people tend to favor their right side. If retailers wish to sell more of a certain item, they should put under-used items to the right of the “bull’s-eye” item. Another interesting phenomenon is the “butt brush.” If consumers physically run into other shoppers because the area is narrow, they will often leave the area or even the store—and the selling opportunity is lost. Other findings include the faster people walk, the narrower their field of vision, which makes it harder to see anything on their periphery; and college-educated people tend to read the packages.
Retailers also must find a way to draw consumers to the end of the space, so that they avoid making a shallow loop around the store. This is why supermarkets place eggs, milk, and many other staples in the back of the store. Shoppers must walk past a variety of other items and be tempted to purchase them. An effective retail operation that demonstrates some of Underhill’s assertions is IKEA, the Swedish furnishings giant. IKEA operates enormous big-box stores that showcase products of superior design at low cost. Almost every aspect of the IKEA retail experience is designed to increase customers’ time in the store and prepare them to purchase. Though there are ways to switchback and leave, customers have an overwhelming sense to follow the long winding path through the entire store.

IKEA pre-furnishes whole rooms and apartments, helping connect the merchandise with the studied needs of its consumers. IKEA created the supervised “Small-world” area for children, where videos, games, and running-around areas are offered. Why? Because if the kids get restless, parents cut the store visit short, and less time in the store equals fewer dollars for IKEA. Kids look forward to it, and parents have peace of mind that the kids are cared for, and thus can focus on shopping.

IKEA provides wide-mouth shopping bags and huge carts to accommodate multiple purchases and offers a number of items at an extremely low cost. There are items that a consumer knows are a great deal, which could influence the consumer to think the same of the rest of the merchandise.

IKEA also provides maps of the store, golf pencils, and lists to structure the experience, all to maximize access to merchandise.

Analyzing the Career Services Office Experience

There are a number of ways to apply the science of shopping to a career services office.

How do students “shop” in career offices? Are they “hunters” or “browsers”? What are the different zones in the office? Density? When are the offices “open”? How can you “up sell” students to the best services? Are there differences of use by class, major, or time of year? How are you currently merchandising your programs/services? What can students get from being in the career center that they can’t get elsewhere? What information do you believe students must have?

Following is an analysis of the Career Development Center (CDC) at Mount Holyoke College from a retail perspective and the subsequent changes staff implemented. Analysis included approaching the building; entering and exiting the foyer; waiting at the check-in counter; and visiting the handout and waiting areas, career library, and workshop room. continued
Approaching the Building
The CDC is not perceived by students to be in the center of campus and is housed in a drab building connected to the campus health center. The signage was not prominent, and shrubbery had grown over it. Staff decided they needed to know how students would notice and approach the office, and how to redirect foot traffic to the office.

Changes made included mounting a bright blue banner outside that can be seen from the street more easily, displaying a colorful sandwich board listing the day’s activities to direct foot traffic to the office, and trimming the shrubbery that had covered the signage.

Entering the Foyer
When students open the front door and enter the foyer, they move quickly, only spending two to four seconds in this transition area. Students will not read anything involved or complicated until they are in the actual career office, so key flyers should be posted deeper inside the office. Additionally, there should be no single-sided posters on glass walls, because an opportunity to provide information is lost when students leave the center. What was information the CDC hoped to convey? What were students looking for?

Changes made included removing extra materials, moving the trash receptacles, adding a plant in the sight line, removing a brochure printed in tiny font that could not be easily read, and posting office hours and contact information.

The Check-in Counter
From the foyer, the check-in counter is on the left. At this point in the student’s visit, the tempo slows down and the student is greeted by a receptionist. Is there anything to look at behind the student workers while students are waiting to be helped? What materials are on the check-out counter to the immediate right (where people stand)?

Changes made to this area included moving the “One Card” swipe reader to the far right of the counter so that students wouldn’t have to switch back to perform this task. A suggestion box that required thoughtful reflection was moved, since it had been placed in an area that students were moving through quickly. Staff put a suggestion box on the CDC web site instead. Knowing students would pause at the counter, postcards for YourPlan, the CDC’s comprehensive, four-year career curriculum were placed in an accessible spot; and the staff picture was moved from its obscure place behind the student receptionist.

Waiting Area
When students wait for an appointment, they settle in the lobby area. The tempo is slow and students usually spend two to seven minutes there. There is an abundance of chairs in the lobby, but only one that faces the receptionist is typically used. The lobby had a somewhat impersonal feel, and items that staff didn’t discard but were not quite sure what to do with were deposited there. There were heavy, black kiosks that seldom had any information and blocked the sight lines of students sitting in the waiting room.

Changes made to the waiting area included moving the kiosks, removing non-CDC items and a phone, placing career-related periodicals in the lobby, and rearranging the chairs and couch to open up traffic flow into the lobby. Floor lamps were purchased to soften the fluorescent lights.

Handout Area
Handouts were displayed across from the waiting area. Students would sometimes drift there while waiting for an appointment. The tempo in this area is slow, and students may spend 30 seconds to five minutes there. Staff looked at this area from a retail perspective and asked, “How do students usually approach the area? Can the handouts be seen from the counter and waiting area? Do people take information and leave? Do they browse?” Ideally, staff wanted to get these materials to students so they could maximize their time with counselors. However, the handouts were a hodgepodge of materials and not displayed in a uniform way.

Changes made to this area included grouping the handouts more thematically and removing an easel that blocked off part of the space.
Library

The library is the repository of all the CDC’s information. In this space, students usually did one of three things: go to the receptionist’s desk, head to the computer stations in the back, or stand in the middle until they decide where to browse.

CDC staff needed to understand what information students must have. Staff also thought carefully about certain policies, such as making students check their bags and prohibiting students from eating in the library.

CDC staff asked themselves these questions: Are there any resources students need that they might not know they need? How long do they stay at individual sections? Does every person who comes to the library get some information? What are the most popular resources? How is furniture used?

Staff decided the CDC should project a funky, individual vibe and not look like Blockbuster. Staff also discovered that some key resources were hidden and mislabeled.

Changes made to the library included obtaining visible, accurate signage; placing “staff picks” on a movable cart; removing some of the newspapers; removing a big filing cabinet that had been in the middle of the floor; encouraging copying because students can’t check out materials; providing student testimonials for resources; and allowing book bags and eating.

CDC Workshop Room

The workshop room is used as a classroom during the day. Students are generally captive audiences in this setting. How could the CDC capitalize on this?

Changes made to this area included placing CDC materials on the back wall and placing a subtle Your Plan postcard display so that it could be seen during lectures.

Exiting the CDC

As students leave the CDC, is there anything else they need? Are there any parting messages and/or any good

Tips for Looking at a Career Center From a Retail Perspective

- Analyze all aspects of the career center from the student perspective.
  Physically go outside the office and approach it. How is the presence of your office signaled on campus? What are nearby traffic patterns? When students break the threshold of the foyer, what do they see? Walk through the entire office.

- Map the office.
  Observe the density of student traffic at different times, and note how students interact with the space and area. Where do they linger? What catches the eye? Why?

- Train career services staff to be amateur consumer anthropologists.
  Empower staff, particularly those that have the opportunity to observe students in their “natural habitats,” to make changes. Build this topic into training, and make it a standing agenda item for staff meetings.
changes in this area included monitoring debris, and posting a calendar of events that advertise workshops in which staff wanted to increase attendance.

Rethinking the Web

Although there is tremendous value of being physically in the office, the CDC, like any retail space, can be enhanced by an online presence. The Internet can give the office identification and provide a compelling overview of programs and services.

Print vs. Web

Reading on the Internet is different from reading printed materials. Reading online is slower and less comfortable. Readers get impatient more easily, and are more likely to move on if they don’t find what they want quickly. Web readers scan the page before committing to details.

Web Writing Tips

When writing for the web, the top-level links should be general. To help users navigate the site, use anchors (in-page links), this will help the reader find the desired information. Web readers come from a variety of different sources, so you should provide a context for new arrivals. Use phrases for hyperlinks, not single words. Web writing requires a way to facilitate scanning—use bullets, boldface, and straightforward, unambiguous language. Lastly, put important content “above the fold”—don’t make readers scroll down for it.

Changes made in these areas were implemented after a long process, wherein the staff identified the most salient materials. This meant that individual sections needed to be more concise.

As a bonus, CDC staff can track stats related to web usage, including most used sites and referral sources. (A curious finding was that the most trafficked page on the site was “declining a job offer,” which was linked to Google.)

Conclusion

The stakes are very high for career offices. Competing for students’ attention and time is increasingly difficult, so career offices are well advised to use a variety of methods to assist them. A retail approach could provide a fresh way to think about career services’ collective purpose and enhance organizational effectiveness.

Endnotes

6 Underhill, 1999.

References