

Automotive Dealerships

Q: What are some of the new issues that are important to automotive dealers when it comes to lighting?

A: I think the new issues are a result of research completed in the last 10 years or so on issues of visibility: the physiological and psychological aspects of visibility that now may help us make more informed decisions about lighting and how it can be used to benefit the dealer and reduce costs. Lighting research, techniques and technologies are evolving quickly and it is important to stay abreast of them. Becoming aware of this information and putting it to use can be an asset to the owner.

Q: Isn't this information covered at dealer seminars, trade journals or by the architects designing the dealerships?

A: Typically, not. Lighting is most often thought about like furniture, plumbing or HVAC. For many people, the design process is more about selecting hardware, or in this case, light fixtures. Most of the lighting for dealerships- I would guess 95% or more- is not designed by professional lighting designers that would bring important issues to the table. So, the owner never really has the opportunity to benefit from these new ideas or understand how they may impact the dealership design and his costs.

Q: Who is typically involved in a lighting installation?

A: Usually a variety of people are involved. The architect may have input on fixture style or general direction of the lighting. The electrical engineer may then determine foot-candle criteria and lighting loads, an interior designer may be involved too. Typically however, lighting is influenced by lighting sales representatives that work with the electrical engineer to specify a system. Then often, an electrical contractor will "value engineer" the system with their sales distributor to reduce the equipment costs.

Q: Wouldn't the architect or the electrical engineer understand most lighting issues?

A: Architects and engineers have their hands full keeping up with new information pertaining to their respective fields. Very few of them attend lighting conferences, seminars, trade shows or are active in continuing lighting education programs or research projects. As for the sales reps and distributors, they are primarily interested in selling products. What incentive would they have in reducing the amount of equipment installed in a sales lot, for example? It would reduce their commissions. It really is a conflict of interest.

Q: Why should the current design method be changed?

A: It should be changed if the owners or their representatives wish to improve visibility, reduce energy and maintenance costs, reduce light trespass and sky pollution, control construction costs and potentially increase sales with improved lighting.

Q: What is light trespass?

A: Light trespass is a term that describes the effect created when the illumination adversely influences people in the community, in their adjacent properties. It's essentially stray light.

Q: Can you calculate the annual operations cost of a new lighting system before it's installed?

A: Yes. Life cycle costs can be demonstrated using computer programs and should be discussed early in the design process. This is when the owner's representative's involvement is important to approve equipment budgets. Some of the annual savings may mean spending a bit more in the construction phase on more efficient lighting and control systems. For example, if I could demonstrate to you that by spending \$100 on a automated lighting control system now, that it would save you conservatively, \$20 per year for the next 10 years in reduced energy and maintenance costs, would you approve the control system? That's a 20% return on investment! This is what we call real value engineering up front.

Q: Is there anything that can be done to improve the outdoor sales lot?

A professional lighting designer can show you how to attract more attention to a sales lot at night, improve visibility to form color and shape while in the lot and cut your cost of sales lot lighting operations (energy and maintenance). This can easily be accomplished since most sales lots today are drastically over illuminated. It's distracting, creates glare, uses more energy than necessary and pollutes the night sky with wasted light.

Q: Why are so many dealerships using high light levels?

A: This happen when dealers, in their attempt to be competitive, use sales reps or out dated ideas to create their lighting systems. The 'more is better' mentality is perpetuated because they aren't aware of visibility issues. Lighting and audio have similar physics. If a sound system is really loud, distorted and has poor frequency response, is it better than one that has less volume but fullfrequency response and clarity? The way to attract attention to your sales lot after dark is not by "shouting" at your customers. Lighting should be designed as part of a "system" of illumination.

Q: What is the best way to attract attention without over lighting?

A: To attract attention after dark, a visual hierarchy should be established, an order of visual importance- graphics, signage, façade lighting, product lighting and showroom lighting all designed together to create the right balance of brightness. It's possible to use lighting to help attract attention, identify the dealer, feature the product, create a welcome experience, aid the customer in finding the entrance, create a view into the showroom and to use light to compliment brand image. Is obnoxiously bright lighting that hurts your eyes an appropriate image for a dealership? What about the effect of the lighting in the neighborhood and light trespass?

Q: Can well designed lighting increase sales?

A: 90% of retail sales is a visual experience. Attraction, product analysis, perception, and often impressions depend on visibility. The question is how well do you want your customers to see? How do you want your customers to feel? Lighting can be a visual amplifier and your best silent sales element. It can work for you or, against you. We have been lighting automotive projects for over 22 years, including dealerships, trade shows and product showrooms. We've also designed lighting for millions of square feet of retail space and experienced the results that better lighting has on customer perception and reaction.

Q: Is lighting just as important in other areas of the dealership?

A: Of course- lets look at the sales showroom. Does the lighting compliment the product, brand image, and atmosphere of the showroom or distract from it? What kind of impression do you want your customer to have of your product and company culture? An impression of "value discount" or of quality, luxury, technology and value combined? You wouldn't light a nice jewelry store like a Wal-Mart or an upscale clothing store like a resale shop. Lighting produces perception in customers. It is important to decide what that perception should be then design lighting to enhance it.

Q: Could the service department benefit from improved lighting?

A: What if better lighting technique reduced errors and could improve productivity in the service department? What would that be worth? What would a customer's perception be in a service department with great lighting?

Q: How much could it cost to improve the lighting in the typical service area?

A: Take 10% of the total salaries of everyone in the service department for just one year and then put that into an improved lighting budget and remember, its not about quantity but the quality of light. I've conducted surveys of service departments at auto dealerships. I've talked to mechanics and department supervisors. I'm convinced that some basic lighting improvements would help

their efficiency, customer perceptions and the owners bottom line. Most lighting is so poor now, any improvement would show a return on investment.

Q: Are there other areas the owner should consider for lighting improvements?

A: Sure. Areas where customers receive their new vehicle is a valuable place to control the lighting and the offices where customers visit are important to the dealer image. Dealers should also consider reducing the visual distractions in the show room. The big glass box concept of merchandising during daylight creates a noisy place to look at new vehicles. If the view to the exterior were minimized, the customer would be more focused on the product. The environment would be more pleasing.

Q: Getting rid of the glass box showroom concept seems a bit extreme.

A: Well, isn't it time to take a fresh look at the function of the showroom and how it can be improved? The glass box idea was started when there was foot traffic and people used to walk and stop to look into a showroom. Today, we are driving by at 40 miles per hour or faster. What can you see at that speed? During the daylight, the glass acts like a mirror. You can't see inside anyway. At night, you can.

Q: From a lighting standpoint, how can the glass in the showroom be improved?

A: How about a system of shades to control the glare of the sun and all the other distractions during the day and keep the customer focused on the reason they came to the showroom in the first place? Then at night, the shades may be opened to allow a nighttime view inside. We did this on a couple of dealerships and you know what happened? The sales staff had a hard time working in a more concealed space. They were used to being able to see outside and had a psychological barrier about the shading system. Old ways of doing things don't change easily. When asked, the customers unanimously agreed that the showroom was much more pleasant with the shades down. They weren't opaque; they were translucent, so it they let light in. The cars looked great, customers were not distracted, and the glare from the sun was reduced. The atmosphere was wonderful. So you have to ask the question. Are we here to sell cars or not? If something is better for sales, shouldn't it be considered?

Q: If the design of lighting has been free in the past, why should someone pay for this service?

A: The value-added of good design will pay for itself many times over. You either pay a little more to do it right the 1st time, or pay for years to come with a design that costs too much to operate and does little to aid in the sales effort.

Q: Where can I find more information on architectural lighting?

A: Visit the websites of: The IALD / International Association of Lighting Designers (www.iald.org),

IES / Illuminating Engineering Society (www.iesna.org), IDA / International Dark Sky Association (www.darksky.org), LRC / Lighting Research Institute at Rensselaer (www.lrc.rpi.edu), and NLB / National Lighting Bureau (www.nlb.org). I suggest that you try to find sites that aren't sponsored by manufacturers, to receive information that's free from possible conflicts of interest.

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