

I first became involved in consulting with ceramic tile retailers about ten years ago with a large mass-market chain. One thing that surprised me back then and has continued to do so is how carelessly many display their products.

Tiles are very beautiful objects in their own right and many are sold at premium prices. I am writing this, whilst enjoying a brief lunch break, from Cevisama, the international tile fair held annually in Valencia. Many of you will have been visitors here too. All around me are elaborate and carefully considered exhibition stands designed to show off the manufacturers' products to the very highest standards to the world's second-most discerning and important buyers.

The world's first-most discerning and important buyers are your customers. How depressing then to visit an average out-of-town tile shop and see rows of badly-lit, poorly-coordinated tile displays with different colours, patterns, textures, sizes and styles all crowded together with no visual relief.

I know that shop space is at a premium and having worked for retailers in many different sectors I also know the pressure is on to cram in the best variety of product but I remain convinced that overall sales can be improved by displaying a few tiles well rather than a load (often literally) of tiles inappropriately.

I have even seen, in a chain of stores that I won't risk shaming by naming them, enormous stands of un-grouted floor tiles with prices daubed on using untidy marker pen.

It did not look like a successful enterprise. What subliminal message does this give to purchasers? I think it says that the retailer doesn't care about the product, that it is virtually worthless and does not merit showing off. It also looks like the price has been made up and could be changed at whim. No wonder everything appeared to be marked down in the store. If a product is made to look as if it can't be sold at full retail (thereby making full profit) few people will be fool enough to pay anything other than a discount price. Just think how you react to bargain bins and knock down deals, most experienced purchasers facing a major purchase like tiles will wonder why they weren't sold at full price in the beginning. Few buy what others don't aspire to.

This issue of Tile UK features natural stone tiles in particular. These products are thought of as especially

# IN SEARCH OF SPACE

Regular Tile UK columnist Nigel Witham argues that to successfully sell premium products like natural stone, less is more and that room for products to breathe is essential.



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difficult to display well. They are heavy, large, need polish or treatment to look as they would in situ and are particularly affected by the type of light in which they are displayed. In a bright, fluorescently-lit shop environment it is hard to simulate a domestic bathroom or restaurant floor for instance. However, such tiles are also very beautiful. Nature has taken tens of millions of years to lay down the sedimentary slate beds from which today's super-fashionable floor tiles are excavated. Igneous rocks formed hundreds of millions of years ago in the throats of volcanic eruptions are the source of the granite tiles that many of your customers will be having laid on their bathroom floors. These products have interest, depth, history and

mystery. They are older and more exquisite than many of the most expensive jewels your same customers happily pay fortunes for. So why don't we give more thought about how to make them look more valuable?

Here is an idea to try. Call me if you'd like some professional help with it. If you have a small store or prefer to carry a large range of natural product then instead of struggling to find room to display large boards attempting to simulate them whole floors or walls, why not put just one or two well-polished example tiles in a properly-lit display case and mount alongside some manufacturer's photographs of the tiles set in an aspirational home environment. Have a brochure or portfolio with some good shots of different colourways and some free tiles for customers to handle and take away. People like to feel expensive things and the sense of touch is almost as important as visual stimulation.

Be ready to explain about the product: where it came from, how it was formed, how long it will last, how, if properly chosen it will be a sound investment that will enhance the value of their home.

Leave space between the different displays. It is well known that a graphic designer will leave lots of white space on a page of text. Try to think about your shop the same way as they think about a page of text; as a display if information that can be clear and beautiful or crowded and unreadable.

Leave space around the different tiles so that each can be seen in isolation without the confusion and clutter of juxtaposed conflicting colours, styles, sizes and textures.

Next think carefully about how you display the prices. Things sold at a big discount have big price tickets in bright contrasting colours emblazoned across them. Things sold at premium, high margin prices, like German cars, Swiss watches or Italian suits have small, discreet, understated price tags.

The subliminal, aspirational message inherent in this is 'if you want this product and are tasteful and successful enough to afford and select it then you should not to be too concerned about the cost'.

Try to keep the price sticker or label away from the tiles. It's probably best positioned just below, in a visually subordinate position - remember with these tiles price is secondary to quality.

OK well there's some food for thought and hopefully action. I'm just finishing my designer cappuccino before another trek around the exhibition stands.