

SPLASH FOR CASH

Getting the most for your money when it comes to interior image-making.

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Interior Designers often face the same kind of challenges as the guys in charge of the Fourth of July fireworks display. Given a holiday, high expectations and a limited budget, how do you get the greatest explosive impact for your pyrotechnic dollar?

A similar creative challenge faces the designers of athletic clubs and recreational centers. Given a building, high expectations and a limited budget, how do you get the greatest visual experience for your interior design dollar?

In today's world of educated, image-conscious consumers, everyone is looking for the most "bang for the buck". The old school of Spartan, bare-bones, build-it-and-they-will-come functional accommodation has given way to the new school of enriching the experience of users with services, programs, architecture and finishes. It is the aim of this article to explore the creative ways in which today's interior designers are pushing the "image envelope" in a value-conscious world.

The creative stage for interior designers consists of floors, walls, ceilings, lighting, millwork and furnishings. These variables are manipulated within the architectural context to establish the "look & feel" of the building and fit it to the needs and expectations of its audience of members.

Flooring:

Functional considerations will lead to a generic selection such as wood, carpet, rubber, stone, vinyl, ceramic tile or a wide range of synthetic materials. Each of these materials presents opportunities for value-conscious enrichment without breaking the bank.

Examples of these applications are as follows:

Use custom colored and patterned carpets

Using larger patterned and custom colored carpets is a good option, especially for those high -energy areas such as, cardio / fitness areas. Most carpet manufacturers have a program for larger patterned carpets that can be custom mixed with yarns from a standard color palette. These carpets enjoy standard pricing and therefore cost no more than picking a selection out of a standard book.

Inset high end area rugs or standard / stock carpets into other flooring materials

Using area rugs or standard carpet inset into a stone, ceramic tile, vinyl or other flooring system is an effective way to incorporate a high-end look at minimal cost. Examples of areas in which this approach would be especially effective are lounge areas, reception areas and upscale locker rooms.

Use higher density carpets at areas that will be noticed

Consider applying carpet base where you might otherwise use a rubber base. Another effective option is to "pump up the volume" on your carpet weight. Using a 30 oz, 36oz or 40 oz carpet in limited areas, such as lounge areas, sales / marketing areas or any where that the members can experience the value.

Use sheet vinyl in creative and expressive ways

The technology of today has greatly improved sheet vinyl and vinyl composition tile (vct). These materials offer great patterns, textures and colors. These flooring materials should be brought out of the "back of house" status and introduced to main public areas. Creative options abound. The ease of cutting and the larger sizes of the tiled products afford unlimited design potential, but be conscious of waste factors related to certain patterns and matching requirements. Inset vinyls to create great patterned design and use them for logos worked into floors that can be viewed from above or in a large entrance.

Use special finish flooring i.e.: concrete, natural stone and ceramic tiles

There are many “old” materials that are finding a new life or resurgence today. Stained, smooth-finished concrete is one the best examples of this. It is durable and attractive. With the new texture and coloration possibilities of this product it is becoming a valid choice for main public areas. However, with these topical treatments this product can be expensive. Another selection is the use of stone. Using a limited application of natural stones as an accent surface at entrance areas; lobbies and dining areas can be very effective for portraying a high-end look and quality for limited investment. You can also use natural stones mixed in with a porcelain tile background.

Wall Finishes:

Functional considerations of durability and impact-resistance will lead you to a generic selection such as paint, vinyl wall covering, fabric, stone, wood paneling or ceramic tile. Creative, and cost-effective thinking and application can enrich each of these finishes.

Examples of these applications are as follows:

Apply vinyl and fabric wall coverings

Vinyl wall coverings are not typically considered to be expensive materials, but are still not used as much or as often as they could be. Using vinyl wall covering in locker room areas, especially lounge areas are a great way to express some quality into a project. Using vinyl, fabric and specialty paper wall coverings in art niche’s and display walls where traffic is at a minimum offers a great opportunity to get a very special look and feel.

Combine regular, specialty paints and paint graphics

Using paints more creatively is always a great opportunity to get bigger bang for your buck. Paint is usually a less expensive application and it is often cheaper to repaint than repair more expensive materials. Use the color scheme more effectively by painting architectural elements in accent colors. Create a multi-color tone on tone scheme that gains a rich look by virtue of the variety and play of color tones. Paint columns, low walls and special walls in accent colors but try to avoid expensive masking requirements. Creating patterns using metal wall reveals and expansion/control joints, then painting out the patterns in accents paints adds interest into the space. Use multiflec paint products in the same way as paint accents, but try to place them in lower traffic areas, or out-of-reach for normal wear and tear. Some multiflec products can be more difficult and expensive to touch up. Always inquire about maintenance and repair before specifying the product.

Accent with paneling, molding, wood and metal trims

Paneling, molding and wood trims are effective ways to highlight important public spaces. They offer a warm and rich feel. Create a wainscot treatment, carry wood base throughout the main public spaces and use crown, chair rails and accent trims within the space. Using wood window and door casements are also a way to introduce wood products into the facility. There are a lot of great wood veneer and laminate products that can also be used in the same manner, but at an increased visual impact. Wood laminates are a great alternative to get the great “look” of wood and can blend in with the real materials being used in a job. Use these laminates in areas that are still highly visible but out of the “touch zone”, and you’ve got an upscale look at a reduced cost.

Lighting and Ceiling Elements:

Elaborate ceiling forms and systems can significantly add to construction costs, and will greatly influence the lighting design. Tremendous aesthetic impact, however, can be achieved with carefully positioned ceiling enhancements, used judiciously, to upgrade an otherwise anonymous ceiling plane. The use of exposed structure in recreational activity areas can help offset the cost of other area embellishments, and differentiate the activity areas from the more sedentary environments, such as offices and meeting rooms.

Lighting at the primary entries and exits provides many opportunities to enhance user’s experience.

Lighting can be decorative by virtue of its outward appearance and surface finish, or may be used to accentuate other building elements, either from a concealed location or as a visible light source.

Utilize White Painted Exposed Structure With Indirect Lighting to Create Expansive High Ceilings at Activity Areas / Utilize Dark Painted Exposed Structure Above an Open Ceiling Grid to Create Drama in low Ceiling Areas / Provide a Combination of the Above / Avoid Using the Typical 2 x 4 Grid Ceiling Everywhere

Many designers miss a great opportunity to provide a more inspiring ceiling by deciding not to expose structural and mechanical elements. Exposing the structural roof deck and support systems can be very dramatic if done with care. Indirect lighting bounced off a white painted structure and deck provides a very pleasant light source, and also conserves cost where an acoustical lay-in ceiling is not required.

Use Economical, low-voltage Pendant Lighting over Primary Service Counters

Using small scale decorative pendant fixtures over prime counter areas such as the food service line or reception desk, serves a functional purpose while at the same time, being located at or just slightly above eye level, provides a highly visible upgrade over a typical recessed downlight.

Use Economical Decorative and Non-Decorative Wall Sconces

Most manufacturers offer economical wall sconce fixtures which match the design of their pendant fixtures, and when used in combination, the effect is dramatic.

Provide Concealed Accent Lighting for Special Interest Areas and Artwork

When using targeted areas of heavily textured stone or other high texture wall finishes, a light source close to the wall will provide a “grazing” effect, which will create shadows to accentuate and highlight the textured wall area.

Limit the Use of Gypsum Board Ceilings and Soffits to High-Impact Areas

Using metal ceilings, grills, suspension and multi-level ceiling treatments is a creative way to add interest to special areas of the facility. When the building has large volume ceiling areas, the use of multi-level or suspended ceilings are a great way to add intimacy and human scale to areas such as café/restaurant spaces, lobbies and lounges.

Used judiciously, dropped or raised gypsum board ceiling areas can enhance and distinguish one functional area from another, and customize an otherwise unremarkable space. The combination with specialty lighting and accent paints, can provide more emphasis to prominent areas of the building. Elaborate sizes or shapes, however, should be avoided to conserve cost.

Custom Woodwork / Cabinetry:

In designing and selecting finishes for built-in woodwork and cabinetry, a distinction should be made between back-of-the-house general use cabinetry and front-of-the-house customer contact area woodwork. For obvious reasons, the latter deserve a higher level of investment in form and finish. Such locations as reception/check-in counters, activity sign-up, public service counters, etc., are prime candidates for differentiation by the use of upgraded materials such as stone, wood, solid surfacing materials, and glass. As with other interior components there are ample opportunities for the inventive designer to achieve an upgraded look for a manageable cost.

Using high-end materials, selectively, on high visibility built-in woodwork items provides a prominent design statement. Also, because these pieces are closely approached, a tactile (polished or textured) experience can also be introduced. The following are prime examples:

Upgrade Retail Shop / Logo Shop Display Walls

Upgrade Food and Beverage Areas

Use Wood Handrails

Use Solid Surfacing Materials or Stone Tops at Vanity Counters

Build-up Top Edges to a Greater Thickness

Conceal Unsightly Exposed Edges When Using Laminates

Upgrade Reception Desks / Service Counters

An example of the types of treatments that may be successful are the use of polished or natural cleft stone tops, rich wood stains, or a combination of unique patterned laminates, or contrasting metal finishes. Providing recesses for computer monitors and cash registers also lends a custom touch to any service counter.

Use Wood Trim at Tops of Partial Height and Freestanding Partitions

Selective use of wood trim as wall caps or corner guards provides an upgraded appearance as well as serving a functional purpose to protect vulnerable surfaces in high-traffic areas.

Use Wood Veneers on Retail Displays in Lieu of Plastic Laminates

In retail wall displays, the simple selection of a wood finish for slat-wall type displays, and the use of wide slat spacing (12" for example in lieu of the typical 3") provide the impression of a more expensive wood panel wall finish instead of the more typical retail experience.

Use Wood Locker Doors in Lieu of Plastic Laminate

The use of natural wood lockers in lieu of plastic laminate faced lockers, while being slightly more costly, more than pays for itself in the appeal to members, and to provide a "club" locker room experience.

Provide Artwork or Planter Ledges at Key Intersections

As the facility is being designed, allow space for artwork niches and recessed display areas. If the shapes of recesses and ledges are kept simple, the cost is minimal to incorporate these elements and convey an impression of quality. Some example areas include locker entry vestibules, elevator lobbies, and points of transition between one functional area to another.

Furnishings/Artwork and Accessories:

When establishing your project construction budget, be sure to include a budget for all major furnishings, especially in those high visibility areas. Nothing could be worse than successfully creating a beautiful building, and then realizing that your current budget won't support the purchase of appropriate furnishings to complete the effort.

So often in our commercial applications artwork and accessories are not incorporated into the overall design concept or budget. These elements can offer great value and appearance to a facility, at comparably low cost. Artwork and accessories can add an unexpected and infinitely variable interior enrichment.

Some key elements to keep in mind in order to get the most striking impact from your furnishings include the following:

Use upgraded fabrics on economical seating at major public lounges or sales areas for greater impact.

Use rich colorful upholstery fabrics used on more economical task or secondary seating.

Table lamps and floor lamps to accentuate lounge and service areas

Provide framed and matted posters for a budget conscious artwork package

Use original artwork and commissioned pieces in combination with the above to give the impression of a higher quality artwork program.

Provide permanent floral displays at key locations for maximum effect.

Include a selection of complimentary accessories at high visibility areas

Utilize floor graphics and murals for maximum impact at low cost.

Limit high finish wood veneers and solids to high visibility areas.

When planning your building and circulation areas, target dedicated areas for high impact furnishings, and provide more economically priced furnishings in back-of-the-house areas.

Provide formal lounges and waiting areas for your members (think hotel lobby) and spend your budget for the most impact here.

Early planning of reception lounges and major public seating areas may allow you to use more budget oriented furnishings, but in such a manner that the adjacent building forms and finishes compliment and enrich a more basic piece. For example, the use of a wood stain on furnishings to match the building woodwork, is a no cost or very economical way of customizing the space. Complimenting a curvilinear wall by selecting adjacent furnishings with curvilinear elements is another way of using a budget creatively to get a richer look with limited means.

For meeting and assembly areas, which require large numbers of chairs, the use of an economical chair is almost always a consideration. By prudently selecting an appropriate stacking chair, however, the visual and physical comfort level can be maintained at a high level. There are quite a number of manufacturers who offer reasonably priced stacking chairs with wood seats and backs for an upgraded image, for instance. The seats and backs are usually shell formed to the contours of the body, and offer a classy alternative to the more typical stacking chair.

The use of the client's own material ("com") or more expensive upholstery fabrics on reasonably priced seating at lounges will do wonders in creating the image of a more expensive piece while using an economical frame. Using "com's" may often be more expensive than using the manufacturers' standard running line fabrics, but the trade off in improved appearance can more than justify the increased cost.

Using a higher end fabric on the chair back in combination with a vinyl or less expensive seat fabric, you can limit your spending further, while getting the most impact where it is most visible.

Include plants and planters at key locations.

Plants and planters can also be an element that more than offset their initial cost with a greater visual impact, by complimenting the surrounding building elements and furnishings. A few strategically placed plants can improve the appearance and visual comfort of any space.

The use of table lamps and floor lamps provides a more attractive seating area, softens the experience, and is more club-like.

Examples of how to use artwork and accessories in cost effective ways are as follows:

Take a regular poster piece and add multi layer borders and larger more detailed frames and you've got an expensive looking piece. Frames that add the appearance of value are larger in scale and in painted, metal and wood finishes.

Don't be afraid to use original and commissioned artwork in a facility. Use these pieces in high visibility areas within the facility. Examples of locations would be the main entrance space, lounges and customer service contact points. Commissioned work is not always thousands of dollars, as usually perceived. Locate an art representative in your area, give them your budget and let them show you the abundant opportunities that are available.

Floral and uniquely designed accessories enrich a space more than expected. If your facility is one in which you want members to linger and be involved, than why not make it feel more like a resort. It is important that a floral designer specializing in commercial applications make the floral arrangements. Both floral arrangements and accessories such as ceramics or framed photography can be used in the art niches, incorporated into display areas and used in lobby, lounge and locker room spaces. Using silk arrangements and plants along with real selections is a great way to apply some cost savings of overall maintenance.

With all artwork pieces and accessories security is a factor. Use security mounts on the artwork and secure those accessories and floral arrangements that might be at risk with adhesive.

In closing, it is worthwhile to point out that true installed cost information is often difficult to obtain prior

to a formal bid. It is also not unusual to see cost estimates provided by a local product representative to be substantially higher when provided by the installing subcontractor. Direct dialogue and negotiation will often bring out cost effective ways to get the desired finish for the right price. When it comes to getting the most hollar for your dollar it is best to leave no stone unturned.