



Movin' with the Music

iPods and other technology are changing the way Hot Topic reaches out to music fans

BY ANNE DINARDO, SENIOR ASSOCIATE EDITOR

When Hot Topic, the purveyor of trendy, music-related clothing and accessories, debuted onto the retail scene in the late 1980s, music fans were wearing ripped jeans and bandanas while making mixed cassette tapes of Guns N' Roses and Def Leppard. Hit the fast-forward button and the scene is all about downloading Fall Out Boy, Fergie and KT Tunstall; listening on iPods; watching music videos on cell phones.

Technology: It's changed the way people listen to music and it's also transforming the way retailers reach out to customers. Because Hot Topic is so involved with the music scene, it decided to give its store environment a techno-update, playing up its rich music assortment and reaching to the newest groupies – those in the Net Generation who've grown up with a mouse or cell phone in their hands.

At the Galleria at Tyler in Riverside, Calif., a 42-inch flatscreen inside the prominent front window displays the Hot Topic logo and moving concert scenes. "It's a great place to communicate a lot of music," says Darrell Kinsley, Hot Topic's vp, visual merchandising and store design. "The screen gives you that hit of music at the front of the store."

After fine-tuning its display content, Hot Topic plans to use the screen to share video clips, tour information, new release dates,

top 10 lists and store events, all the content to be created and managed internally.

"This customer is so familiar with YouTube, blogs and the Internet and the new multimedia element picks up on that," says Ken Nisch, chairman of JGA, the Southfield, Mich.-based design firm that worked with Hot Topic on this fourth evolution of its store design. "And there's much more visibility to entertainment and music content."

The flatscreens are also helping Hot Topic play up its renewed emphasis on the music. Although the brand was founded on rock T's and concert posters, not all of its retail stores actually sold the music that its customers were rocking out to every night. So its new store format had to relate two messages: that stores now carry an extensive music selection, and that the company understands why that matters. "With iPods, the variety of music open to an individual is unlimited," says Kinsley. "You rarely see one category on a person's iPod. It's a blending of many styles."

Since Hot Topic's stores have reflected specific music trends – gated metal doors and dark environs when goth was in style, a tunnel entrance and red lights during the pop/punk/rave era – this new environment needed to reflect a more diverse and eclectic approach to music. So the brand decided

Paul Bielenberg, Bielenberg Associates, Los Angeles

Hot Topic reaches out to today's Net Generation with a flatscreen that displays the Hot Topic logo and concert imagery (opposite). Inside the new store format (top right), a more prominent music zone houses interactive touchscreen stations. The specialty retailer updated its former center-aisle configuration with two new side aisles (bottom right) that draw shoppers to the perimeter walls where merchandise is displayed full-face.



to create its own interpretation of the downtown indie record store (think Philadelphia's South Street or New York's Meatpacking District).

For inspiration, Hot Topic and JGA executives went abroad, visiting avant-garde locales in Europe where they explored the globalization of music and culture. "If you're 19 and getting ready to backpack across Europe, you'd want to go to Amsterdam, Barcelona, Berlin and Hamburg," says Nisch. "The one-offs and independent retailers we saw in these cities inspired the new storefront concept."

Based on their research, JGA and Hot Topic created a fabled history for the prototype, a takeoff on a 19th Century building that once served as a warehouse and now houses an independent music store. Outside the 1700-square-foot prototype, two recessed entrances flank the new bay window, creating a street-front character. Mosaic tile flooring and exposed brick and wood suggest an aged look. Backlit transoms above the doors sport the brand logo and visually connect with the prominent flatscreen.

Inside, particleboard flatwall panels and metal fixtures give a worn, construction-like vibe, while manufacturing stamps are left exposed on plywood shelving. Unfinished concrete flooring and ceiling ducts add to the character.

New gondola fixtures in varying heights improve visibility through the store and create some visual pop, "so your eye is constantly moving," says Kinsley.

A new centrally located cashwrap and nearby Music Zone anchor the store. Interactive touchscreen listening stations feature more artists. An overhead marquee announces CD release dates and in-store listening parties.

Staying tuned in to how customers are listening to and sharing their favorite hits will help Hot Topic in its goal to become as well-known for its music collection as it is for its selection of licensed concert shirts, skull belt buckles and Vans shoes.

"As technology evolves, we'll evolve with it," says Kinsley. ❖



PROJECT SUPPLIERS

CLIENT
Hot Topic, City of Industry, Calif.

DESIGN AND CONCEPT
JGA, Southfield, Mich.

ARCHITECT
Fitch, Scottsdale, Ariz.

FLOORING
American Olean, Dallas
Centiva, Florence, Ala.

WALL MERCHANDISING SYSTEM
Spacewall West, Placentia, Calif.

STOREFRONT
Arto Brick Veneer, Gardena, Calif.
Virginia Tile, Farmington Hills, Mich.

LIGHTING
Juno Lighting Group, Des Plaines, Ill.
Baselite, Chino, Calif.
Con-Tech Lighting, Northbrook, Ill.
Times Square Lighting,
Stony Point, N.Y.
L.A. Lighting, El Monte, Calif.

MILLWORK AND FIXTURES
Laurel Manufacturing, Delanco, N.J.
Temeka Inc., Perris, Calif.

GRAPHICS/SIGNAGE
Recom Group, San Dimas, Calif.
Loren Signs, Whittier, Calif.

LAMINATES
Wilsonart, Temple, Texas

PAINT
Benjamin Moore, Montvale, N.J.