

Best foot forward



Elena Maurer
LIGANOVA



Elena Maurer is the creative mind behind the fun, theatrical and quirky displays that grace the windows and shop floors of International brands like Adidas, Hugo Boss, Joop, Globus, Levi Strauss and Tommy Hilfiger. The 35-year-old, native Romanian has been setting a visual course since more than three years at the renowned Brand Retail Company LIGANOVA, located in Stuttgart and Berlin.

Interestingly the career of the sporty New York-raised Bucharest native was initially planned differently. She pursued a professional tennis career, which was interrupted due to injury. She changed her path and took on marketing and sport-sponsoring studies at New York University. After a brief period of working at Hugo Boss in the American metropolis, she was transferred to Metzingen, where the department of visual merchandising was on



the drawing board and conceptualized to take the brand to a different height.

For Maurer, Visual Merchandising is expression, passion, emotion and a way of life all at a time. It is the interface and the collaborator of architecture, interior architecture, product design, marketing and communication. Here she talks to VM&RD on her take on VM in India and her association with LIGANOVA.

What brings LIGANOVA to India?

It all started almost 2 years ago, when The Collective invited an international pitch for Visual Merchandising setup of the first store opening in Bangalore. LIGANOVA offered its VM approach and we won the pitch. I got an opportunity to come to the city for the first store opening as I was the one leading the whole project. Staying in Bangalore for a week I observed that India lacks good visual merchandisers as visual merchandising is not looked as a very enticing professional career over here. I realised how important it is for a country like India to have a sound VM knowledge. With this thought in mind, I went back to Germany. And now we are back in India to impart that knowledge of visual merchandising.

What opportunities you see in India?

As the concept of large retail stores gains ground in India, the practice and concept

of VM is likely to grow exponentially. In the European countries VM receives highest priority in commercial planning of a product. As seasons change, the merchandise collections / Plans too change in a retail store. When such changes take place the store too undergoes a transformation in decor and visual presentation to appeal to the consumers while announcing new arrivals in merchandise collection. This phenomenon of transformation of visual presentations and displays of merchandise accompanied by relevant thematic props is still very new in India. VM and Displays have a storyboard effect communicating innovatively to the customer besides being a 'Silent salesman for a retail store'.

How can Indian retailers benefit from global practices of VM?

It is quite unpredictable what will benefit the Indian retailers. But, we analyzed that a lot of International brands are opening their stores in India with their own 100% subsidiary. These brands bring in their own VM standards and professional attitude for setting up a store. We have come here especially to work with the Indian retailers and brands, with the aim to offer the knowledge and share our long time experiences we have in the field of VM. We will help them right from the beginning, starting from developing the concept, implementation, merchandise presentation to branding and planning within the store.



How LIGANOVA plans to maintain further in India?

Now we are completely ready to set up the necessary people and the team members who will be active in the whole training and implementation process. One simply cannot start with 20 to 25 people who are not properly trained and for that we have a plan to train 10 Indian's by next year. We will train them in Germany by giving them the expertise and knowledge which they will implement here.

Did the economical downturn affect the European retailers?

Yes, the recession affected the retailers. They brought down the brand marketing budget and truly invested more into below the line retailing. Courageous companies like Adidas, Nike and Hugo Boss cannot stop to believe their customers and they brought in the courage in customers to buy again. They dared to show them that don't be afraid of economical crises, we will go ahead to support you, entertain you to buy and we believe in you. Undoubtedly those were the toughest years for us when retailers tried to shrink their budget as much as possible but they didn't cut it out.

During slowdown what was your strategy to give more value for money to the customer?

In India where VM services don't exist, it is important to give more value for money because retailers are not used to VM services. And I personally being in this field from last 14 years can give them the added value only when I along with my team launch a new window display or a new store and the customers will see how it

looks later. A customer has to have a lot of patience as we take almost 2 to 3 months to explain the value of the money a retailer has spent. It's much of an implementation work whose edit value can only be realised after the customer's response.

Can you throw some light on LIGANOVA's VM fixtures?

LIGANOVA is an innovative, step forward and retail driven company. At the time of economical crisis we came up with a visionary concept which was retail driven and flexible. The need is to focus on the entertainment and shopping atmosphere behaviour rather than focusing on fixture as a retail architecture having massive or huge architectural concept. I as a VM want to have high quality fixtures but I really do not care if it is quality marble or it is just a normal material which I can use for my merchandise. Of course it makes an obstruction between Louis Vuitton and Gucci, Adidas or Nike. But we believe that the spending of the money, of the overall marketing budget should be properly balanced between fixture spending and the actual monthly Visual Merchandising activity. The store fixtures should be always very flexible and movable even after a year. That is why one must have a strong VM concept to allocate the merchandise.

With the backing of her sound experience, intuitive approach to conceptualization, passionate knowledge of VM and approach to detailing Elena Maurer, has lots to offer to the visual merchandising and the retail industry that could certainly be of great value to India ●

**Astha Bhardwaj
(with inputs from Vaishali Tanwar)**

