

Homerun: YOLO Colorhouse

Janie Young and Virginia Lowe, founders of YOLO Colorhouse, have found a way to market paint that overcomes one huge insecurity of many consumers: choosing a color.

When I started on the sales floor at Environmental Building Supplies, in Portland, Ore. — one of the first green building retailers in the US — my manager warned me early on to stay far, far away from the poor, confused customers squinting at the paint chips.

“They’re a huge time suck,” she said, “and a huge problem for us if you recommend the wrong color.”

Paint is sold with the slimmest of profit margins; some colors use extremely expensive colorants which can drive the profit down to pennies. On top of that, there's a labor cost—even expensive new automated machines have to be operated by a human being. Once tinted, it can be impossible or simply too labor intensive to correct a color that the customer decides is too strong or the wrong shade. And inventorying messy sample paint chips is a costly headache.

In my store, this was a problem. Customers, who, as I later learned through research, had never been in the store before, came in and were actively ignored in their moment of need. I observed one customer lingering for hours trying to decide between two shades of off-white which were, in fact, the same formula with two different names. Those brave customers who persevered and managed to make a purchase were, in ALL UPPER CASE LETTERS ON THE RECEIPT, informed that paint was absolutely unreturnable. And the owners of the store became deeply ambivalent about selling a product — even one that brought new customers through the door—with such potential for unhappiness and regret.

Enter YOLO Colorhouse. YOLO isn't a line of paint: it's a branded system of colors that happens to be available as paint. Taking a nod from the fashion industry, colors are issued in seasonal “collections.”

There aren't many: only 47 to start off with organized in categories of a half dozen or so with names like “air,” “leaf,” “clay,” and “petal.” Together with the unabashedly beautiful graphic identity, the tagline, “created by scientists and artists with nature in mind,” and the Green Seal certification indicate that the product is meant to be both environmentally friendly and easy to use. Furthermore, marketing materials, in-store merchandising, and PR communicate that the product was created by a woman-owned company founded by artists, creating one more appeal to a target market which, in a store like Environmental Building Supplies, is overwhelmingly female.

Customers loved YOLO paint. They were visibly relieved when they approached the in-store display, which displayed sample chips floating behind a serene pane of frosted glass. And they loved YOLO's innovative sample system: before, the only way to judge a paint color was to buy a quart of paint: expensive, time-consuming, and potentially wasteful. All big no-no's with our environmentally conscious customers. Other paint

companies had introduced small sample pots of paint, but these were still messy and time-consuming to apply. YOLO solved the problem brilliantly. Instead of sample quarts, YOLO sells poster-size sheets of heavy paper coated with actual paint, efficiently rolled up and displayed at the perimeter of the store display. There's even repositionable adhesive on the back, so you can move the sample around to different walls in your house to see what the color will look like. There was a benefit for our store, too. Customers who came in to shop for paint also spent more time interacting with other materials. They'd take a couple samples of green across the showroom and look for carpet to match the new paint, or hold a red up behind the wood stove in the showroom to envision what it would look like in their own home.

YOLO Colorhouse is creative because it didn't introduce yet another luxury brand of paint in a can with a fancy label. Although YOLO's label is beautiful, Janie and Ginnie thought through the entire paint purchasing Process from the customer's point of view. They didn't come up with a different size or clever format for paint chips—they eliminated them and introduced a product that inspired customer confidence at every step of the process, from consideration to application. Because they have established beautiful, easy, and natural color as their brand, anything that comes in different colors could be a YOLO Colorhouse product.

The lessons I've learned from YOLO could be universalized to different contexts as follows:

1. Kindness sells; frustration is opportunity. Observe your customers using your product. How can your product make them feel relieved or happy rather than nervous or frustrated?
2. Good story + innovative product + beautiful identity = free advertising. Early on, YOLO Colorhouse landed a 2 page spread in Sunset Magazine at a time they could not afford to advertise heavily. For the photoshoot, Janie and Ginnie painted squares of YOLO colors on a wall in their studio, and Sunset ran that photo alongside glowing text.
3. Just because something is always done in a particular way (paint chips) does not mean that it's the only or the best way to do it.
4. Find a way to promote and prolong interaction with a product.

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