

# backstory POWER ON

Verizon's destination store concept is more about the digital lifestyle than products

**A**t more than 9,000 square feet, the first of what Verizon has dubbed its "Destination" store concept opened in Minneapolis' Mall of America in November. The high-energy store is more about lifestyle than it is about product, as the state-of-the-art, interactive, and hands-on digital experience helps consumers understand how technology can impact their lives.

But the process actually began several years earlier, says Domenico D'Ambrosio, Verizon's executive director of national retail operations. "We knew that the company had to shift in a very strategic and succinct way—the evolution of the network itself," he explains. Verizon launched its 4G LTE network in 2010, then began to hone in on more robust smartphones and devices to be carried on that network

before launching, in 2012, the company's Share Everything plan.

"After that, we knew we had to make sure that our stores resembled us as a company—it wasn't just about a new store design, but about a new way to do business," D'Ambrosio says. The new store concept would become part of Verizon's comprehensive retail presence, tied closely into the internet experience, advertising, and more.

## ONLINE BONUS

Take a video tour of the Verizon Destination store online through the digital edition of this issue, at [www.retailenvironments-digital.org](http://www.retailenvironments-digital.org).



Verizon's 9,000-square-foot Destination store concept, designed by Chute Gerdeman, opened in Minneapolis' Mall of America in November and has a warm, residential feel with gray wood, brick walls, and real wood floors to make customers comfortable while learning about and engaging with wireless technology. Interactive lifestyle zones throughout the store serve consumer interests such as fitness, music, games, and business, featuring related wireless products in a real-world setting.



This involved many groups across Verizon, from the internet team to B2B, which helped the store team better understand the connected devices customers would be interested in, D'Ambrosio says.

Following an extensive RFP and review process, the project was awarded to Columbus, Ohio-based Chute Gerdeman in fall 2012. The firm then went full-force very quickly—designing not only the first Destination store at Mall of America, but also the Smart store concept for the wireless company's retail fleet, the first of which opened in May 2013.

"Verizon made a commitment to the evolution of all of the stores in their fleet," says Jay Highland, vice president, client creative partner, for Chute Gerdeman.

### DESIGN FOR A CONNECTED LIFESTYLE

From the first glimpse of the Mall of America store, it's obvious that much has changed. Many of the graphics and big posters that used to be visible from the storefront are gone. While the checkmark branding on the storefront identifies Verizon, the storefront itself is transparent and uninterrupted, showing activity within the space.

Inside, the environment is warm and inviting. Warm wood, painted panels, and brick were chosen to provide a feeling of comfort and approachability. The phones and devices, which are generally given pride of place in the front of cellular stores, were moved to a dramatic curved display wall in the back of the space. Instead, the focus is on accessories and wireless tools, organized into a series of interactive lifestyle zones that serve customers' interests (music, fitness, business, home, and games, for example) and also demonstrate how technology can make their lives richer.



*Phones and devices, which are usually placed at the front of cellular stores, are displayed in a dramatic curved display wall in the back of Verizon's Destination store.*

Touchscreens for digital content are integrated into each zone. In addition to the eye-catching and interactive "brand monolith" at the front of the store, large digital screens adjacent to product displays focus on the human story rather than on products. Education, which used to take place out of sight, was moved to a central, very visible "wireless workshop" area. The message, Highland says, is that the technologies in the store are not science fiction but available now—and can fit into customers' lives quickly and easily.

Gone is the traditional long sales and service counter, replaced by more customer-friendly alternatives. Point-of-sale "staging tables" throughout the store allow store specialists and shoppers to interact and engage. Additional floating POS stations are tucked into individual smart zones. And store specialists also have mobile POS tablets for quick transactions.

### MATERIAL DIFFERENCES

While Chute Gerdeman was new to the Verizon team, Philadelphia-based Sparks Custom Retail has a decade-long relationship executing store rollouts for the wireless company. For the Destination and Smart store concepts, Sparks provides nearly all elements inside the store shell except for screens and digital content. This includes fabrication, sourcing of other elements, value engineering, warehousing, and installation.

Sparks also built a nearly full-sized mock store in its Philadelphia facility for this project. "We took it from the stage of pretty pictures to a physical store mockup so both Chute Gerdeman and Verizon could come in and test it, touch it, and look at it in the real world," says Chairman Jeff Harrow.

All elements for the Destination store are custom fabricated, with a focus on high-end materials and finishes. Real woods, including salvaged woods and quarter-sawn ash





*The design elements in the Destination store are custom fabricated, with a focus on high-end materials and finishes such as real wood and solid color-core materials on fixtures and surfaces.*

hardwood, were used in many fixtures instead of veneer or laminate, says Sparks project manager Ed Jankins. For other fixtures, high-gloss, solid color-core was chosen for tactile feel and durability. High-gloss granite floor tiles are repeated in the store facade. Soffits and woodwork glow with high-gloss lacquer paint.

Verizon's approach to visual merchandising is also unusual for a technology company. For example, custom mannequins by Los Angeles-based Greneker sport connected products and accessories, putting a human face on fitness and business technology.

## NEW WAYS TO DO BUSINESS

Verizon's partnership with Chute Gerdeman expanded beyond the new retail design concept to include merchandise assortment, staff training, real estate planning, and other aspects of Verizon's retail business.

With help from Chute Gerdeman, the company completely transformed its staff training from product-based to life-style-based—focused on better understanding customers and what they need. To train specialists for the new Mall of America store, for example, Verizon brought in athletes to better help the team understand fitness, as well as gamers and industry experts in various areas.

Some associates traveled to spend a few days in the full-scale store mockup in Sparks' Philadelphia facility. Others experienced new store elements and fixtures in other training environments or through virtual store tours. Chute Gerdeman also produced videos and detailed playbooks that describe everything required to display products and keep the store looking fresh and clean.

## MEASURING SUCCESS


In addition to watching actual sales figures, the company monitors a variety of "listening posts" including NPS analysis, says D'Ambrosio. (NPS, or Net Promoter Score, monitors loyalty to a brand or company rather than satisfaction with a particular product or transaction.) Chute Gerdeman helps the company sort through the data and aggregate it to identify the aspects that can drive effective changes in store.

What's next? The stores will continue to evolve, and ideas are still being refined in the mock store. The Smart store concept has already opened more than 100 stores across the country and plans an aggressive schedule for the near future. Destination stores in Houston and on Chicago's Michigan Avenue are scheduled to open this summer.

## Verizon Destination Store

Mall of America, Minneapolis

**Retailer:** Verizon, Basking Ridge, N.J.

**Architect/project management/design:** Chute Gerdeman, Columbus, Ohio 

**Fixture contractor:** Sparks, Philadelphia 

**Furniture/upholstery:** Aceray, Cincinnati; All Modern, Boston; Allermuir, Maumee, Ohio; Barn Light Electric, Titusville, Fla.; Davis Furniture, High Point, N.C.; Design Within Reach, Stamford, Conn.; Donghia, Milford, Conn.; HBF Furniture, Hickory, N.C.; Knoll Textiles, East Greenville, Pa.; Modern In Designs, Flushing, N.Y.

**Flooring:** Architectual Systems Inc., New York ; Patcraft, Centerville, Ga. ; Shaw Contract Group, Dalton, GA ; Porcelanosa Group, Pittsburgh (stone/tile) 

**Graphics/signage:** Duggal Visual Solutions Inc., New York; Gabel Signs, Baltimore

**Laminate:** Wilsonart, Temple, Texas 

**Lighting design:** 37 Volts Light Studio, Cincinnati

**Lighting:** Wiedenbach Brown, Yorba Linda, Calif.; Jesco, Glendale, N.Y. (specialty LED display lighting) 

**Mannequins:** Greneker, Los Angeles 

**Metalwork:** McNichols, Tampa, Fla. 

**Millwork:** Pioneer Millworks, Portland, Ore.

**Paints/coatings:** BTD Wood Powdercoating, Brainerd, Minn. ; Koroseal, Columbus, Ohio; The Sherwin Williams Co., Cleveland ; Tiger Drylac, St. Charles, Ill. 

**Plastics:** Lucite Lux, Cordova, Tenn.

**Stone/tile:** TerraCore, Dallas; Hamilton Parker, Columbus, Ohio

**Walls:** Armstrong, Lancaster, Pa., (wall panels, molding) ; Elite Xpressions (wall panel, molding), Corpus Christi, Texas; DL Couch, New Castle, Ind. (wall treatment); GLV Co., West Jordan, Utah (panels/molding) ; Wolf Gordon, Long Island City, N.Y. (wall treatment); Megawall, Comstock Park, Mich. (slatwall) 

**Technology:** AKQA, New York (technology, audiovisual); McCann Systems, Earth City, Mo. (technology, audiovisual); X20 Media, Montreal (technology, systems)

**Security devices:** InVue Security, Charlotte, N.C.