

At MPREIS, design truly differentiates



Photo by Lukas Schaller

Far from the pedestrian yet functional designs of most U.S. supermarkets resides the MPREIS stores in and around Austria (Tyrol, Salzburg, Karnten) and in the north of Italy (South Tyrol). The Alps make a stunning backdrop for many of the 175 stores, which average 600 square meters of selling space.

The mix of internationally known and local architects, commissioned to design each store to its size and location, make the most of these settings to “create an attractive indoor and outdoor unity,” Hansjörg Mölk, the chief executive officer of MPREIS, told SupermarketGuru.com in an e-mail interview. “Architecture is only a small part of our success. It is important to have a conclusive strategy which is customer-oriented.”

Yes, but the family-owned chain has relied on architecture as an essential component of its customer orientation since 1983 because, as Mr. Mölk says, “it is important to attract attention so people talk about MPREIS.” Striking indoor and outdoor design (chains that attempt to emulate MPREIS focus only on the outside, he says) has built buzz - and shopping - to the tune of 20% growth over the past three years: Gross sales of 527 million Euros in 2008 are projected to grow to 570 million Euros in 2009.

MPREIS will sustain this design focus, even in a challenging economy, because “you always have to follow up your unique selling proposition,” he noted.

Mr. Mölk says he was “inspired in the 1980s” by the shops of the U.S. group of architects SITE. “So we started to find our own design concept which fits Tyrol.” He urges retailers today to differentiate by developing their own “inspiring and surprising concept for customers.”

While he didn’t answer specific questions about how the store designs of MPREIS affect the number, frequency and time duration of store trips, or basket size, or ROI measures (he needs to keep some competitive edge, after all), the designs do suggest high quality and simplified shopping with well-identified areas of the store.

The New York Times described the MPREIS stores as “light-filled pavilions that are made out of such gourmet materials as structural glass, perforated steel, poured concrete and raw birch timbers. Every MPREIS is different [and] designed by architects who range from international stars like Dominique Perrault to regional talents like Peter Lorenz.” One of its newest stores in a secluded ski village is turning “a 40-year-old stucco market into a sleek wood-shingled box,” the 21st collaboration between the chain and Helmut Seelos of Architekten, the paper reported.

An English translation from *The Bund*, a Shanghai newspaper, reads, “No one really cares what a supermarket looks like, as long as we can buy what we need there...[but] the MPREIS [in the Tyrolean Alps] look like art pieces. That’s why local people would like to hang out there during leisure time. In MPREIS supermarket, your eyes and your stomach can all be feasted.”

What a wonderful goal in the U.S. too, if retailers would concern themselves more with the sensuality of many of the foods they sell, the mind-body-spirit connection of shoppers, and the sensibilities of customers who want food and beverage shopping to be more than the functionary experience it usually is. Mr. M \ddot{o} lk, by the way, told us that “individualized and creative buildings don’t have to be expensive.”