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STORE PLANNING / DESIGN

Competing on Many Levels

Integrated audio and video technology helps pump up Under Armour store experience

By Marianne Wilson



A stadium-styled tunnel entryway, above right, complete with audio and video, brings customers into the Under Armour store.

Under Armour, the athletic apparel and accessories company, makes its retail debut with a high-energy, high-concept space that conveys the excitement and emotion of sports. Advanced video and audio technology enhances the action at the 4,500-sq.-ft. store in Annapolis Mall, Annapolis, Md.

"We strove to create an environment for our target customers, who are about 16 to 24 years old, that they would want to spend time in," said Jennifer Spaulding, director of retail execution, Under Armour, Baltimore.

The store design, by FRCH Design Worldwide, Cincinnati, brings the Under Armour brand story to life. One of the most innovative elements is the entrance: To enter the store from the mall, the customer walks through a tunnel. The concrete entrance is modeled after a stadium walkway.

"Our goal with the tunnel was to have the consumer feel as if he or she is an athlete heading out to the field for play, or going into a stadium to catch a game," Spaulding explained. "It's as if they are walking into the underbelly of a stadium."

The tunnel, approximately 16 ft. long, features a dazzling



video display that includes four, 40-in. high-definition LCD screens (the screens are all located on the left side of the tunnel, with a handrail on the right side). Full-motion video of the Under Armour product line and pre-produced television commercials play on the screens.

"The screens, which are mounted adjacent to each other, have a very thin bezel," explained Nadine Zgonc, senior director, strategic account management, PlayNetwork, Redmond, Wash., which provided the custom music, video and systems integration for the store.

The design gives Under Armour the capability to display unified images or logos across all four screens, with no visible separation between them. (The store also can display separate images on each individual screen.)

"In effect, the screens can unite as one and show one common image," Zgonc said, "which creates a lot of motion and energy."

The tunnel is outfitted with a completely hidden, fully digital transducer system that enables volume levels to gradually increase as customers walk through it to simulate the excitement of entering a packed sports stadium.

"The speakers are mounted inside the walls," said Under Armour's Spaulding, "and there are a variety of different sounds, including the sounds of cleats and general crowd or stadium noise. The sounds, which can be heard from outside the tunnel, draw shoppers in from the mall."

The tunnel opens up into the store mezzanine, which has a warehouse-industrial look. One of the highlights of the

space is a 120-in. translucent screen, which the company's pre-produced TV commercials and other images are projected upon. The projected imagery can be seen on both the front and back of the screen, which is suspended from the ceiling. The projector also projects a cast on the concrete wall.

The screen is framed in, and secured with, a heavy steel bezel.

"We wanted the store to have both an industrial and current, fast-technology feel to it, so we juxtaposed industrial elements with the technology," Spaulding said. "The fixtures, for instance, have a heavy industrial feel. They almost resemble weight plates."

All of the video footage used in the store was compiled and created by the Under Armour brand team.

"PlayNetwork helped us encode it so it would work with the technology," Spaulding added. "We brainstormed quite a bit with PlayNetwork on the audio and video, what to put where and the like. Our target audience really identifies with our commercials and the featured athletes. With the video in the store, the idea was to make them feel as if they were part of an Under Armour commercial."

The audio system in the store is high-powered, with custom



A 120-in. rear-projection HDTV screen can be viewed from both sides.

music provided from six suspended loudspeakers (Pro Series by EAW) and subwoofers by SLS mounted from industrial rigging.

"The audio system is very unique in that most retailers use small speakers," PlayNetwork's Zgonc explained. "But Under Armour challenged us to come up with something that would better suit their industrial-styled environment. We used big, professional speakers that are about four to five times the size of components in a standard retail space. And we rigged them in a way that lends to the overall store environment."

PlayNetwork created the custom music programming in close collaboration with Under Armour. The playlist was developed with no gaps, or dead air, between tracks, resulting in an intense, high-energy club DJ vibe. The music ranges from new bands to timeless tracks.

"PlayNetwork created programming that caters to our target customer," Spaulding added. "The music is updated frequently as we don't want it to get tired for our customers or store associates." The control for the store's audio and video components are all integrated in one concealed rack.

"It's very efficient, with all the media and content network updatable," Spaulding said. "The system comes on with just the flick of a button by the store manager."

The store features an iPod docking station that feeds into the overhead system.

"Before and after store business hours, associates can bring in their iPod and play their own music over the system," Spaulding said.

Opened in late fall, Under Armour has met with a very positive reaction from customers, according to Spaulding.

"They absolutely get it," she added. "They love the video screens, the tunnel and all the details. The reaction has been phenomenal."

As to the possibility of additional locations, much will depend upon the performance of the Annapolis store.

"We're viewing it as a test, and evaluating it every day," Spaulding said. ■

About Under Armour

Founded in 1996 by former University of Maryland football player Kevin Plank, Under Armour is known for performance-apparel and gear engineered to keep athletes cool and dry through a game or workout.

The brand enjoys a cult-like following among younger consumers, as much for its testosterone-laden commercials as its stretchy, form-fitting shirts and hip image. Five years ago, it introduced a series of commercials featuring sweaty, male athletes grunting the words "Protect This House" as they lifted weights or knocked each other around on the football field. The tag line became a mantra that helped lift the brand to national prominence. Under Armour scored big again with its "click-clack" cleats campaign that marked its entry into footwear.

Currently, sporting-goods stores account for the majority of Under Armour's sales. The company also sells direct via the Web and outlet stores, and it recently opened its first full-price store (see related story). One of the first shirts that founder Plank (who serves as CEO and chairman) created—style 0039—is prominently displayed in a glass case at the end of the tunnel that leads into the store.

The company went public in November 2005, and has been on the fast track ever since. For the third quarter, ended Sept. 30, 2007, its net revenues increased 46.3% to \$186.9 million, and net income rose 25.4% to \$20 million.