

## British Display Society Industry Expert Interview

Barbara Chapman FBDS talking to  
**Matthias Spanke**

In this month's issue I'm interviewing Matthias Spanke, the Founder and CEO of the visual merchandising agency BIG IDEAS who have headquarters both in the USA and Europe.

Matthias is a highly experienced industry expert and has a long 25-year career creating brand experiences of leading retailers worldwide. His expertise covers the development and implementation of successful strategies for the in-store experiences of many leading brands.

He is an expert in bricks-and-mortar retail and visual merchandising. He regularly gives presentations and workshops on the retail trends and brand experience. He is also the author of three industry books.

I'm fascinated to understand his journey into this industry and his experiences within it, but also how he views the future of visual merchandising. I think you'll agree, It's a fascinating read. So, Matthias, tell me...

### Q1. Can you tell us briefly about your career path into this industry?

I was born and raised in Germany and after earning a college degree in design, I completed a vocational training program as window dresser. That was 25 years ago. In 2001, I took on my first management role as Head of Visual Merchandising for a European fashion retailer. Subsequently, I gained experience as Global Head of Visual Merchandising in various international companies such as Tom Tailor and Tally Weijl. In 2009 I started my first own visual merchandising agency serving world-wide renowned brands. Seven years later, I was offered a position by Macy's in NYC as Vice President, Creative Director of Visual Merchandising where I was responsible for the visual experience of the then 605 stores across the United States. Eventually, I founded the full-service agency BIG IDEAS Visual Merchandising, with one office in Europe and one in the US, where I am still based.

### Q2. What different skills did you learn from each of those brands that you worked for along the way?

Within 25 years I had the opportunity to grow into the different jobs and tasks. I started my career with crafting which ranged from painting to making props. Always with the goal of creating a beautiful decoration. But the job and its tasks have changed: It's no longer about making the stores just look pretty, much more it is about making stores successful and providing an unforgettable customer experience. For instance, at Tally Weijl, with stores in over 30 countries, I learned how important it is to have the sales figures of each region and country as an indispensable part of visual merchandising. Only those who know the preferences and shopping behavior of their customers can make sound decisions in visual merchandising. Through my agencies' worldwide clients, I have also learned about cultural differences and their influences on successful visual merchandising and store design.

### Q3. How did you come about starting your own business?

Throughout my entire career, there have always been so many jobs and projects I was interested in, but of course I couldn't change my employer every three months. That's when I had the idea of starting my own agency. It gives me the opportunity to work for many different brands and to manage a wide variety of projects – all at the same time. My current role at BIG IDEAS offers a lot of variety and excitement. I also take



Matthias Spanke  
Credit: Marcel Boldu

on projects, that to me are not about the money at all, but about the fact that they're fun or that I've always wanted to do them.

### Q4. Tell us more about your business BIG IDEAS and the sort of projects you get involved with.

BIG IDEAS Visual Merchandising provides retailers from all over the world with full service from strategy development to design and production to global roll-out. There are clients for whom we primarily work on the concept and design. Then there are clients, such as Cartier for whom we produced some of the last Christmas displays and took over the window installations throughout Northern Europe. Thirdly, there are clients like Bang & Olufsen, for whom we simultaneously set up the window displays worldwide – from Singapore and Tokyo to NYC and LA and all over Europe.



Photo Credit: BIG IDEAS Visual Merchandising

### Q5. What's your favourite project that you've worked on that was the most successful?

That's hard to answer, because there are always new and exciting projects that are fun and bring success to our clients. The development of our own trade show stand for EuroShop 2020 is certainly one of my favorite projects of recent years. I had the opportunity to develop something absolutely free and without any restrictions. Our slogan was "Retail Isn't Dead" and my idea was to make the booth look like a church. However, without using Christian symbols like crosses so as not to offend anyone. We printed large baroque windows in grey and black on textile frames and made church pews serving as seating for client meetings. There were also hundreds of LED candles, the slogan as a neon sign and seats on different levels for the perfect selfie moment. This booth had exactly fulfilled its goal: It showcased our services in a creative and humorous way, generated lots of social media posts, and was also picked up repeatedly in the press and on TV.

**Q6. When first moving to the States from Europe, what (if any) differences did you find in visual merchandising processes?**

The US retail market is further advanced in terms of innovation and customer satisfaction. There are already a lot of implemented strategies around 'speed and convenience' in almost any kind of business field. You can find self-checkout and return stations in fast fashion as well as in premium stores. The same applies to 'curbside pickup', delivering the merchandise directly to the customer's parked car – something hardly anyone in Europe had heard of before Covid. In the United States, they just know how to make big things even bigger and better. Ever since I've been living in the US I am approaching things differently: For example, I always think about whether any installation could also provide a social media moment. That's something I wouldn't have thought about ten years ago.

**Q7. How has Covid effected your business?**

Our business stands or falls by the success and failure of our clients. And they are almost exclusively bricks-and-mortar retailers. Many of them are facing major challenges due to consecutive global lockdowns. When Covid hit in March last year, Europe practically came to a stop. But not us. We at BIG IDEAS continued to work and develop strategies on how to bring customers back into the stores and make them feel safe there. Covid has made it even more clear that it is no longer enough to offer merchandise or services in stores, but that stores need to provide an additional customer value. We are doing our very best to help our clients meeting challenges posed by Covid and we are developing strategies and concepts to make the brands more successful in the long run.

**Q8. How do you see retail moving forward after the pandemic?**

In recent years, e-commerce has been steadily growing. And Covid has accelerated this development. Recently, even older generations have chosen online shopping over offline shopping. Now, on the one hand, the advantages of e-commerce, such as speed, convenience and variety, must also be offered in brick-and-mortar retail. And on the other hand, the offline advantages must be increased way further. Stores need to provide added value, such as an unforgettable experience, and they need to become part of the community. I believe that stores of the future will increasingly become so called "third places": places, where customers will spend time besides work and home.

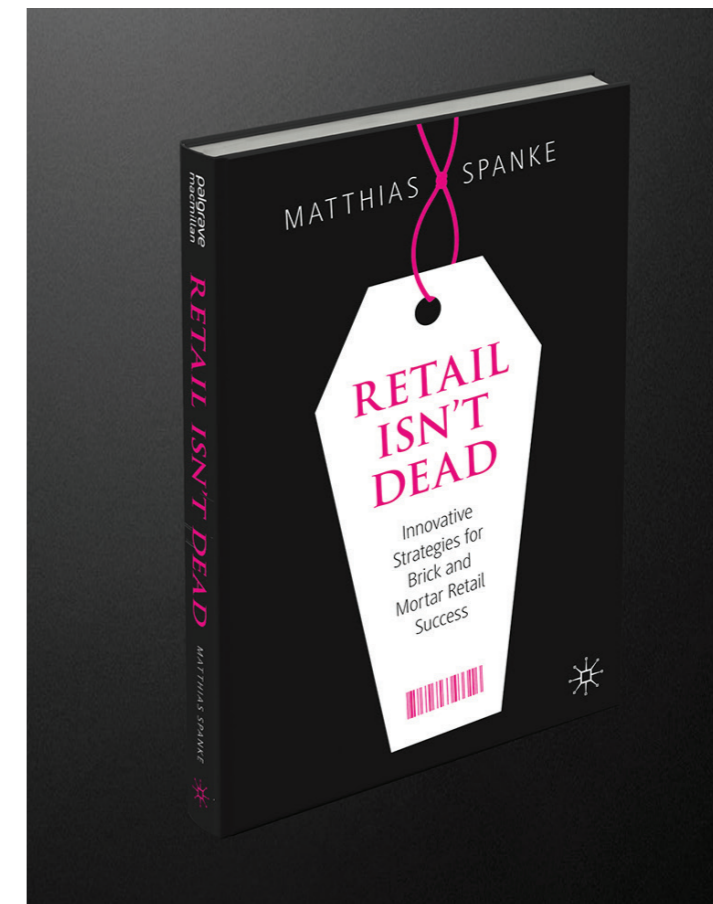
**Q9. You've written three books. Can you tell us more about how these came about and tell us the book titles and publishers? Our readers might be interested in reading them.**

My first book "Successful Visual Merchandising" was published in 2012 and "Easy Branding in Fashion Retail" three years later. Both titles came out in a German edition only. Last year, "Retail Isn't Dead" was published both in English and German. The book will also come out in Korean and Chinese within the next few months. "Retail Isn't Dead" shows what the future holds for bricks-and-mortar retail. There is a large number of steps that can be taken to meet new customer expectations and gain competitive advantages. The most important and innovative strategies are pointed out in this book. These include e.g. new brand experiences, potential applications of in-store technologies, sustainability initiatives, and steps to make online advantages available offline. This book is extremely practical and user-oriented, with a lot of tips and over 50 best-practice examples from all over the world and from a wide variety of industries. The English edition of "Retail Isn't Dead – Innovative Strategies for Brick and Mortar Retail Success" is published by Palgrave Macmillan.



*EuroShop*

*Photo Credit: BIG IDEAS Visual Merchandising*



**Q10. What does the future hold for yourself and BIG IDEAS?**

We intend to continue to grow with the agency BIG IDEAS, but above all in a healthy way. To me personally, it is important to be innovative and to always be extremely timely regarding new trends and developments around the world and in various industries. Many innovations from the food trade or service sector can also be adapted to our fashion clients. Presently, I'm also writing my fourth book, which will be published worldwide in fall-winter this year. It's about the different generations from Baby Boomers to Gen Alpha, and how their lives, mindsets and especially shopping behaviours are changing. In addition, in this book there will be innovative success strategies and even more best practice examples. Since the field of social media and online marketing is becoming increasingly important for us visual merchandisers, I am currently completing a master's degree class in this field.

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It was an absolute joy to interview Matthias. His passion and love for this industry shone through. We carried on speaking hours after I finished the interview, discussing our shared passion of vm and all things creative. I would love to thank Matthias for taking time out of his busy schedule to chat with me.

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