

7 Step Store Layout Checklist



1

Decide on a Retail Store Floor Plan

TYPES OF RETAIL FLOOR PLANS



Grid Floor Plan Store Layout

A grid floor plan, also called a straight layout, is a very efficient use of both floor and wall space. With fixtures and displays running parallel to walls, a grid floor plan maximizes every inch of available floor space, including the corners. Grid layouts are easy for customers to navigate and for store owners to categorize. Plus, they offer plenty of end cap and feature wall exposure for promotional items and seasonal products.

Since grid layouts are used in most grocery, big box, and convenience stores, they create a familiar feel to customers. However, due to this familiarity, they tend to impart a grab-and-go experience. A grid layout can be a good choice for small retailers who shelf-stock inventory in quantity, like toys, books, magazines, specialty foods, kitchenware, and home goods. However, it's not ideal for retailers who want to create an upscale, branded environment that invites relaxed browsing.



Loop Floor Plan Store Layout

A loop floor plan, sometimes called a racetrack layout, creates the most guided shopping experience of the three. A loop store layout features a defined pathway throughout the store, which exposes customers to every item on display. Bed, Bath & Beyond stores are good examples of a loop floor plan. Loop floor plans work very well with zone merchandising tactics, too, which we discuss in detail below.

In a loop floor plan, the perimeter walls are highly visible and can feature all types of wall and shelving displays. A loop floor plan provides a great base for combining layouts, too. With a loop plan, the central part of the store can be set up in a grid or free-flow layout (which we cover below), or even a mix of the two.

However you design it, a loop floor plan surrounds customers with product displays on outer walls, and allows for all types of creative display variations in the center of the store. A loop floor plan works well for most types of small retail stores, such as apparel and accessories, toy, homewares, kitchenwares, personal care, and specialty products.



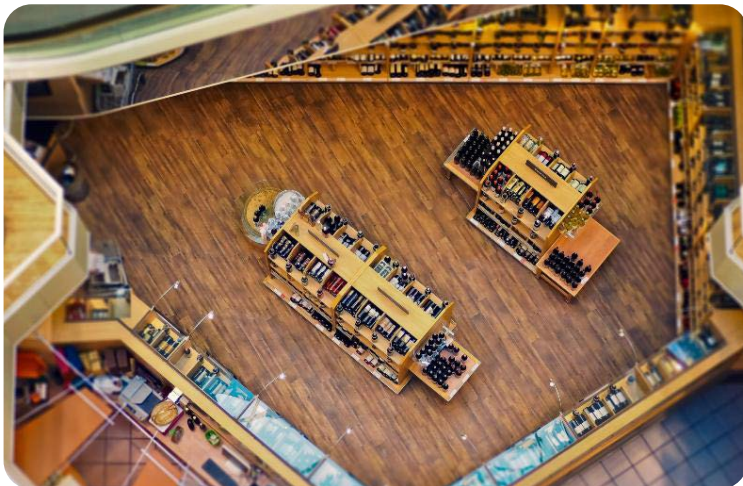
Free-Flow Floor Plan Store Layout

A free-flow retail store layout is the favorite of many specialty retailers because it allows maximum creativity and is easily changed and updated. Browsing is king in a free-flow layout. Fixtures and displays are placed at angles to encourage shoppers to slow down and explore highlighted product groupings at every turn.

A free-flow store layout creates open sight lines throughout the store, so specialty displays

and power walls, which we discuss in detail below, are highly visible. This makes it easy to funnel customers toward specific merchandise zones using eye-catching accent colors and product groupings.

The open look of a free-flow layout is ideal for all types of boutiques and upscale stores. It also works well for stores with smaller inventories, since it's designed to highlight product groupings rather than store goods in quantity.



Diagonal Floor Plan Store Layout

A diagonal store design is ideal in electronic or technology stores, beauty and cosmetic retailers, specialty food stores, or any shop that encourages shoppers to test or sample products. Diagonal floor plans feel more open than grid plans, which can feel like a maze.

Diagonal floor plans let customers easily move between aisles while also providing store employees with good angles to view shoppers.

Similar to free-flow store plans, diagonal layouts create open sightlines throughout the store. This floor plan is ideal for letting shoppers browse displays to sample products on their own, or using the diagonal displays to point customers toward a central sampling or demonstration area.



Forced-path Floor Plan

Forced-path or guided floor plans are typically used in physically large spaces. They have an open entryway at the front of the store. As shoppers move inside, there is only one pathway option that guides customers throughout the length of the store and drops them off at the checkout area.

Forced-path layouts are similar to a museum or guided tour in terms of how they operate.

Furniture stores like IKEA use forced-path plans to showcase different rooms and design types. Stew Leonard's is a regional grocery store that uses forced-path floor plans to bring shoppers through different departments, with product samples and singing animatronic animals peppered throughout the store to keep shoppers engaged.

Forced-path floor plans are ideal for retailers that want to create a specific, memorable shopping experience. These floor plans are a good choice for showcasing many different product departments or design displays. They also require a lot of effort to keep shoppers interested throughout the store with demonstrations, different types of displays, and engagement opportunities.



Angular Floor Plan

Angular floor plans use many smaller, rounded displays in the center of the store to create a dynamic shopping experience that highlights a smaller number of products. Floor displays automatically draw customer attention (opposed to wall or aisle displays), which makes this layout highly engaging.

However, there is limited display space. As a result, angular layouts are mostly used in

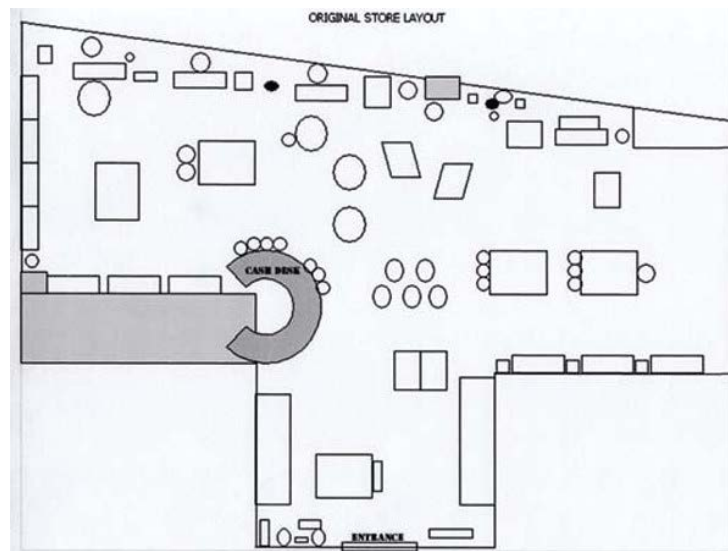
showrooms, high-end boutiques, and designer stores where there are highly edited or curated collections. These types of stores also need a substantial space for inventory storage outside of the sales floor to restock items as they are sold and provide additional sizes.

Angular floor plans can commonly be found in jewelry stores, handbag and accessory designer storefronts, artistic independent displays, and high-end boutiques.

2 Put Your Retail Store Layout Down on Paper

As Kizer & Bender always tell retailers: Put it on paper. If you haven't settled on your store design, or even if you have, the first thing you need to do is work your plan out on paper before you start moving things around in your store. Putting it on paper helps give you a clearer picture of the desired result and any potential issues before getting started. Remember, many small retailers find that a mix of floor plan and layout styles works best.

For example, you might start with a loop, then combine grid-style shelving aisles and free-flow displays in the center section. Or if your sales floor isn't a standard shape, as shown below, you might create a loop or grid in one section, and use a free-flow layout in another.



If you have a copy of the blueprint for your store, start with that. If not, draw up your own schematic of your sales floor. Grid paper works great for this, or you can use online store design tools, which we list below.

Next, take your sales floor schematic, note any special built-in features such as columns, cabinets, or shelving, and attach it to a piece of poster board or foam core. Then overlay a piece of tracing paper to sketch out how different floor plans can work within your space.

This is also a great time to plan out any security systems you want to install. Your employees will spend a lot of time behind the cash wrap, and can't watch every angle of the store at all times. A retail security system such as [Simplisafe](#) offers cameras, secure entry keypads, panic buttons, and more with live 24/7 professional monitoring and no contract. [Get a free quote today.](#)

3 Consider Traffic Flow & Customer Behaviors

Customer Behavior #1: Decompress Upon Entry

It's tempting to place new products, hot items, and sale signage front-and-center so they're the first things customers see upon entering—but don't do this. The first few feet inside the door, say five feet for a small store and 15 feet for a larger store, is known as the decompression zone. Retail store design experts strongly advise against cluttering up this space.



The decompression zone is where your customer makes a mental shift from the outside world to your store environment. Upon entry, they take stock of your store, develop an opinion of your brand, and even make subconscious judgments about the prices they expect to find.

Retail store layout experts agree that this area should be open, inviting, and free of overpowering displays and signage clutter, as shown in the image above. Many customer behavior studies, including those conducted by EnviroSell's Paco Underhill, support this opinion. They show that customers tend to ignore displays, signage, and even manned sales counters placed close to store entrances.

Want to learn more about designing a store around customer behaviors? Check out Paco Underhill's "The Science of Shopping" books. Paco is the founder and CEO of the consumer behavior research firm EnviroSell, and a leading authority on customer-driven retail practices.

However, the area just beyond the decompression zone is some of your most valuable promotional space, which experts Kizer & Bender often call your lakefront property. We detail ways you can maximize this valuable space below.

Customer Behavior #2: Right Turn, Up Ahead

Kizer and Bender write, “American’s shop the way they drive; we have a tendency to turn right when we enter a store. Approximately 90% of customers will do this, so it’s important to merchandise this area with care.”

So what does that mean for retail store owners? According to Georganne Bender of Kizer & Bender, in the U.S. it means three key things:

1. The right-hand side of your store, especially the lakefront property just beyond the decompression zone, is best for promotional displays.
2. Customers are going to naturally drift to the right upon entry, so you should design your store traffic flow based on a right-to-left pattern.
3. Checkouts and registers should be located to the left of the entrance so the right side can be maximized for product exposure and power walls, which we discuss in detail below.



The small apparel boutique pictured above really nails these traffic flow details. A roomy entrance offers clear sight and travel lines to eye-catching power walls on the right, and an inviting seating area toward the back. These lure customers into the store with the promise of treasures and comfort within. The shop even has a left-side checkout midway back. Someone really did their customer behavior homework on this retail store layout.

Customer Behavior #3: Personal Space

The size and placement of aisles and pathways dictate the flow of customer traffic throughout your store. Aisles must be wide enough to invite customers to browse, not bump into other shoppers, and—most importantly—pick up and carry items for purchase.

Spacious pathways are a key aspect of good store planning. In fact, it tops the list of retail experts' store design tips. Heshy Lovi, Sales and Marketing Director for [M Fried Fixtures](#), recommends aisle widths of four feet or more. This, he says, ensures your aisles and pathways will be comfortable for all customers, including those using strollers or wheelchairs.



This store leaves customers plenty of room to browse with generous aisles and pathways.

Wide aisles also prevent the dreaded butt brush, a term coined by top retail consultant Paco Underhill. His studies show that both women and men avoid tight or crowded aisles where they might brush bottoms with other shoppers—really, this is a thing. Learn more about Paco's retail research and insights in his book, "Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping."

In addition, if your aisles aren't wide enough, you could be subject to complaints or lawsuits under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The ADA requires you to have aisles that are a minimum of three feet wide. If you're reported to be non-compliant, you could be fined if you don't widen your aisles and remove obstructions.

Our advice: Plan for aisle and display pathways of at least 3 feet, 6 inches wide, without obstructions. Then, once your fixtures and displays are in place, further test your store's pathways by rolling a large baby stroller throughout your store. If you can easily navigate all traffic pathways, your customers should enjoy a comfortable browsing experience.

4

Position Your Store Checkout Area

According to retail feng shui expert DeAnna Radaj, store checkout and register placement is one of the biggest mistakes she sees in retail store floor plans.



DeAnna says that in general, the front left of a retail store is a good location for the checkout counter, like the one above. Shoppers naturally drift to the right when they enter a store and tend to loop around the store, leaving on the left side. So, a checkout at the front left of your store puts it your customers' natural exit path. Plus, it doesn't distract them from shopping as they make their way around the store.

She states that many retailers mistakenly place their counter toward the front, on the right side of the store. But this takes up prime product promotion real estate. It's better to use this lakefront property for a product display power wall, and let the checkout area take up the space on the left.

Some experts recommend a checkout location at the rear of the store. But that's not practical for small retailers with limited staff since it can leave the front of the store unattended. For small retailers, experts tend to agree that a checkout should be toward the front of the store, to the left of the entry.

Once you've decided where to place your store's checkout, you'll need to decide what type of checkout you need. Island? Long counter? Cash wrap? There are many options to consider. Explore them all in detail in our article on [cash wraps and checkout counters](#).

Once you've decided where to place your store's checkout, you'll need to decide what type of point-of-sale (POS) you need. [Square's](#) software is fast, intuitive, and designed for modern retail with both Apple and Android compatibility. You also get integrated payment processing, inventory management, and reporting insights to help you make smarter, more profitable decisions. [Create a free account](#).

5 Position Products for Maximum Exposure

Use Zone Design & Merchandising Strategies

“Zone design successfully helps shoppers locate what they want while exposing them to products that enhance the ones they are buying. Increased transaction totals are a natural byproduct. Products are categorized by use into Zones, such as ‘kitchen and cooking,’ ‘entertaining and dining,’ and ‘home decor,’ with inventory range and stock levels determining the size of each Zone.

“Best-selling products should be placed in Primary Zones located toward the rear of the store, ensuring that shoppers will pass by Secondary Zones featuring other merchandise, increasing their exposure and sales potential (it’s why milk is always in the back of the grocery store). You can also feature several ‘best sellers’ in window displays for exposure.”

– Debi Ward Kennedy, Retail Visual Design Expert

Zone Merchandise Bestsellers Toward the Back

Whether it’s underwear in an apparel store or milk in a grocery store, the items customers need most usually are found near the back. Think about this next time you’re in a grocery store. As you walk to the back of the store to get milk, you funnel past coffee, cereal, and toilet paper. And the milk is right by the eggs and cheese. This is primary and secondary zone merchandising in action, and the reason people shopping for one item often leave with three or more.

Dan Jablons, a consultant with Retail Smart Guys, highlights the importance of putting necessary items near the back of your store. Doing so increases your customer’s exposure to other products, he says, and motivates customers to impulse buys.

What Are Your Go-to Products?

Do you carry items that bring your customers back time and time again? Consider placing these primary and similar secondary product lines toward the back of your store. Or, if your stock is constantly changing and you don’t carry replenishing goods, place your sale items toward the back. That way, customers must pass your new items and promotional displays on their way to check out the deals in back.

Zone Merchandise Low-cost Impulse Buys at Your Checkout

Impulse items like small toys, candy bars, lip gloss, and breath mints are great products to feature near your register. When customers approach the register to pay and leave, you don't want them to stop shopping. Placing low-cost impulse buy items near registers, as shown in the image below, encourages shoppers to add an item or two as they check out.

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Highlight Power Walls With Flexible Display Options



Power walls are areas of your store where most customers naturally focus on and move toward upon entering. Following customer behavior patterns, power walls are usually on the right side of the store, just beyond your store's entrance, in what Kizer & Bender call your lakefront property.

Power walls are your go-to spot for hot finds, new items, and seasonal features that attract instant attention and pull customers through the entry area and into your store. These areas are likely going to change frequently and you need to plan for it. Outfit these spaces with versatile displays that can be easily changed to showcase various product groupings.

Power wall space isn't limited to the front of your store. Any place in your store design that naturally draws traffic can be a power wall. And a power wall isn't limited to wall displays, either. Tables, specialty display units, aisle endcaps, or even prominent spots near your register can be promotional power walls.

Slow Customers Down With Speed Bumps & Merchandise Outposts



Along with power walls, you'll want to include a few speed bumps and merchandise outposts to slow customers down as they move through your store. Smaller speed bump displays and larger merchandise outposts placed along your store's main traffic flow let you draw customer interest to certain products. Speed bumps let you feature new finds and hot sellers in eye-catching ways. Larger outposts are great for special price stock or product groupings such as seasonal features and branded collections.

"Just past the Decompression Zone is where you place fixtures known as Speed Bumps. These merchandise displays work much the same way as speed bumps in parking lots work—they slow customers down. They also grab their attention and introduce them to the cool product for sale in your store. Be sure to rotate the product on your Speed Bumps at least once a week."

– Rich Kizer and Georganne Bender, Retail Store Layout Consultants, Kizer & Bender



Tip: Save money on specialty displays. Many manufacturers offer retailers low-cost or free specialty display fixtures designed to highlight their branded lines, like the one pictured below. These make great speed bump or outpost display units on a tight budget. Your product line reps can tell you if they're available, plus provide merchandising and display advice.

6 Place Fixtures & Displays in Your Store Layout

Store Fixtures & Displays Should Define Your Brand

Retail store design experts agree that your store's walls, floors, fixtures, and display units should create a coordinated backdrop that defines your brand but lets your products pop.

So keep this in mind when choosing fixtures and display units: The ultimate purpose of fixtures and display units is to put your products front-and-center. But at the same time, the overall look, styling, and finish is your biggest branding opportunity. Choose cohesive fixtures and display pieces that coordinate with your product collections but don't overpower them, like the successful looks below:



Use Product Displays Designed to Handle Your Products



Display units must also be able to handle products' weight and size. For example, glass shelving is not ideal for power tools, and expanded metal racks aren't complementary to jewelry displays.

Slatwalls can accommodate a wide variety of products and are typically found in home, decor, and craft retailers. Plus, it comes in a variety of stylish looks.

Retail store design experts advise small retailers to keep versatility in mind when choosing product displays. Your stock will likely change over the years. If you install permanent, unmovable displays, you likely will regret it later. Adjustable display options such as slatwall, gridwall, apparel racks, and shelving tend to be good choices for small retailers.

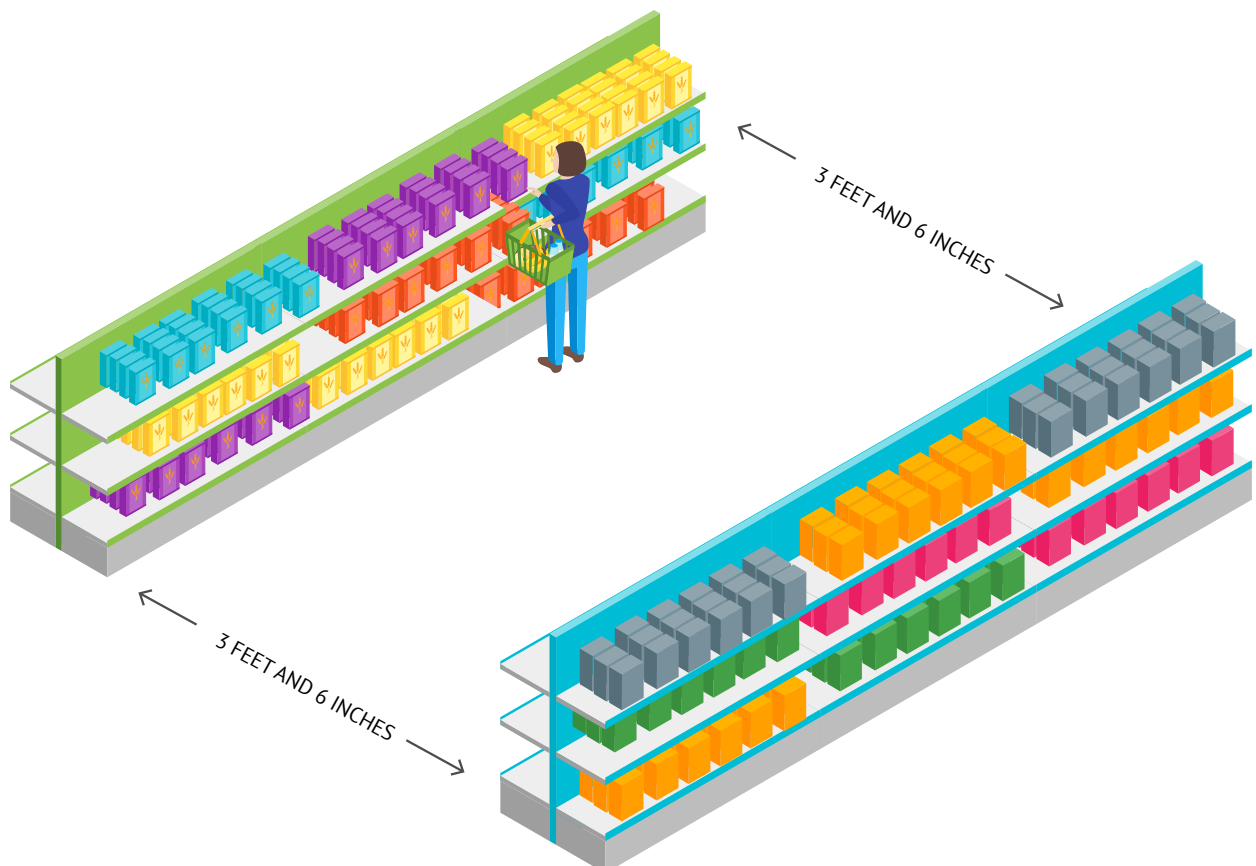
Many retailers are also opting for digital signage. While digital signage and display solutions are more of an investment upfront, they allow you to quickly and easily show customers sales, new products, upcoming events, customer reviews, and more.

Tip: Ask your product manufacturers about display units tailored to display their products. Vendors often provide attractive free or low-cost units to display their branded lines. This can be a great cost savings for you.



Aisle & Personal Space Matters

Remember that you must allow three feet of pathway space between all display units to meet ADA requirements. But customer comfort is more than a requirement. Studies have proven, time and time again, that customers do not like to be jostled when shopping. Allow generous pathways between fixtures. Experts recommend 3 feet, 6 inches, so customers can move freely, examine products, and carry items to your registers. This will keep customers happily browsing in your store and you in good standing with the ADA.



7 Create Comfort Zones & Other Amenities

Seating

Leslie recommends that retailers provide some type of seating for both customers and anyone who is accompanying them. Shoppers do get tired and so do their friends and relatives who are along for the ride. Why not offer them a chair? Seating can be as simple as stools near the checkout or a lounge area near the dressing rooms.

Dressing Rooms

Dressing rooms are a must in most apparel stores, but they do take up valuable floor space. Make the most of dressing room areas by using adjoining walls for promotional items and accessories like belts and scarves. If you provide dressing areas, be sure at least one door and changing space meets the [ADA accessibility guidelines](#) too.

Checkout & Customer Service Areas

In a small store, these are usually one and the same. In stores where customers don't shop with baskets, Lesley recommends having a checkout counter large enough to hold products as customers continue shopping. Remember, empty hands pick up more products, and that leads to more sales. Also, make sure checkout counters are large enough to handle the checkout process efficiently and allow space for customers to put down a handbag.

When it comes to limited checkout space, a compact point-of-sale (POS) system like [Square](#) can make the checkout process fast, efficient, and tidy. With fast and intuitive software that works with either Apple or Android tablets, you can create a streamlined work station with all of the payment, inventory, and customer management features your retail store needs. [Sign up for free.](#)

Store Planning Resources

If you feel overwhelmed at the idea of planning your retail store layout yourself, professional designers can help. Yes, the upfront cost is greater than going it alone; expect to spend \$150 per hour or more on a qualified designer. But hiring a pro can save you time and money in the long run by designing your store right from the start.

Here are some places to start your store designer search:

- **The Retail Design Institute:** The leading professional association for retail design experts. You can review and contact member design professionals by region.
- **The American Society of Interior Designers (ASID):** The leading professional association for interior designers. Note, you'll want a designer who has retail store experience since residential and retail design needs differ greatly.
- **Kizer & Bender:** They are top national retail consultants, store designers, and merchandising experts. They also have a Top Performers Retail Club, publish many best-selling e-books, and run an award-winning Retail Adventures Blog.

Display Company Design Services

Many retail fixtures and display companies provide store planning and design services to their customers. Though typically not free, these in-house design services can be far less expensive than hiring an independent designer. Plus, they can help streamline the process of retail store layout and planning as well as the purchasing and installation of displays and fixtures.

Store Planning Software

Though store planning software isn't a necessary tool for the average small retailer, it can certainly come in handy if you are looking to develop specific planograms, such as for the holiday season or a special event. Store design software is more common for multilocation retailers that want to deploy the same planogram in multiple places. Either way, if you are looking to build planograms, DotActiv offers a handy free tool.

Product Vendors

Another great source of retail store design inspiration is your product vendors and their line reps. After all, your success is their success, so they're usually happy to share retail store layout and merchandising ideas. Many provide retailers with free or low-cost branded display units too. Some line reps will even assist you in product mapping your store, display setup, and replenishment—it never hurts to ask.

Pinterest & Other Idea Sources

Sometimes you just know it when you see it. So always be prepared to capture pictures and take notes when you see store features that you'd like to try out yourself. Also, don't forget the many online resources out there. Settle down with a cup of coffee and scroll through Pinterest for a treasure trove of retail store layout ideas.



Bottom Line

Planning your retail store layout is no small task, but many small retail store owners do it all themselves with great success. Take it slow, follow our seven steps, and remember to put the customer first. With the ideas in this guide and a little elbow grease, you'll soon be on your way to mapping out a retail store that's easy to navigate, welcoming to customers, and best of all—profitable.

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