

The North Face has debuted a flexible wall grid system, seen here in its Post Street location in San Francisco.

Wall climbing

The North Face's new wall merchandising system maximizes flexibility

By Alison Embrey Medina, Managing Editor

Walls are something that every retail store has to have, so why not utilize as much of that prime merchandising real estate as possible? In its new store prototype launched last year in Seattle's University Village, across the street from the University of Washington, The North Face brought the walls into play. The visual team at San Leandro, Calif.-based The North Face partnered with Portland, Ore.-based The Carlson Group to create a new wall merchandising system that would provide optimal functionality while also reflecting the retailer's brand identity.

"We wanted to present a brand-right customer experience that expresses the lifestyle of The North Face shopper," says Nicole Lockridge, account manager, The Carlson Group. The grid-based system is essentially constructed of 10-ft., hot-rolled steel standard uprights that are bolted to the wall through a plated cleat system at the top and bottom. The uprights are each

spaced 24 in. apart and feature Plyboo shelving, an environmentally sustainable bamboo plywood combination. Myriad accessories offer abundant options: including capacity shelving in various lengths, merchandise hooks that allow the option of hanging product from left to right or front to back, and a peg panel with peg hooks for smaller items.

The University Village opening last year was the first launch of The North Face's new visual merchandising strategy, which included a redesigned architectural palette and store façade, as well as the new fixture program. "We like to juxtapose four visual 'ingredients' in our overall visual 'recipe,'" says Eric Green, director of visual merchandising for The North Face. That recipe includes an iconic red logo; an industrial material (hot-rolled steel); an organic material (Plyboo); and graphics (cinematic, aspirational outdoor photography). In most locations that the wall system is implemented, all of

those four key ingredients are present.

While 75 percent of its business is attributed to wholesale, The North Face has made a strategic shift to focus on its retail stores, using them as laboratories for design and visual initiatives. "Whatever we do in the wholesale arena is really born inside the retail stores," Green explains. "That's our opportunity to try new materials, new fixture packages, new signage options and new merchandising scenarios, and then we edit it down, or 'value-engineer' it, for the mass rollouts." By the end of 2007, 10 to 11 new stores will have been outfitted with the new package.

The retailer will have 20 retail stores in operation by the end of this year, including new stores in Natick, Mass.; Madison, Wis.; Westchester, N.Y.; Evanston, Ill.; Boulder, Colo. (remodel); and Kansas City, Mo. The North Face also has plans for an additional six to 10 new stores in 2008, Green says. **ddi**



Photo: Courtesy of The Carlson Group, Portland, Ore.