



CONFIDENTIAL

A DISPATCH FROM THE SHOWROOM FLOOR



DISPLAY PURPOSES ONLY: Author Evan Ratliff uncovers the genius of the Ikea branding strategy by becoming a shining example of it.

You wish you had my office. Knowing you, you'd probably take the whole space intact—the corner desk with a view, the wooden sideboard with filing cabinets, the matching beech veneer. You covet my smart solutions to every office problem: magazine rack for clutter reduction, foot rest for ergonomic soundness, proper lamp positioning for lighting balance. All of it from IKEA—from my EFFEKTIV “desk system” to my LOREN “jar with lid.” You'd buy it all from me if you could, even the GLANA picture frame with the photo of my nephew in his frog costume.

Actually, you can. Because my office is not just from IKEA, it *is* IKEA—the office furniture section of the Emeryville, California, store, to be exact. I arrive to start my day just before 11 a.m. After walking the gray one-way path around the showroom, scouting for a suitable work space, I settle into the faux office set with the EFFEKTIV corner desk and an unobstructed view of the showroom floor. I break out my laptop, cell phone, and some miscellaneous paperwork, cover up the framed picture of a Nordic male model with my nephew, and settle in for the workday.

Of course, I don't actually work for IKEA. But if the Swedish furniture giant is about anything, it's about having an immersive experience. And by 11:30, I am fully immersed in IKEA land—a universe as meticulously engineered as it is invitingly lived-in, with its fully furnished living rooms, kitchens designed down to the fruit in the bowls, slept-in-looking beds, and *Svenska* books on the shelves.

With more than 160 stores in 22 countries and growing fast, the 60-year-old juggernaut has steamrolled across world markets, depositing its blue and yellow bunkers wherever it goes. Several hundred million customers pass through its doors each year, and in 2001 they spent \$10 billion along the way. Deconstructed by cultural critics, featured in Hollywood

FEATURE PROJEKT

IKEA:
Monoculture Hell
Or Do-It-Yourself
Shopper's Heaven?

This combination:

by Evan Ratliff
photos Jeffery Cross

\$4.95



To buy this item, note
the name & color, then
**Go to the nearest
information desk**

films, and fetishized in song lyrics and Web sites, IKEA is no ordinary retail giant. It's a full-fledged cultural force.

More than the appealingly quirky commercials or Viking-style expansion strategy, the core of IKEA's branding genius lies in its showrooms. After a few hours of working here, I begin to notice the singular weirdness built into this land of umlauts. There is, of course, the Swedish thing. The names—DOKUMENT, ABSTRAKT—sound more like Swedified English. They're straight from the Häagen-Dazs mold (owned by none other than all-American dough company Pillsbury), and lend Northern European cachet to its products. No detail is ignored: Red is not red, it's the richer ULSKA Red (and always in capital letters, as if the Swedish shout everything: “GRUVA lamps! TRÄNE chairs! WORK IKEA PLANNING OFFICE!”). The language hangs on everything—across from my office, a bank of coffee tables suspended from the wall bears the ominously simple inscription, “LACK.” The showroom offers

so many of these double meanings I'm left wondering if they have an irony division in the corporate identity unit.

Contrary to what you might assume from the Swedish novels lining the bookshelves, the sets are not models of Swedish homes. They vary by store, and especially by region: Homes are larger in Houston, for example, and there are more studio apartments in the San Francisco Bay Area. The sets are constantly evolving as new furniture comes in, old pieces are worn out, and seasonal changes call for new color schemes.

Then there is the gray path running through the store. No matter which road you take, it seems to lead you back always to the merchandise, like a casino designed to hem in gamblers. People walking by my desk are often “lost” looking for restrooms or exits. (They always know, at least, that they are still in IKEA.) They stop to gaze in wonder at the stress-testing machine across from me, pummeling a POÄNG chair with an ass-shaped wooden plank inside a glass case. It dutifully records its 566,544th pounding.



NOT FOR SALE: IKEA's "home environments" simultaneously lure shoppers with familiar emotional cues and ice them off with well-researched homogeneity.

IKEA has turned suspension of disbelief into a marketing tool.

I'm something of a stress-tester myself, evaluating whether this office can handle the rigors of a full workday. If IKEA's merchandising strategy is for its sets to be appealing enough to make you want to enter them, its furniture assemble-it-yourself enough to make you want to own it, then it's working. I've already put a few personal touches on my office, and I'm getting to know the people here. Jeanine, the employee covering the office section, eyes me warily, stopping by my desk occasionally to expound on its features ("all the legs are adjustable") and to ask if I need anything. When I ask her if it's alright if I spend some time trying out the desk, she hesitates. "Sure, OK," she says finally. "It's just ... interesting."

Shoppers wander through my work space, snippets of their conversation mingling with the soft rock and voice-of-God employment and sale announcements issuing from the speakers overhead.

"ATTENTION IKEA SHOPPERS ..."

This is it, I think. They are calling for security to escort me out. "Look at this, Jan!" A man opens the cabinet behind my desk. "Ooooo, it's magic!" Jan says.

"IMAGINE YOURSELF WORKING ..."

I breath a sigh of relief—just another product pitch.

"See that there, see that man?" A woman points at me. "That's exactly what I'm doing, putting the desk in the corner."

"IMAGINE A JOB THAT FITS RIGHT INTO YOUR LIFE PATH ..."

A shopper bends down to check the price of my EFFEKTIV desk system. "It's just so cheap! Are you a model for this unit?"

"No, I'm just trying it out."

"THERE IS NO REASON TO IMAGINE ANY LONGER."

While working at my EFFEKTIV desk, I am often asked the question, "Excuse me, do you work here?" To which I answer, "Well, I don't work *for* IKEA." This vagary leads to further confusion. But the fact that customers believe I might actually be hired to demonstrate what this office would look like with someone working in it is revealing. There's a socially engineered "this is your place, come on in" strategy at play here that distinguishes IKEA's home sets from those in other department stores. In a merchandising concept as brilliant as it is simple, the company has turned suspension of disbelief into a marketing tool, down to the one-pound fake plastic computer monitors trained to the IKEA Web site, as if someone living in an IKEA store might still need to check things online. Follow the arrows around the showroom, wander in and out of what look like real rooms—already decorated, already full of "smart solutions"



LACKLÜSTER: Ubiquitous product tags shout irony at every turn with Swedified labels like ABSTRAKT storage systems, GRUVA lamps, and LACK tables.

you can co-opt. Isn't this place so you? See yourself living in it, working in it.

From my vantage point, the strategy looks extremely EFFEKTIV. Kids crawl into beds and fall asleep. Husbands sit and watch TV while their wives shop. Cell phones are ubiquitous, as people lounge on the furniture and make plans for the evening or try to locate other members of their party. ("Hey, we're in the bedroom section. Where are you?") One guy even sits down at a desk across from me and types away on the plastic computer prop for a while, just to get the feel for it.

This is all part of the plan. "We want the room settings to be a model of reality, for customers to feel like they are actually voyeurs in somebody's home," says Amy Singer, an interior designer for IKEA North America, who, along with a team of other designers, helps create the sets for new stores. "It actually happens that people come in and say, 'I want this entire room setting,'" says Singer. (It's true—I've heard people say

it more than once today.) "There are definitely some people out there who have no creativity whatsoever. IKEA really works for them."

As IKEA's designers define them, there are two types of sets: rooms and homes. Rooms, like the office I'm working in, are simpler, with perfectly matched furniture and minimal detail. Homes, on the other hand, are what Jennie Reboh, an interior designer who works on sets at the Emeryville store, calls "experimental media"—a little human idiosyncrasy thrown in to keep things real. A "front door" to one of the sets includes a mailbox and an address: 2202. There is food in the fridge. There are clothes in the closet. They are your clothes. The furniture is intentionally mismatched, just slightly out of alignment. "It's going a little deeper, a little bit further into reality," Reboh says. There are enough shoes in the closet to show how easily shoes can be organized, but not so many that it looks messy. The objective is to suggest an ideal, "without smacking people in the face with the reality of their messy

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lives,” she says. “We want to give them suggestions instead of showing them what they already have.”

The room I’ve chosen to work in, Jeanine explains, is a model for a designer’s workspace. I tell her it looks a lot like a doctor’s office. “It used to be a psychiatrist’s office,” until the set designer moved on, she says. You may not always know who IKEA has in mind when they build their sets, but when it comes to the image you’re after, they’ve done their homework. Behind the laid-back, assemble-it-yourself banner, there’s a lot of high-ticket corporate research on how people shop; motion studies that track shoppers as they move through the store search out ways to increase “dwell time.” And the sets themselves begin with detailed sketches of target customers.

“We do research, and we know who our market is,” says Singer. “We know how our customers are living, what kind of spaces they are living in, the size of the spaces that they are living in. And, essentially, we put together stories about those typical people in our markets.”

For the homes, those stories include names, occupations, typical friends. Designers start with whiteboard diagrams of the residents: “Lucy and Dave, art collectors, with two kids.” They envision the couple’s eating habits, sleeping patterns. Even the framed pictures, which in the Emeryville store are printed from a CD photo collection, are aligned with the dweller’s profile. “These are the people, these are their relatives,” says Reboh of the photo selection process. “This is them at a dinner party.”

By early afternoon, the IKEA office is really working for me. I’m making calls, writing email, and starting to feel like this actually is my office. I start to wonder what I would have to do to get kicked out of here. If I had kids, could I drop them off at the day-care center each morning and pick them up at the end of the workday? Could I have friends over to watch college basketball on Saturday afternoon?

In the midst of fantasizing about my IKEA future, I break for lunch, having previously arranged an appointment in the cafeteria, where by some miracle of Swedish socialized eating you can get a shrimp sandwich for \$3.25. Jeanine stops me on my way out to make sure I have brought my laptop with me.

“I’m going on my lunch break,” I say, officially.
 “So you’ll be out of the office?” she asks.
 “Yes. Please hold my calls.”

Jeanine has been warming to me all day, at one point stopping by to inform me that she might have to start charging me rent. “I might have to start charging you salary,” I reply. “I’m really helping people out here.” And I am: loaning out pens, smiling at the kids (who find me especially curious), offering helpful advice.

Taking up a new station after lunch, lounging in my PROCENT “task chair” as the Friday afternoon crowd starts to pick up, I try to study IKEA from the inside. I look out over the customers. They don’t seem particularly inspired. Nor do they seem unhappy or angry. In fact, they seem to be, well, pretty much enjoying themselves. Mostly, they seem to be salivating over getting pretty decent furniture on the cheap. Set designer Amy Singer argues that pushing the IKEA lifestyle is really about giving people choices. “I’m certainly not force-feeding anyone anything,” she says.

But the force-feeding may be exactly what we’re drawn to. It certainly captures the attention of popular culture. In a scene in David Fincher’s *Fight Club*, a series of IKEA environments scrolls across the screen as Edward Norton’s character obsesses over the IKEA catalog and describes becoming “a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct.” The blue and yellow box has found its way into songs by hip-hop artist Redman (“Crack heads furnish your homes like IKEA,” in “J.U.M.P.”), and alt-rock bands like Pavement (“Date with IKEA”) and the Flower Kings (“IKEA by Night”).

The seeping IKEA brand inflames cultural critics, who paint pictures of a numbed nation duped into wearing Old Navy, drinking Starbucks decaf lattes out of Target cups on identical KARLANDA sofas. Naomi Klein, author of *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*, has called IKEA and its megabrand ilk “mass cloning that’s being masked in a carnival of diversity.” Writer Alan Deutschman jokingly referred to the store as “a triumph of socialism.”

There is an ideological sameness lurking behind the well-researched sets. IKEA is selling more than just furniture with its experiential tactics. It’s selling a way of life. “We talk about it as if it’s the dream versus reality,” says Reboh. “We want to show the dream. It’s about offering the solutions to the problems, instead of showing the problems.” The selling of the IKEA dream—like the furniture it’s composed of—benefits from the economies of mass production. It’s easier to market if we all want the same thing.

Especially if we want the same thing over and over again, with every product cycle. “Relatively speaking, it’s kind of dispo-

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able furniture,” observes John Seabrook, author of *Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing, the Marketing of Culture*. “More than a threat to homogenizing taste is just the way it adds to our consumerist behavior and encourages us not to view pieces as classics in any sense.” But considering the alternatives, says Seabrook (who himself enjoys a modular IKEA desk in his office), it’s hard to see it as the evil empire. “I think IKEA tends to educate people and improve their taste,” he says, pointing out that a certain segment of shoppers will end up with a better appreciation of modernist design, albeit in a distilled form. “I’d rather see IKEA than Ethan Allen furniture.”

The idea that Seabrook and I, both sitting at our IKEA desks, are unwittingly becoming consumerist robots does seem a rather dim view of human nature—and perhaps an inflated view of the importance of desk brands. Sure the LACK table looks mono-Swedactic in the store, but even if everyone on my block owns it, it probably won’t hijack my sense of self. In that sense, the cultural critics and the IKEA faithful have both bought into the IKEA dream embodied in each meticulously constructed home set: The belief that your furniture determines your identity.

Of course, I’ve fallen into the same trap. After a day working in the store, I begin to realize that instead of jamming IKEA’s merchandising strategy, I’ve played right into their hands. They’ve been onto me the whole time, and they heartily approve. I’m part of the “experimental media” that makes IKEA not just a store full of assemble-it-yourself lifestyle kits, but a destination in and of itself. How far is too far in IKEA? There is no too far.

“It’s gotten to the point where people go there like they go to the park,” says Seabrook. “A lot of people sort of sneer at that, because they see it as ultimately some sort of corporate control of what should be uncommercial experience. But those people still go to IKEA regularly and hang out with their kids.”

And what’s so wrong with that? Maybe we do yearn to spend an afternoon in a controlled environment—a clean, safe place where there are just enough but not too many shoes. A place where they already know what your living room looks like before you walk in. A place where the doctor’s office is stylish—like a designer’s space—with beech veneer and magazine racks. An island of socialism, where the lines are long but the basic necessities are subsidized by the powers that be. A place kind of like ... Sweden.

Socialism to me means a 30-hour work week, so at 4:30 I start packing up. I grab my nephew’s photo from the frame, zip up my laptop, and follow the gray path to the exits. On my way out, I stop by to say goodbye to Jeanine.

“See you next time,” she says. I wish her a nice weekend, and head out through a shortcut in the living room section. As I turn the corner, Jeanine catches up. “Hey! Next time, bring some coffee,” she says with a smile. “Starbucks, decaf latte.” ☺



THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM: The only empty spaces in IKEA’s colossal lots appear hours before the store opens.