



Bringing Sexy Back: Can Retailers follow Justin Timberlake's lead and bring sexy back to retail?

When it comes to retail, there is no denying it: Some retailers have "it" while others don't. The "it" factor I'm talking about is 'sex appeal' and if you are a marketer/shopper like me, you will agree that there's nothing worse for a brand than a flat environment, and nothing better for consumers than an environment that's rocking.

If you've been to most of the big boxes in the past year or so, you probably could sum up your experience with one word: frustration. The polar opposite to a sexy establishment like Target, most retailers (grocery, hardware etc) have little of what it takes to inspire consumers to make choices, purchase goods and feel positively about their in-store experience. Instead, shoppers just want to scream; stores are hard to navigate, misleading signage, sales associates that can't help locate their own elbow let alone sheets, a check out line that is unbearable at best, three wheeled shopping carts, littered parking lots. Many retailers have not yet figured out how to make a change.

However, I am not here to tell you that these retailers are a lost cause. They can and should improve! There's a self-help formula for bringing sexy back to retail that will both bring success to these less than attractive establishments and give consumers an intriguing and note-worthy shopping experience. If Justin Timberlake can do it, we are here to tell you that there is no reason why a retailer like K Mart cannot follow suit!

Obsession with sex appeal

In today's world, it is impossible to ignore pop culture's obsession with bringing sexy back. From Justin Timberlake's number one song of the same title to the world's obsession with Paris Hilton, Pinkberry and H&M, sex appeal has become the driving force of our cultural zeitgeist and has no signs of slowing down. Yet, while prevalent, this obsession is not a new concept. Since the beginning of time, retail outlets have sold sex appeal to consumers to drive traffic into their stores. Exemplified in everything from employing intriguing displays to boutique aisles to added value promotions, stores become successful by attracting consumers and appealing to their interests and desires. However, if sexy equals success then why does it seem like Target is the only big box retailer that has figured it out?

Unfortunately, many retailers don't know how to do "it" right. Their attempts at creating an attractive, consumer-friendly environment end up being overshadowed by the realities of disorganization, terrible customer service and in-organic means at creating a connection. We think this is crazy. There is no reason why big box retailers need to associate themselves with the less desirable Kevin Federline crowd. Rather, by following the steps below, they have the opportunity to become sexy retailers who can be attractive and attract new customers looking for a positive shopping experience.

Step One: Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery!

They say that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. In order to begin the process of bringing sexy back to retail, it's a good idea to examine those retailers that are "sexy" and imitate, imitate, imitate! There is no reason why we should have to re-invent the wheel. Rather, by taking a page from undeniably sexy retailers like Forever 21, H&M and Abercrombie & Fitch, we will have a leg up on any competition looking to create a sexy environment that works.

I'd also suggest that retail aficionados check out various retailers for inspiration. My partial list includes:

- the Pinkberry yogurt chain, springing up
- 7-Elevens in Austin (upscale)
- of course, the Plano Wal*Mart
- Whole Foods
- Tweety, an upscale boutique featuring Sylvester's favorite lunch
- Best Buy
- Nike Town
- Apple stores
- Old Navy
- Target
- Build-a-Bear

Lessons:

- There is no need to re-invent the wheel.
- Take a look around at "hot" retailers and employ the lessons learned.

Step Two: Understand the wants and needs of your target demographic

Sexy retailers are "hot" destinations for teens and young adults and it's not because they play good music. These retailers drive traffic into their stores because they take the time to truly understand their target demographic.

For example, if you take a look at teens today, it is impossible not to notice their fascination with young celebrities. From texting about the latest cover of US Weekly featuring Nicole Ritchie or Paris Hilton to tuning into MTV's TRL to see if Vanessa Manillo is still in love with Nick Lachey, today's teens are mesmerized by these figures who on one hand live unattainable and glamorous lives and on the other are so relatable by age that they could be lab-partners in high school biology. As a result of this relatable quality, today's teens form strong relationships with these figures. Forever 21, H&M, Abercrombie & Fitch, Nordstrom's, J Crew, Target, and others not only understand this fascination with celebrity but cater to it, by offering 'of the moment fashions' that make teens feel that they can look as good as their favorite idol at a fraction of the price.¹ By creating clothing that could easily double for the designer duds purchased by celebrities at Fred Segal or Juicy Couture, some mass retailers have emerged as leaders in the retail pack for teens of all ages who want to feel cool, sexy and as cute as their favorite star at a fraction of the price. And, the evidence is in their sales. "For the year, *forever 21* is projecting more than \$1 billion in sales, up from \$925 million last year."²

In addition to attracting today's teen's by catering to their fascination with celebrity, targeted retailers also drive traffic to their stores by creating environments that could almost double as entertainment. From their employment of bright lights, fashionable displays and top-40 music, these stores understand that teenagers will frequent environments that they deem exciting and as a result, they make it their mission to provide an energized shopping environment that will cater to this crowd.³

¹ Emily Scardino, "Knows what's 'in,' and spends accordingly – Connecting with the Customer: Trend Teen – Teens spent \$170 mil in 2002," DSN Retailing Today, http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FNP/is_23_41/ai_9567941/, (December 16, 2002).

² Rachel Brown, "Fashion retailer forever 21 goes on expansion rampage," *Los Angeles Business Journal*, http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m5072/is_28_28/ai_n16619527/, (July 2006).

³ Emily Scardino, "Knows what's 'in,' and spends accordingly – Connecting with the Customer: Trend Teen – Teens spent \$170 mil in 2002," DSN Retailing Today, http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FNP/is_23_41/ai_9567941/, (December 16, 2002).

A major aspect of this exciting environment is boutique displays: being masterful at creating eye-catching displays that encourage teens to purchase today's trends in an effortless way. Featuring items ranging from earrings to shirts to bags, these displays organically show consumers all of the cool things available in the store and give them hope that they too can get the look of fashion icons like Sienna Miller. And, these displays help the store sell goods as well. By creating displays that organically push sales of big-ticket items as well as small, these retailers can push items that may have trouble selling on their own and achieve a positive ROI. According to Carol Norman, EVP for Claire's Stores' The Icing division, a division that retails teen accessories and décor items, the key to retail success is merchandising these big and small ticket items together as part of a trend. "If the trend is bohemian, we place that merchandise together."⁴ By merchandising such trends together, retailers both manage to make shopping easy for teens while influencing bigger sales. In essence, both the retailer and the teen win at shopping.

Therefore, in essence it's imperative for retailers to "find out what consumers say they want from life, whether its excitement, self esteem or more information."⁵ By determining up-front what the optimal target consumer really wants, retailers will win more business from consumers who will spend more time browsing and shopping at the valuable outlet.⁶

Lessons:

- Understand the psychology behind your target shopping demographic.
- Examine what men, women, teens, families etc, expect out of their shopping experiences and cater to these groups.
- Create a winning shopping environment that benefits both the consumer and the retailer – make sure your consumer feels like they won organically.

Step Three: Don't forget the men!

More and more retailers are thinking about the male shopper as well, even as the 'metrosexual' fad seems to be fading. According to Ilse Metcheck, executive director of the California Fashion Association, most of the 25 percent growth in the retail industry over the past five years is due to male shoppers.⁷ And hot stores around the country are embracing this phenomenon. They understand that "women's closets are full,"⁸ and in order to be successful, it's time to start paying attention to the estimated 85% of men who are spending more money on shopping than they earn each month. Exemplified in the move from only having women's stores, Hot Topic, Forever 21, Lisa Kline and M.Fredric have all launched men's concepts in hopes of capitalizing on the male Gen Y market that has serious spending power today.⁹

However, in order to attract men to the fold, retailers need to examine what men want out of their shopping experiences and create an environment that caters to these needs. A great example of a retailer that has taken this lesson to heart is Harmonie Boutique in Venice, California. In creating their sales environment, the store determined that men not only want to relax while shopping, but they want to feel social, confident

⁴ Emily Scardino, "Knows what's 'in,' and spends accordingly – Connecting with the Customer: Trend Teen – Teens spent \$170 mil in 2002," DSN Retailing Today,

http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FNP/is_23_41/ai_9567941/, (December 16, 2002).

⁵ "Loves to have fun, adventure and wants to look good doing it – New Age consumer: Attitudes and Values – Traditional retailers making stores fun and exciting," *Drug Store News*, http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m3374/is_8_24/ai_87511140/, (June 17, 2002).

⁶ "Loves to have fun, adventure and wants to look good doing it – New Age consumer: Attitudes and Values – Traditional retailers making stores fun and exciting," *Drug Store News*, http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m3374/is_8_24/ai_87511140/, (June 17, 2002).

⁷ Emily Bryson York, "Goth to guys: hot topic founder markets to men at malls," *Los Angeles Business Journal*, http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m5072/is_43_28/ai_16865887/, (October 2006).

⁸ Emily Bryson York, "Goth to guys: hot topic founder markets to men at malls," *Los Angeles Business Journal*, http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m5072/is_43_28/ai_16865887/, (October 2006).

⁹ Emily Bryson York, "Goth to guys: hot topic founder markets to men at malls," *Los Angeles Business Journal*, http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m5072/is_43_28/ai_16865887/, (October 2006).

and assured. Therefore, as a customer enters the boutique, shoppers will be met by a friendly sales-person who will offer them a drink (men a Corona, women a mimosa)¹⁰ to loosen them up.

In addition, the store takes this social environment one step further by inviting both male and female customers to happy hour parties where drinks are free, a DJ spins and clothes are 10% off. According to Laura Abeyta, owner of Harmonie, these happy hours lure in male customers and encourage sales as they are a “modern way to meet people. (You will have the opportunity to meet) someone who suits your lifestyle, your sensibility, your income level.”¹¹ By offering these happy hour parties, the store becomes a shopping destination for anyone looking for excitement, intrigue, confidence and the discovery of love amongst designer duds.

Lesson:

- Illustrate your understanding of your target demographics in all retail decisions (including use of displays, lighting, atmosphere – social, relaxed, energized etc.)

Step Four: Keep it real!

Old Navy is the perfect example of a retailer that is “cool” for keeping it real. Unlike many of its competitors in the marketplace today, Old Navy understands that it doesn’t need to offer only trendy fad clothing in order to be a hot store. Featuring staple t-shirts, jeans and shoes, the retailer appreciates that what may appeal to a 17 year-old might not appeal to their parents, and creates boutique sections that will cater to individuals in a family. In addition, these boutique sections allow the retailer’s target demographic, the parental consumer, to feel confident that their kids will look like kids (rather than sexed up figures like Paris Hilton) after shopping in the store. Thus, by creating a safe atmosphere where consumers can find items that will flatter their age and demographic, Old Navy maintains its messaging that it is a family friendly store filled with high-quality and affordable staples.

In addition to Old Navy, big-box retailers can also keep it real by creating exclusive product offerings that echo the store’s support of their target demographic. From Target’s exclusive furniture deals with high end designers like Rachel Ashwell and Todd Oldham to H&M’s exclusive deals with high-end designers like Karl Lagerfeld, mass retailers are successfully creating a connection with “hot” consumers by offering them goods that augment their lifestyle desires.¹²

According to Marshal Cohen, author of the book, *Why Customers Do What They Do*, consumers these days are happy to admit that they shop at mass retail stores.¹³ “Nearly a decade ago, only 31 percent of shoppers would admit to shopping mass retail stores in addition to department stores. Today that number is 67 percent.”¹⁴ Thus, mass retailers don’t have to be dowdy in order to keep it real; by embracing wants and needs of their target clientele through product offerings, mass retailers can create a consumer attraction that is hard to beat.

Lessons:

- Create an identity: Say what you mean and mean what you say. If your target shopper is moms, cater to moms. Don’t try to be something for everyone because you will end up losing.
- Support your messaging through product offerings etc.

¹⁰ Emily Bryson York, “Goth to guys: hot topic founder markets to men at malls,” *Los Angeles Business Journal*, http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m5072/is_43_28/ai_16865887, (October 2006).

¹¹ Emily Bryson York, “Goth to guys: hot topic founder markets to men at malls,” *Los Angeles Business Journal*, http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m5072/is_43_28/ai_16865887, (October 2006).

¹² Helyn Trickey, “Fashion designers angle for the aisles in retail,” <http://www.cnn.com/2006/US/10/18/bin.budget.designers>, (2006).

¹³ Marshal Cohen, “Fashion designers angle for the aisles in retail,” <http://www.cnn.com/2006/US/10/18/bin.budget.designers>, (2006).

¹⁴ Marshal Cohen, “Fashion designers angle for the aisles in retail,” <http://www.cnn.com/2006/US/10/18/bin.budget.designers>, (2006).

Step Five: Establish attractive roots

Location, location, location! No matter the city, there is no denying that certain neighborhoods help foster a “hot” shopping environment for consumers. Therefore, it is only logical that in order to foster a “hot” shopping environment, retailers across the country need to pay increasing attention to where they lay their roots. Evidenced in major cities, like New York, “hot” retailers are establishing stores in “appropriately attractive” neighborhoods to display their brands.¹⁵ However, before a retailer lays their claim on a neighborhood, it is imperative that they take the neighborhood’s demographics into account.

Exemplified in the real estate choices made by the upscale British lifestyle brand, Ben Sherman, a retailer’s location should echo its appeal to its target consumer. In March of 2006, the “hip” brand opened a 5,000 square foot location in the “heart of Soho”¹⁶; an area inhabited by well to do trendsters and trendmakers that make up the retailer’s targeted clientele. By choosing this neighborhood, Ben Sherman cemented its brand messaging as a retailer that understands its target shopper and positioned itself as a “sexy” store that is attractive to consumers who want to feel cool and look cool by wearing a “desirable” brand.

Conversely, if your store appeals to an alternative crowd, grittier neighborhoods would be a better choice. Giant Robot New York, a shop and art gallery offers its patrons a cool selection of “alternative” toys, books and clothes, has popped up in the Village to great fan-fare.¹⁷ By choosing neighborhoods that appeal to their core clientele, brands like Giant Robot establish themselves as one with the people; they encourage patronage by creating an environment that plays to the wants and needs of their consumers.

Lessons:

- Choose a location that suits your target demographic.

Step Six: Create a physical attraction

In order to have palpable sex appeal, attraction is a necessary component. And, when it comes to retail, it’s no different. Consumers today are inundated by retailers who try to lure them into their stores. However, there are very few retailers that manage to translate their advertising or incentivization tactics into in-store traffic.

A. You’ve got good bones!

Costco is a perfect example of a retailer that uses its physical layout to build a palpable attraction with consumers. Adhering to the philosophy that consumers will frequent a retailer that allows them to discover value added items that make them feel like they’ve won at shopping, Costco physically arranges its stores to maximize the psychology behind shopping and winning. As one enters a Costco, it is impossible not to notice all of the alluring yet discounted big-ticket items like jewelry, electronics, and furniture the store has to offer. Costco strategically places these hot ticket bargains in the front of the store so that consumers will instantly be put in the mindset that Costco cares about their purse-strings and will give them the best possible deals in the business. It encourages shoppers to buy more and spend more. “Some consumers come for necessities and take advantage of bargains. Others come for bargains—for the thrill of the hunt is a mighty motivation to some shoppers – and take advantage of necessities....”¹⁸ In addition, Costco further uses its space by placing food and consumables towards the rear of its units to insure that the customers who entered the store for such staple products will be persuaded to browse all aisles and partake in what the store has to offer. By spreading hot ticket items all around the store, Costco creates an environment that makes consumers feel as if they are being taken care of and in turn, they frequent the establishment for everything from staples to cashmere sweaters. It is an attraction that is hard to beat.

¹⁵ Faith Hope Consolo, “NYC welcomes an exciting new retail landscape,” *Real Estate Weekly* http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m3601/is_5_52/ao_n15675912, (2005).

¹⁶ Faith Hope Consolo, “NYC welcomes an exciting new retail landscape,” *Real Estate Weekly* http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m3601/is_5_52/ao_n15675912, (2005).

¹⁷ Faith Hope Consolo, “NYC welcomes an exciting new retail landscape,” *Real Estate Weekly* http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m3601/is_5_52/ao_n15675912, (2005).

¹⁸ Mike Duff, “Food still fueling Costco gains: furniture can’t match consumables,” *DSN Retailing Today*, http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FNP/is_9_42/ai_10165414

In addition to Costco's great use of its physical layout, traditional department stores are getting into the game by using their space to create an attraction amongst consumers. According to the article, *And on this floor, a comeback*, in USA Today, "Department stores have made the most of their square footage by adding more designer and private-label merchandise to distinguish their offerings."¹⁹ As a result of these new layouts and offerings, department stores are attracting those consumers who used to purchase their specialty items at boutiques. "Specialty stores do not offer the variety, prices or size variation that Macy's or the other department stores offer."²⁰

Lessons:

- You've got good bones so use them wisely!
- Strategize the layout of your store to guide consumers through a plethora of emotions (from hunt and win to discovery and value) to drive sales.

B. Stock it to me!

There is nothing more frustrating to a consumer than an out of stock situation. And, there is no excuse for this kind of retail behavior. For years, retailers like Kmart have earned the unenviable reputation of having poorly managed stores due to their out-of-stock and messy aisles. According to Debbie Howell in her article, *Improve the in-store experience: Give the consumer a reason to return – Fast Track to Recovery – Kmart Corp*, the first thing a retailer can do to put a halt in consumer foot traffic is to ignore the store's presentation and offerings.²¹ As one enters into a Kmart, "it is not uncommon to find grocery carts filled with un-stocked or clearance merchandise blocking aisles, apparel littering floors, shelves running low on basic items like shampoo and milk and new patio sets stuffed so close together it makes comparisons impossible."²² As a result of such chaotic disarray, retailers like Kmart create an environment that not only alienates potential consumers but, it turns off existing consumers by presenting its offerings in a disarranged and uninviting way. Therefore, in order to gain the trust, enthusiasm, and foot-traffic of consumers, retailers must bring organization to the forefront of their in-store experience; by doing so, it is inevitable that they will experience an increase of foot-traffic and in-store sales.

Lessons:

- Don't take your offerings for granted
- Make sure consumers feel that you are catering to their needs by offering stocked aisles.

C. That hue makes you look hot!

Whether you're selling appliances, medicine, home improvement, clothing or groceries, there is no denying that the right surroundings have an enormous impact on your customers.²³ Therefore, it is up to retailers to make sure that their establishments augment how customers look and feel rather than intensify their feelings of shopping despair. Consider lighting as an example. Unfortunately, many retailers cut costs when it comes to lighting. Featuring either florescent lighting or dim hues, their use of poor lighting does little to "sell" their clothing.²⁴ In fact, it creates a drab atmosphere that makes even the best-valued clothing unenticing to the consumer and sales are lost.

Lesson:

- Don't forget that seemingly inconsequential details can actually make or break a sale

¹⁹ "And on this floor, a comeback," *USA Today*, 21 February 2007, sec.2B, p.1.

²⁰ "And on this floor, a comeback," *USA Today*, 21 February 2007, sec.2B, p.1.

²¹ Debbie Howell, *Improve the in-store experience: Give the consumer a reason to return – Fast Track to Recovery – Kmart Corp*, http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_mOFNP/is_5_41/ai_83805328/ (March 11, 2002).

²² Debbie Howell, *Improve the in-store experience: Give the consumer a reason to return – Fast Track to Recovery – Kmart Corp*, http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_mOFNP/is_5_41/ai_83805328/ (March 11, 2002).

²³ Lisa Johnson, *Get Ready for Retail Theatre*, <http://www.marketingprofs.com/5/johnson3.asp> (May 31, 2005).

²⁴ Kelly Nolan "Kmart elevates apparel with style and quality," *DSN Retailing Today*, http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_mOFNP/is_19_44/ai_n15694744 (October 10, 2005).

D. I'm in love with the geek squad!

Who says smart isn't sexy? When it comes to creating a sexy retail environment, education is key! According to our friends who run the Bigheads Network, a network made up of influencers in a variety of prevailing industries, the most powerful outlets are those that allow consumers to feel that they have learned, been inspired and have left smarter than when they arrived.²⁵ Consumers are attracted to environments that help them learn how to get the most out of what they buy. Therefore, one way retailers can create such an environment is by offering in-house seminars and workshops. As evidenced in the success of Williams-Sonoma and Home Depot, sales to consumers increased ten fold when the retailers began offering in-house seminars and demonstrations.²⁶

In addition to creating a sexy appeal by offering in-house seminars and workshops, retailers must also educate their employees about their product offerings. While 'service with a smile' may keep consumers placated, it will not provide them with satisfaction. Therefore, retailers must do better than that to attract business. According to Mary Sammons, President and COO of Rite-Aid, "You want the customer to feel that they are really having a valuable shopping experience while they are (at your retail outlet) so they will stay longer and buy more. Product knowledge and enthusiasm (is key to accomplishing this fact)."²⁷

Lessons:

- When it comes to retail, knowledge is power! It's time to educate, educate, educate!
- In-store demonstrations, seminars, workshops and skilled employees are key factors in increasing sales and creating a palpably attractive environment.

E. Signage is sexy

In addition to attracting consumers through educational tactics like in-store demonstrations or seminars, retailers can also attract consumers through their use of clear signage. However, unfortunately for us, many retailers take signage for granted. If you visit a store like K Mart, you will notice that the store's signage does not match up with its offerings. In fact, you are lucky if the product you seek is even located on the same aisle as advertised. As a result, consumers emerge from such retailers frustrated with their lack of organization and determined to bring their business elsewhere.

Lesson:

- Clear and accurate signage is imperative to building a sexy retail experience.

Bringing Sexy Back To Retail

So now that I've outlined some of the steps that are necessary to bring sexy back to retail, can we successfully bring sexy back to Kmart and others? The answer is yes. However, in order for the retailer to create the perception that it is an attractive destination to rival its best competitors like Target, it must create a strong identity, offer enviable goods, and a pleasing environment that will excite not only moms but, teen influencers as well. "We need to have shoppers say, 'I bought my clothes at Kmart and that isn't a bad thing.'"²⁸ And, the retailer can begin by running through what I call the Sexy Back test:

- **What makes your stores hot? Anything?**
- **What do people say about your stores? Anything?**
- **Do your stores offer exclusive products that are desired? Experiences? Services?**
- **Do your employees exude irresistible appeal due to their brains rather than brawn?**
- **Do your shoppers brag about how good you are to their friends?**
- **How rewarding is their shopping experience?**

²⁵ Bigheads Playbook for EMAK Worldwide, Inc. (November 27,2006), Question 4, page 4.

²⁶ Jeff Wuorio, *7 ways to get foot traffic to your retail store*, http://www.microsoft.com/smallbusiness/resources/marketing/customer_service_acquisition, (2007).

²⁷ Mary Sammons, President and COO of Rite-Aid at NACDS Annual Meeting, "Loves to have fun, adventure and wants to look good doing it – New Age consumer: Attitudes and Values – Traditional retailers making stores fun and exciting," *Drug Store News*, http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m3374/is_8_24/ai_87511140, (June 17, 2002).

²⁸ Emily Scardino, "Making discount Kool one basic-T at a time: Kmart Jon Goodman, chief apparel officer," *DSN Retailing Today*, http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_mOFNP/is_17_43/ai_n6198635/

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About EMAK Worldwide Inc.

EMAK Worldwide, Inc. is the parent company of a family of marketing services agencies including Equity Marketing, Logistix, Mega and Upshot. Its agencies are experts in “consumer activation” by offering strategy-based marketing programs that directly impact consumer behavior. The agencies provide strategic planning and research, consumer insight development, entertainment marketing, design and manufacturing of custom promotional products, kids marketing, event marketing, shopper marketing and environmental branding. The Company's blue-chip clients include Burger King Corporation, Frito-Lay, Kellogg, Kohl's, Kraft, Macy's, Miller Brewing Company and Procter & Gamble, among others. Headquartered in Los Angeles, EMAK has offices in Chicago, Amsterdam, Frankfurt, London, Paris and Hong Kong. More information about EMAK Worldwide is available on the Company's web site at www.emak.com.