Too many deficient lighting systems are costing retailers a fortune. Sure, energy is being wasted. But the cost of energy is pocket change compared to the cost of what lighting is doing – or not doing – for retail operations.

Imagine a store without good lighting: dull and shabby sales floor; personnel taking forever to do things; and insofar as warehouse operations, forget it. Nobody would see the store at night. And if they did, would they want to risk parking there? Or walking from the car to the front door?

Too many retailers assume that, for the most part, light is light. It’s not! Qualitative differences can have a significant impact on bottom-line results. The better the lighting, the better the results will be. More sales. Fewer expenses. More profit.

Consider the case of Colonial Park Plaza, an enclosed mall in Harrisburg, Pa. The promenade’s incandescent lighting system lacked sparkle, a condition that was made particularly obvious when management replaced it with a system composed entirely of fluorescent lighting.

The new system cost about two-thirds less to operate and maintain. More important, it provided far more light than before, lending depth and brilliance to surface colors and generally making the mall a more pleasant space to be in. Within two years, traffic increased by a third and store owners claimed 38 percent sales increases – gains worth $10 million a year. Other retailers became interested in the mall, lowering the vacancy rate from almost 19 percent to 6 percent.

Does the Colonial Park Plaza case tell us that energy efficiency really doesn’t count? Not at all. But it’s important to put energy efficiency in perspective. Avoid the trap of making changes principally to lower utility bills, assuming that your “after” lighting will be just as good as your “before” lighting. Imagine improving your lighting so it consumes less energy, only to discover that it’s had a negative effect on sales. First optimize your lighting for the tasks to be performed. Then make it energy-efficient.

At Fairmont Fair Mall, in Camillus, N.Y., parked cars were being vandalized and stolen. Management beefed up security patrols, but traffic and sales continued to decline. (Security patrols are simply not visible enough to comfort worried shoppers.) Then management installed a completely new outdoor lighting system for the parking area. This discouraged vandals and thieves, who work best in low light, and comforted shoppers walking in the lot. Fewer patrols were needed, saving about $10,000 per year. Snow plows were able to get their work done faster, too, adding another $5000 worth of benefit.

Most important to retail tenants’ bottom lines, the new lighting made the center far more visible from the roadway – and safe and secure, as well. Increased traffic led to more sales, more...
At Northcross Mall in Austin, Texas, lighting designer David Apfel (New York) used uplighting to highlight the architecture and create a warm, inviting atmosphere.

sales led to more retailers, and the beat goes on. Given the full range of benefits and the energy saved, the new outdoor lighting system paid for itself in less than 100 days.

As part of the National Lighting Bureau's High-Benefit Lighting Awards Program, we collect a number of these case histories over the years, with an array of benefits: department stores whose new, more-efficient lighting spurred soft-goods sales by improving displayed materials' color and texture; grocery stores where the reduction of lighting to save energy resulted in a sales slump that was reversed only when more (and more energy-efficient) lighting was installed; and retail warehouses, where better lighting reduced fork-lift accidents, contributing to the savings from both fewer accidents and lower insurance premiums.

The NLB's term for it is High-Benefit Lighting*: lighting designed to maximize human performance by optimizing the "seeing conditions" provided for task performance. While we believe in the value of energy efficiency, we also believe that overall energy efficiency can be realized only when seeing conditions are the best they can possibly be.

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