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Blinded By the Light(s)

Moths aren't the only creatures attracted to light and retailers are plugged in to that reality.

In fact, shopping mall Christmas lighting is a world wide industry, largely dominated by MK Illumination, an Austrian company that's in 17 countries. According to CEO Klaus Mark, the idea is to delight but not distract. After all, lights are simply marketing tools designed to help stores part consumers from their money.




"Christmas lighting is so important to attract people to the shopping centre," says Mark. "Everything needs to be considered to make the product more attractive, from the colours of the lights to whether they should flash or blink." Nothing is left to chance.

This year, the industry is aiming for a more "traditional" feel, using colours and images easily associated with the corporate version of Christmas, including trees, bells and reindeer. Along with blue — which has joined red and green as a "traditional" Christmas colour in stores — the hottest hue right now is warm, white light.

Jon Riordan of MK Illumination says shopping malls need a cosy, glowing feel. Inside, he says, "the lights should be comfortable and slow people down while they look around the shops". He says shoppers want a more leisurely pace because of the economic and emotional whirlwind caused by the recession — a recession that's making people yearn for the warmth and comfort of a traditional Christmas.

Analysts say the same thing happened during the Great Depression. So designers are highlighting things that make people feel good: bright colours and familiar symbols with lots of glitz and dazzle.

Even Christmas trees are part of the plan. In England's Cheshire Oaks Mall, the world's tallest one draws crowds with its 27.5 metre



*There was
nothing artificial
about this tree!*

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reach. But like all shopping centre trees, it's in the middle of the complex so people have to walk past the stores to reach it.

Similarly, malls use flowing decorations that carry consumers all through the centre. In most malls, shoppers are greeted by a new spectacle each time they walk into a different area. "It's almost a psychological approach to Christmas," says one expert, and it works.

So every year at this time, we're drawn to the lights, not the Light. We open our wallets but not always our hearts. And we focus on the crass, not the cross, even though Christmas is really about Easter and not the star and stable.

In other words, we're consumed with consumerism — material witnesses against ourselves whenever overindulgence puts our faith on trial. Most Canadians will spend \$600 to \$1,100 on Christmas this year and a third of us will use money we don't have. Half of us will buy something major for ourselves, according to a recent study, which also says Canadians worry a lot about paying the bills, finding gifts for the hard-to-buy-for, and choosing presents people won't like.

Ultimately, shopping doesn't slow us down, it sets us up. Instead of filling us with warm, happy thoughts, the end result of spending is just the opposite. Bright colours and the cosy atmosphere are mere enticements. No wonder they're called the trappings of Christmas.

This season, Americans alone will spend \$447 billion. Experts at the United Nations say world hunger could be eliminated for a fraction of that — \$30 billion over each of the next three to five years. Still, full stockings will trump full stomachs as most of us look the other way.

"I am the light of the world," Jesus says. *If you follow me... you'll have the light that leads to life.* That Light brings genuine comfort and joy, and meaningful change in the world. He also brings forgiveness to those who embrace him. "For *unless you believe that I Am who I claim to be, you'll die in your sins,*" he tells his critics. "When you've lifted up the Son of Man on the cross, then you'll understand that I Am [God's Son]." (John 8:23, 24,28)

The Nativity was just a portal to God's plan for our redemption. So the tree on which Jesus died is the one that should draw us in, to his message of love and eternal life. Simply put, Christ is the only Present with an everlasting future and a lifetime guarantee. What will it be: Christmas Light or Christmas Lite?

Rick Gamble