

Wooing women

Courting DIYers with nails of steel, and enamel

BY TERRY C. EVANS

NATIONAL REPORT — Women. Hardware stores and home centers have decided that they can live with them and they can't live without them.

Sure, retailers have flirted with female-friendly concepts like Home Depot's Expo Design Centers and Sears' The Great Indoors, but not until the last few years have traditional hardware stores and home centers really turned on the charm.

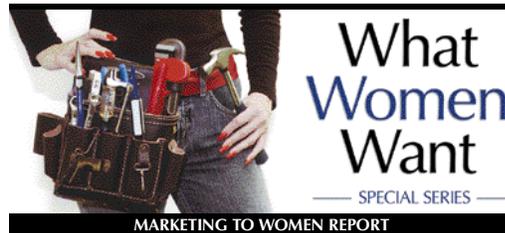
This is the reality: Single women make up the second largest group of home buyers after couples, according to the National Association of Realtors. Survey after survey has shown that women not only influence a majority of home improvement purchases, but also are more involved than ever in DIY projects. A national survey released last summer by Lowe's showed that 94 percent of female homeowners complete a home improvement project on their own at least once every five years.

"Women do-it-yourself projects are gratifying, not only because they save money, but also because they make the DIYer feel empowered," Melissa Birdsong, director of trend forecasting and design for Lowe's, said when the survey was released. "And that's appealing to more women as well as men."

Industry watchers have long touted Lowe's as the most female-friendly retailer in home improvement—a company that aggressively went after female DIYers when doing so seemed risky to everyone else. When the retailer reconfigured its format in the mid-'80s, it included a home decor department. That department quickly became a destination for women, who, wandering into adjacent aisles, found a store that was tidier and more welcoming than a typical hardware store or home center.

"Lowe's has played a quiet leadership role. They've been very careful," said David Szymanski, the director of Texas A & M University's Center for Retailing Studies. "Lowe's caused the industry to really go back to the customer and understand who they are. I think we have seen women changing and the customer base changing. Women are no longer helpless consumers who lack the proper knowledge or interest."

In fact, a 2000 Home Depot/ Yankelovich Partners study of more than 1,000 women found that 37 percent said they would rather spend their



weekend leisure time working on a home improvement project than shopping (28 percent) or cooking (25 percent). The survey also found the most popular DIY activities for women were painting and gardening, followed by wallpapering, installing a faucet, putting in a floor, upgrading

lighting, installing ceiling fans and adding window treatments.

"It seems like there's just been kind of a groundswell in about the last five years, where everyone has really recognized that you need to get serious about this," said Kim McKesson, Home Depot's merchandising vp-kitchen, bath and appliances. "You can't just do one-off marketing pieces to women. You have to have a strategy. Women want to have more 'one-on-ones,' to focus on relationship building. They ask a lot of good questions."

Home Depot wants women to do exactly that at its popular DIY clinics. Over the past decade or so, Home Depot has



A new look: Do it Best redesigned its ad circulars (front) with more lifestyle photos, more coupons and more white space in an effort to appeal to more women.

tested "Ladies Night" DIY clinics at select stores, but only recently have they been organized into a program that runs the length of the football season. While men are sitting on the couch on Monday nights, football widows are donning tool belts and heading for Home Depot. The retailer offered about 20 such programs last year, mainly as a test in Northeast markets, and management expects the initiative to be expanded this year.

"We'll be standardizing some of those clinics specifically to focus on the female consumer's needs," McKesson added.

Home Depot has also placed a strong focus and made significant progress on making its stores much more appealing to women. The most prominent example is "Design Place," the retailer's home decor initiative, which is currently in nearly 900 stores and will be in all stores by the end of fiscal 2003.

"We've had paint, special-order carpet and window coverings, kitchen and bath, all these categories, in our stores for years and years," McKesson explained. "It was just that people weren't really thinking of how do I help pull all this together for the customer and make it a better shopping experience for them. It's definitely been an evolution, but [Home Depot management] gets it now."

McKesson, however, was quick to emphasize that the male consumer is still as important as ever.

"We don't have to advocate one customer at the expense of another," McKesson added. "It's all about merchandising appropriately for the customer shopping that particular category. How a customer shops for lumber obviously is extremely different than how they shop for special-order carpet. We're getting much more focused on lifestyle imagery and key product information from a customer's point of view as opposed to our point of view or a manufacturer's point of view. In the point-of-purchase [materials], you're going to see better how-to information built into the signage."

The retailer also packages how-to information in its own home decor magazine called StyleIdeas, which shows customers what they can do with products from Home Depot. Do it Best, the Fort Wayne, Ind.-based co-op, tested a similar how-to focused home decor magazine last fall, and it officially launched the publication

this spring. The magazine, targeting women, will be published twice a year.

"Women are a huge audience, and their expectations at retail have to be addressed," said Bill Zielke, vp-marketing and international development for Do it Best. "We believe women buy or influence the purchase of 80 percent of all goods in the United States and probably a similar percentage in our industry. So we're trying to provide Do it Best retailers with programs and training to make sure they're both merchandising and professionally selling to the female segment."

To help dealers reach out and make that sale more effectively, the co-op has revamped the look of its circulars to be more appealing to more women.

"What we found was women prefer photos to illustrations," Zielke said. "They like clean, stylish fonts, color and style in circulars. Our circulars now have some bright pastels. We use photographs rather than line art. There are more coupons and more white space. We even upgraded the quality of paper in our circulars."

Aside from advertising, Do it Best also is launching a full home decor program during its May market. Home decor is a "huge opportunity" for Do it Best, according to Zielke. The new program will show dealers how to design a home decor store within a store focusing on female-friendly store design, training and display programs.

Meanwhile, rival co-op Ace Hardware began to soften its look more than a year ago with a new in-store decor package, offering its retailer-members a more female-friendly look as opposed to the stark red that Ace is known for. A softer,



Marketing through magazines: Both Home Depot and Do it Best are targeting women via new magazines that explain how to complete jobs in the home.

brighter “Color Your Life” paint department decor package followed. To date, more than 700 members have implemented both decor packages in their stores.

“Women in Ace stores is a good thing,” John Venhuizen, Ace’s marketing manager, told HCN. “They spend 50 percent more than a man in our stores.”

And Ace is giving women more reasons to spend by launching various marketing initiatives through its Helpful Hardware Club, which boasts 4.5 million households. The most recent promotion was for Valentine’s Day.

“We’re saying to them, ‘Your significant other doesn’t want another tie; he wants something great from the hardware store,’” Venhuizen explained.

At the same time, he pointed out that Ace has not lost sight of its core consumer men between the ages of 30 and 60 who account for about 65 percent of the co-op’s current business.

“We refuse to alienate our core,” Venhuizen said. “We’re trying to be wise and target all consumers. But we have no delusions. We think that, for a long time, we’ll draw more men than women.”

But Ace says it does plan to capitalize on opportunities to draw more female shoppers, specifically in two of its strongest categories: paint and lawn and garden. Broadening the product mix in key categories is how Chicago-based co-op TruServ also says it’s supporting its retailer-members in their efforts to attract women.

“In housewares we’ve brought in brands like Cuisinart, Chicago Metallic and KitchenAid better, more premium quality products,” Carol Wentworth, TruServ’s vp-marketing and advertising told HCN. “In the lawn and garden category

we’ve started to bring in fashion-forward items, such as a wrought-iron park bench, as well as basic hardware because a lot of women are taking on projects themselves. TruServ views the female as very important, and some of our members have already capitalized on the female customer.”

In fact, many traditional hardware stores looking to attract women now often take their cues from retailers long known for their female-customer base, such as Swedish-based home furnishings retailer Ikea. More than 65 percent of Ikea customers are women, and they are an integral part of any marketing decision the retailer makes, say company executives.

“While none of our initiatives are exclusive to women, women drive our organization,” said Christian Mathieu, Ikea’s external marketing manager. “We often feature women as heroes. We advertise in Vanity Fair, Cosmopolitan and Lucky [magazines], just as an example. A big piece of our store is family friendly too. For example, we have nursing stations in the stores. We’re always looking at the changing needs of our customers.”

That should be a given for all retailers, added professor Szymanski.

“People are really complex, and for you to be successful in the marketplace you really have to get to know your customer,” he emphasized. “Retailers should be proactive, and not wait to react until way after the fact. Develop an innovative spirit and anticipate customer needs. If you develop that sort of pro-active strategy, that to me is the prominent key to success.”



Designing women: Home Depot’s Design Place, which will be in all of its stores by the end of the year, was designed to be appealing to women.