



## Highlights: Hardware Stores

Along with a hammer and screwdriver, every do-it-yourselfer should have a reliable, reasonably priced hardware store at the ready. **Boston Consumers' CHECKBOOK** and [www.checkbook.org](http://www.checkbook.org) drill down with ratings of 128 local stores on the essential elements consumers look for in a hardware store. The ratings compare prices based on shopping for a market basket with a wide range of hardware products, and compare store quality based on surveys of more than 3,900 customers who rated stores on advice, promptness of service, product selection, and more. Among the findings:

- In CHECKBOOK's price survey, national chains Lowe's and Home Depot soundly beat all of the independents and other chains; both had prices that averaged at least 24 percent below the Boston all-store average. Among the independents, CHECKBOOK found big store-to-store price variation. Prices at some stores were more than 10 percent below the all-store average for items shoppers checked, while prices at others were more than 15 percent above average.
- Although they offered the lowest prices in the survey, Home Depot and Lowe's fell short of almost all independent stores on quality of customer service. Home Depot received "superior" ratings for quality of advice from only 26 percent of its surveyed customers, and Lowe's received such favorable ratings from only 43 percent of its surveyed customers. In contrast, a number of independent stores throughout the Boston area were rated "superior" for the quality of advice they provide by more than 80 percent of their surveyed customers. Local chain Rocky's Ace Hardware, which CHECKBOOK found had prices about 11 percent below average, was scored "superior" for advice from a respectable 69 percent of its surveyed customers.
- The big national chains received their highest scores on the survey of customers for their "variety of products." Although they generally don't rate as high for variety as for advice, many independent stores do a masterful job, often in a relatively small space, of offering the variety of items their customers want.
- Price variation among stores was substantial for individual items in CHECKBOOK's market basket. For example, researchers reported:
  - Prices for 10 single-gang electrical outlet workboxes ranged from \$5.90 to \$59.90
  - Prices for 50 feet of ½-inch PVC piping ranged from \$6.70 to \$37.45
  - Prices for a 1.33-gallon bottle of Roundup Plus weed and grass killer ranged from \$14.99 to \$26.99
  - Prices for five one-inch-by-one-inch metal C-clamps ranged from \$8.45 to \$16.95
- Some independent stores give discounts of 10 to 20 percent to customers buying large quantities--for example, if the customer will be running up a bill of \$500 or more in a couple of weeks. Some stores also offer discounts of 10 to 15 percent for using a store credit card or charge account. These discounts make these stores much more price-competitive with the big chains, which don't generally offer such discounts.
- CHECKBOOK found that hardware stores' return policies are remarkably liberal. This is important in the hardware business because it is fairly easy for shoppers miscalculate a quantity or measurement--and not even know it until months later when they actually try to use the product. CHECKBOOK recommends consumers inquire about a store's return policy before making a purchase. Many stores will allow returns for more than a year if the customer presents a receipt and the item can be resold.