

Strictly Embargoed Until:
October 21, 2011

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Highlights: Furniture Stores

Furniture is a major investment. If consumers don't buy carefully, they risk spending too much, putting up with defective products or months-late delivery, getting items they don't like, or getting furniture that doesn't hold up, according to **Puget Sound Consumers' CHECKBOOK** magazine and www.checkbook.org, which have just released new ratings of quality and service at 65 local furniture stores. CHECKBOOK found—

- A qualified and helpful staff can offer good interior design suggestions and provide prompt and full answers to questions without annoying sales pressure. But CHECKBOOK found not all stores' customers were satisfied with the customer service provided. Some stores were rated "superior" for the advice provided by their staff by 80 percent or more of their surveyed customers; others received "superior" ratings from 40 percent or fewer of their surveyed customers.
- Some stores were rated "inferior" for "reliability"—standing behind products, delivering on time, etc.—by 20 percent or more of their surveyed customers, a big red flag about possible headaches ahead.

Among the complaints CHECKBOOK receives from furniture store customers, the most common are about—

- Customer service/sales staff—dissatisfied with advice provided, attitudes of staff, or responsiveness—mentioned in 45 percent of complaints.
- Delay in delivery—mentioned in 32 percent of complaints.
- Received incorrect or damaged product—mentioned in 28 percent of complaints.
- Unreliability—Failure by the store to address concerns or correct problems, unsatisfactory refund policies, or store did not keep promises—mentioned in 24 percent of complaints.

Comparing prices is difficult, because many chain retailers sell items that aren't available elsewhere, and among stores that do sell national brands, it's unusual to find the exact same item on the sales floor at more than one or two different retailers. But for national-brand items, stores can order requested items from the manufacturer. One proven strategy to get good prices on such items is to note the make and style number of a desired item at one store, call other independent stores, give them the make and style number, and ask them to bid competitively with the best price they can offer if they order the item from the manufacturer.

With the results of such competitive bidding in hand, a shopper can try to negotiate price even with a store that did not give the lowest bid. This may be difficult (though sometimes possible) at department stores or

chains, but independent furniture stores are often responsive, according to CHECKBOOK. When calling local furniture stores as part of its competitive bidding strategy, CHECKBOOK found the following price differences:

- For a Kincaid “Gathering House” wardrobe, prices ranged from \$1,795 to \$3,415.
- For a Berkline queen sleeper sofa, prices ranged from \$885 to \$1,754.
- For a Broyhill “Sedgemoor” rectangular coffee table, prices ranged from \$310 to \$645.

CHECKBOOK also examined the pros and cons of buying online. Researchers found online prices were generally good but not always better than the best prices from local stores after accounting for shipping costs. And buying online has disadvantages, including difficulty getting a remedy long-distance if a product is delayed or defective, and problems assigning responsibility between seller and freight line if a product arrives damaged.

CHECKBOOK recommends consumers take the following other tips into account when purchasing furniture:

- When ordering a custom item, make as small a deposit as possible and pay by credit card.
- Inspect furniture upon delivery. If it has a significant defect, reject it. If the defect is minor, it may be more convenient to call the store, note the defect on the delivery slip, and then, with the store's approval, keep the item until a replacement is provided.
- If a defect is noted after delivery, notify the retailer at once. The longer the delay the more strongly the retailer may suspect that the customer caused the damage.
- When placing an order that will have to be fulfilled by the factory, get the retailer to (1) write on the sales slip an estimated delivery date, (2) promise in writing to order promptly and notify the customer if the delivery date quoted by the manufacturer is later than the store’s estimated delivery date, (3) promise in writing that the customer can cancel and receive a complete refund if the delivery date quoted by the manufacturer is later than the store’s estimated delivery date.
- If the customer is told of an unexpected delay and chooses to cancel, he or she should notify the retailer quickly so it can cancel the order. Once a manufacturer cuts fabric or ships non-upholstered items, the retailer is obligated to pay for the consumer’s merchandise. If the retailer is on the line for the expense, it is likely to resist efforts to cancel for a refund.
- For items ordered out of current stock, be sure the sales slip includes language allowing for return of the item within a specified number of days if the customer is not satisfied—possibly with a requirement that the customer pay a re-stocking fee and shipping charges.

The media may cite selected examples of top-rated furniture stores, as shown in the new issue of Puget Sound Consumers’ CHECKBOOK, and CHECKBOOK’s editors are available for interviews. Please call Jamie Lettis at 202-454-3006 to schedule.

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