



Highlights: Hardware Stores

Along with a hammer and screwdriver, every do-it-yourselfer should have a reliable, reasonably priced hardware store at the ready. *Bay Area Consumers' Checkbook*, online at www.checkbook.org, looks at the nuts and bolts of the local options, rating stores for quality and price. Highlights from Checkbook's report:

- To compare prices at area stores, Checkbook's undercover shoppers checked prices for 20 items at the Bay Area stores for which Checkbook received at least 10 ratings on its consumer surveys. Price variation among stores was substantial for individual items in Checkbook's market basket. For example:
 - Prices for a specific Weller 140/100-watt soldering gun ranged from \$32 to \$59
 - Prices for six 3 ½- inch brass rounded corner door hinges ranged from \$16 to \$84
 - Prices for three 15-amp, 125-volt GFCI outlets ranged from \$24 to \$75
 - Prices for a specific Black & Decker "Mouse" detail sander ranged from \$25 to \$60
 - Prices for a 4-ounce bottle of Gorilla glue ranged from \$4 to \$12
- For prices, the area's largest chains—Home Depot, Lowe's, and Orchard Supply Hardware—beat almost all of the independents and other chains. Lowe's prices averaged about 24 percent less than the all-store average, Home Depot's prices averaged 21 percent lower than average, and Orchard Supply's were 14 percent lower. But Checkbook's price survey did find below-average prices at several area independent stores.
- Although they offered some of the lowest prices in the survey, the big chains fell short on quality of customer service. Home Depot received "superior" ratings for quality of advice from only 19 percent of its surveyed customers, Lowe's received such favorable ratings from only 35 percent, and Orchard Supply received such favorable ratings from only 55 percent.
- In contrast, a number of independent stores in the area were rated "superior" for the quality of advice they provide by more than 90 percent of their surveyed customers.
- Among the area's many Ace and True Value stores, Checkbook found no consistent pattern in ratings for advice or other aspects of service. That is not surprising because Ace and True Value are buying cooperatives for independent stores that impose no performance standards or specific operating procedures on affiliates.
- Ask about discounts. Some independent stores give 5 to 15 percent off to customers buying large quantities—for example, if the customer will be running up a bill of \$500 or more (and in some cases less) over 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 deals.
- Checkbook found that hardware stores' return policies are remarkably liberal. This is important in the hardware business because it is fairly easy for shoppers to miscalculate a quantity or measurement—and not know it until months later when they try to use the product. Checkbook recommends consumers inquire about a store's return policy before making a purchase. Most stores will allow returns for an indefinite period if the customer presents a receipt and the item can be resold.

Checkbook's editors are available for interviews. Please contact Jamie Lettis at 202-454-3006 or jlettis@checkbook.org to schedule.