



Highlights: Hardware Stores

Along with a hammer and screwdriver, every do-it-yourselfer should have a reliable, reasonably priced hardware store at the ready. *Washington 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 Washington 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 \$25 to \$57
 - Prices for 50 feet of ½-inch Schedule L copper piping ranged from \$49 to \$150
 - Prices for three 15-amp, 125-volt GFCI outlets ranged from \$33 to \$69
 - Prices for a 4-ounce bottle of Gorilla glue ranged from \$3.50 to \$11
- For prices, Home Depot and Lowe's beat all of the independents and other chains. Lowe's prices averaged about 23 percent less than the all-store average and Home Depot's prices averaged 19 percent lower than average. But our price survey did find below-average prices at several area independent stores.
- Although they offered the lowest prices in the survey, Home Depot and Lowe's fell short on quality of customer service. Home Depot received "superior" ratings for quality of advice from only 20 percent of its surveyed customers, and Lowe's received such favorable ratings from only 38 percent of its surveyed customers.
- In contrast, Maryland chain Strosniders Hardware and a number of independent stores in the Washington area were rated "superior" for the quality of advice they provide by more than 80 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.

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