

5 Things Not to Buy at Home Depot

By Katy McColl, CBS MoneyWatch.com

While plenty of customers “bleed orange,” Home Depot causes others to see red: The retail giant is known among contractors as the place where you’ll get the lowest price but sometimes the worst service.

Here are five product categories where trying to save a buck might not be worth the hassle. Further down, check out the list of five products that you should be looking for when snagging a deal at Home Depot

1. Basic Hardware Items

Suppose your faucet leaks and you need a new washer. There might be a hundred replacement options that all look the same, but if you get the wrong washer, the faucet won’t work. Most people in this bind are better off paying 10 to 15 percent more at the local hardware store, where they’ll find a staffer who will meet them at the door, walk them to the plumbing aisle, and zero in on the right washer — and the same goes for screws, bolts, hinges, picture hooks, and other maddeningly tiny yet precise odds and ends.

Time saved: a lot, especially if your local hardware store’s located within walking distance. “If the corner hardware has stayed in business, it’s because it’s staffed by very competent generalists,” says 19-year veteran builder Ben Walsh, president of Green One Construction Services in Portland, Ore. Local outfits tend to know what homeowners need, he says, and they stock accordingly. A spokeswoman told us that Home Depot does have trained greeters, but in our experience, those greeters don’t get to every customer or walk them through the aisles.

2. Major Appliances

Home Depot does have some “top-notch, top-rated” appliances, including some models that it sells exclusively, says Robert Markovich, home & yard editor at Consumer Reports. However, “if you care about service, you’re going to want to go to ABT Electronics or the local independents,” says Markovich, pointing to an annual survey of more than 16,000 Consumer Reports subscribers who recently bought appliances.

At the local appliance store, you’ll get personalized attention from a salesperson who can explain, say, the difference between a manual-clean filter and a self-clean filter on a dishwasher (manual clean is high-maintenance but generally quieter). And unlike Home Depot, local dealers service what they sell — instead of pawning you off to a manufacturer’s 800 number.

3. Doors, Windows, and Trim

The wrong-sized doors or windows can bring a job to an expensive standstill, and fixing problems takes longer at Home Depot because “you never speak to the same person twice,” says Larry Roland of LRC

Carpentry in Melrose, Mass. Roland, who buys lumber but not doors, windows, or trim from Home Depot, says he also gets better quality at a specialized lumberyard.

4. Kitchen Cabinets

A single 24-inch corner cabinet costs \$107 at Home Depot and \$117.99 at Ikea, but Ikea's simple Scandinavian styles are "vastly more sophisticated," says Julie Carlson, editor-in-chief of the influential decor and renovation site Remodelista.com. On a recent visit to her local Home Depot in the Bay Area, Carlson found the design of the kitchen storage units particularly depressing, describing them as "cheap stuff trying to look like hand-carved, baronial cabinets." Ikea's cabinets, by contrast, are inexpensive yet chic-looking, according to Carlson.

5. Cleaning Products

For a company that advertises itself as being environmentally conscious, Home Depot falls behind the times in the cleaning aisle, carrying products that are rife with toxic chemicals such as ammonia, sodium hydroxide, and hydrochloric acid, with only a few safer options, like Martha Stewart's Wood and Floor Cleaner. "The cleaning products section made me feel like I was contracting a respiratory disease just by strolling the aisles," says Remodelista's Carlson. By contrast, Target does a much better job of devoting shelf space to natural alternatives like Seventh Generation, Mrs. Meyers, Caldrea, J.R. Watkins, and Clorox's Green Works line.

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"More Saving. More Doing" — the home improvement retailer's slogan since March 2009 — is catchy and accurate, if a little self-congratulatory: The word on the street, among professional contractors and home-improvers, is that The Home Depot usually has the lowest prices on home improvement supplies.

As the world's largest home improvement retailer and the fourth largest retailer in the U.S. with \$70 billion in annual sales, the company uses its clout to drive down prices, and, sometimes, to set a good example, too: the Home Depot was the first retailer to accept old compact fluorescent light bulbs for recycling, and is a leader in sales of responsibly-sourced lumber. Here's how savvy buyers navigate the aisles:

1. Interior and Exterior Paint

"Overall, Home Depot is the place to go for paint," says Robert Markovich, Home & Yard Editor at Consumer Reports, pointing to the May 2011 issue, in which Behr, the store's in-house brand of paint, swept the top spots for paints and stains. Behr is also doing something else right: it is reducing the volatile organic compounds (VOCs), which the Environmental Protection Agency has linked to short- and long-term adverse health effects, in its paints. The paint's ability to cover contrasting colors also eliminates the need for a primer, and less paint = less VOCs. Not to mention the time and money saved by not sitting around and watching that extra coat dry.

2. Framing Lumber

The home improvement giant sells more sustainably-harvested Forest Stewardship Certified (FSC)-certified wood than any retailer in America. For these efforts, the Natural Resources Defense Council called it a “progressive” company. Larry Roland, of LRC Carpentry in Melrose, Mass., who’s been in business for 30 years, says that Home Depot’s framing lumber is good quality and cheaper than anywhere else. Like most contractors, he likes being able to handpick individual 2 x 4s — as opposed to going to a lumberyard, where you order at a counter and wait by your car for the delivery. (And if you get knotty wood, tough luck.) For high quality doors, windows, and millwork such as interior baseboards and moldings, however, Roland always hits the local lumberyard. Why? See What Not to Buy at Home Depot.

3. Window Shades & Blinds

For plain white or neutral shades in a jiffy, and especially for windows that aren’t standard-sized, you can’t beat the ease of Home Depot, where they’ll cut down shades and wooden blinds on the spot while you shop, for free. (They also do this for lumber, but few people know about the custom-cut shades.) “It’s quite convenient, so I use those shades a lot,” says Naples, Fla.-based interior designer Jill Harrity, of Wood & Renkert.

4. Light bulbs

When it comes to their selection of energy-efficient light bulbs, Home Depot really shines. Their house brand EcoSmart — a line of compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs) that use less energy and outlast traditional incandescents — “cost the least and did the best among spiral bulbs,” says Markovich of Consumer Reports. Home Depot stocks 37 different kinds of LED light bulbs, and 156 CFL bulbs — even black lights and novelty color-changing “party bulbs.”

The U.S. Department of Energy estimates that a standard LED bulb lasts roughly 35,000 hours, vs. 8,000 hours for a CFL and 750 hours for an incandescent bulb. While other stores sell CFLs (Lowe's, for example, carries 41 kinds of LED light bulbs and 75 compact fluorescent light bulbs), Home Depot was the first retailer to accept old CFLs for recycling — a public service, since a broken CFL can release harmful mercury vapor into the environment. Wal-Mart, by contrast, does not recycle old CFLs.

5. Modern House Numbers

Even design snobs will slum it at Home Depot when it comes to Hillman house numbers, which cost \$5.99 a pop and look a lot like the numerals designed by modern architecture ballast Richard Neutra — which go for eight times as much at Design Within Reach. Julie Carlson, editor-in-chief of the influential decor and renovation site Remodelista.com, wrote about the stylish numbers after hearing about this surprising find from one of her site’s readers. Which just goes to show: With approximately 40,000 different items in each store, there’s bound to be a little something for everyone.