

# New store more like a Home than a Depot

Retailer puts decor on display with a feminine touch in Design Center

By Patti Bond

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Charlotte — Home Depot's newest retail laboratory debuts here Thursday, and it's a true hybrid of everything the home improvement giant has tried to date — plus a few new tricks.

Dubbed Home Depot Design Center, the female-friendly store at first glance feels like an updated version of the retailer's high-end Expo Design Center concept. Shoppers are greeted with a familiar showroom area, featuring mockups of kitchens and bathrooms. A sign nearby says "Indulge yourself in style."

Shoppers who don't know Expo — such as those in Charlotte — may feel as though they've wandered into the mega-merger of Home Depot, Pottery Barn, the Container Store and Smith & Hawken.

Just inside the entrance, for example, is an 11,000-square-foot showroom featuring furniture and accessories from Home Decorators Collection, a catalog business Home Depot acquired last year. Next to that, there's a large home organization department featuring upscale closet systems, rattan baskets, funky storage boxes and children's storage items.

In another corner, the garden shop is stocked with orchids, cut flowers, silk plants and decorative containers.

Notably missing: forklifts and two-by-fours.

"We really tried to create a format that lives up to the needs of the home decor customers," said Jason Feldman, the company's senior director of merchandising. Feldman, who's overseeing the Design Center concept, insists it's not a modernized Expo. (The Expo chain has been scaled back considerably in



Chris Keane/Associated Press  
*Mary Beth Kilgo (left) and Ann Sprinkle put the final touches on the new Home Depot Design Center in Charlotte.*

recent years.)

Rather, Feldman says, it's a test of what happens when the retailer takes the most appealing pieces of the regular warehouse store and Expo and puts them under one female-friendly roof.

"This is really an extension of the learnings from the orange box and Expo and picks up where they left off," Feldman said.

The orange box in this case is more of a burnt orange, coordinating with the new earthy color palette at the Design Center.

Although the 100,000-square-foot store is roughly the same size as a regular Home Depot, not much else is similar in terms of how the retailer showcases products.

Shelving tops out at 10 feet high, compared with the neck-craning racking in Home Depot's warehouse setting. And in the large millwork gallery in the center of the store, workers have installed dozens of doors and



Chris Keane/Associated Press

*Vanessa Crump dusts at the Home Depot Design Center, a new format for the Atlanta-based retailer that opens today in Charlotte.*



Chris Keane/Associated Press

*Laura Kyle of Natures Flowers sets up an arrangement of plants at the test store.*

windows in realistic exterior facades of stucco and siding.

“Customers want to see what it’s going to look like at their house,” Feldman said, turning the handle of a front door and walking through the faux entryway.

Customers can also try out ovens and other appliances in the kitchen showroom, where Home Depot will host cooking demonstrations.

The functional aspects are a key part of wooing female shoppers, notes Dori Molitor, chief executive of WomanWise, a Minneapolis-based consulting firm that specializes in marketing brands to women.

“Women in general have more acute senses than men. They want to try things, touch the products and feel connected,” Molitor said. “If Home Depot can tap into these senses, they’re going to find a more engaged shopper.”

Female consumers have been a challenge for Home Depot, known for its noisy, working-warehouse environment.

The Design Center format was built to be an antidote, Feldman said. Store designers ditched the lumber and building materials area and used the space instead to carry a wider selection of decor-oriented products.

Prices run the gamut, too. Appliances, for example, range in scope from \$50 microwaves to \$8,000 Viking refrigerators.

“We really want this to be approachable,” Feldman said. “We want customers to find beautiful things but not be overwhelmed by price.”

The Design Center in Charlotte marks the second test of a new store format this year for Home Depot.

In the spring it rolled out small stores in the San Francisco area. At roughly half the size of regular Home Depots, the five California stores put a heavy emphasis on appliances, flooring, and kitchen and bath products.

Home Depot is testing a second Design Center in Concord, Calif., but executives say that will be it for now.

“We’re not trying to roll out a new chain of stores,” Feldman said. “The goal is to see how many of the elements work and whether we can take those back to the orange box.”