

MAKING THE CONNECTION

Five Tips for Better Serving the Pro Plumber Market



The faucet drips. Before long, a bucket underneath the sink is full of water. The DIYer tries all of the quick tips he's learned at his local hardware store, but the problem is bigger than just tightening the drain pipe. He calls his local plumber to come fix the problem.

Driving to the job site, the plumber stops at a home improvement store to pick up the pieces he'll need. Where does he stop? Home Depot? Lowe's? An independent?

This situation is reminiscent of many choices plumbing contractors face, so how can you win them over and earn their business?

To help you stand out against the competition, *Hardware Retailing* editors spoke with a variety of plumbers to find out what they want from their suppliers. They all noted five key areas where independent retailers should focus to gain their business, including speedy service, knowledgeable employees, a wide range of inventory, added perks and well-known locations. In each of these areas, we have included their perspectives.

We also spoke with independent retailers who have experience working with plumbing contractors to learn some of their tips for success.

For a helpful guide on how to gain new business from plumbing pros, visit TheRedT.com/1HVfLSe.



Mayfield Plumbing & Electric arranges products so professionals can get in and out of the store quickly.



PROFESSIONAL

For many plumbing contractors, wasted time is money lost. In order to build a great relationship with pros, it's vital they're able to get in and out of your store quickly.

According to Bill Haws, general manager of Bill Howe Plumbing in San Diego, California, making a pit stop to pick up a part for a job can be frustrating for his team of plumbers if it takes time away from getting the job done.

"Plumbing is an expensive operation," Haws says. "If we're sitting and waiting for products, we're wasting time and money."

One reason the pros from Bill Howe may stop at a big-box location is because they know they will be helped differently than the DIY shoppers.

"Lowe's and Home Depot both have contractor counters," Haws says. "Our plumbers don't shop there too often, but when they do, they know the lines are shorter and quicker. Any way the hardware store can expedite the process while we're in the store, getting us in and out as fast as they can, is huge for us."

RETAILER

Since efficiency is key for professionals, Andrew Myers, manager at Mayfield Plumbing & Electric in Mayfield, Kentucky, continuously strives to get his customers the items they need in a timely manner. Mayfield Plumbing & Electric is heavily focused on the professional customer, servicing electricians and plumbers. The store is about 10,000 square feet with a counter and shelving at the front, products on either sides of the counter and a separate building behind the store for large or bulkier items.

"A lot of times, the customer gives us a list and we go to the back and get it," Myers says. However, if there are multiple customers at the store, the customers may end up waiting on the staff. Therefore, Myers has strategically made some products easily accessible.

"I've been intentional about putting things in an organized way so customers can go pull products for themselves rather than always waiting for employees," he says. "Some of the big [plumbing suppliers] have very small store fronts with all of the inventory in the back, so the customer relies completely on the salesmen, but I've tried to separate our business by giving the customer access to product."

Stuart Holthaus, general manager at A-1 Irrigation Do it Best Hardware in Valley Center, California, also understands that professionals want to get in and out of the store.

“It’s key that our employees can get the customers what they need in an efficient manner so they can get back to their jobs,” Holthaus says. “If the store is easy for the customers to shop, they’ll come back, because time is money.”

If you want to grow your relationship with plumbing professionals, finding a way to speed up the process is key. Some methods for quick service are having an employee act as a runner to grab items or taking customers’ product orders via text or phone call, having it ready to go when they arrive at your store.



PROFESSIONAL

For the professional, knowledge is about accuracy and speed rather than project help. The plumber wants to be serviced by employees who know what he needs, where it’s located and can offer prompt service.

According to Fred Thompson, a service and repair plumber based in Celebration, Florida, the independent store Celebration Hardware

has earned his business in many ways because employees can answer his questions.

“One of the things I like about [Celebration Hardware] is their knowledge of what they have in stock and having enough product so that I can get the job done,” Thompson says. “When I need something on a job, I know I can call the store and they’ll know what I’m asking for. That is a big deal. You don’t know how many times I have gone to a store that said they had what I needed and when I get there, it isn’t there.”

RETAILER

To get plumbers in and out quickly, your team must be equipped with ample product knowledge so they can complete orders efficiently and answer any customers’ concerns. While professionals work with the product every day and will often have no questions, sometimes new products will emerge or the product will malfunction and retailers need to be able to assist them.

At A-1 Irrigation Do it Best Hardware, Holthaus believes knowledge is one of the most important things for attracting professional customers.

“When professionals ask questions, they are surprised at the product knowledge our employees have,” he says. “It is service the pros would expect to receive at a wholesale house.”

To train employees, Holthaus uses video and online training, but he also brings in plumbing contractors to do in-person training for the employees.



Deb Steinke (left) and **Barb Grosskopf** (right) use in-person and online training to ensure all plumbing customers at **Qualheim’s True Value** are serviced by knowledgeable sales associates.

“The actual guys in the field using the products come in and train the team on how to use the different products,” he says. “The best teachers are out there actually using the product.”

At Qualheim’s True Value in Shawano, Wisconsin, Deb Steinke, plumbing department manager, tries to stay up to date on trends so she can help DIYers and the pros.

“While professionals usually want to get in and out, they sometimes ask for advice if it’s about a new product they’ve heard of but haven’t seen,” Steinke says. “Then we can show them the product and try to guide them with it.”

Steinke has learned all about the plumbing industry in her 32 years of hardware retail experience, however, she still tries to gain hands-on training.

“You can have all the products in the world, but without knowledge, it’s nothing,” says Gayle Lemmer, manager at Qualheim’s True Value. Lemmer uses the North American Retail Hardware Association’s (NRHA) online training programs to train her employees, which can be found at nrha.org/v2/Training/, along with other online classes.

“I learn from customers, I go online to research and I have also taken several classes, such as a hands-on class about soldering,” Steinke says.



Bill Haws, general manager of **Bill Howe Plumbing**, presents to a group of his employees. By understanding the trade, you can better assist the pros.

An advertisement for the Iron & Oak HRM log splitter. The main image shows a man in a blue shirt and safety glasses operating the red and blue log splitter in a wooded area. To the left, there are three inset images: the top one is labeled 'HORIZONTAL' and shows the splitter with a log; the middle one is labeled 'HORIZONTAL VERTICAL' and shows the splitter with a log; the bottom one is labeled 'TRACTOR MOUNT' and shows the splitter mounted on a tractor. In the top right corner, the 'IRON & OAK' logo is displayed. In the bottom right corner, the text 'DEALERS WANTED' is shown. At the bottom, the website 'ironandoak.com/HRM' and the phone number '(866) 281-4509' are listed.



A-1 Irrigation Do it Best Hardware has made a concerted effort to offer a wide range of inventory, so plumbers can get everything they need in one place.



PROFESSIONAL

If your business wants to begin supplying more contractors, it's important to simply ask them what they need.

When Celebration Hardware first opened, Thompson says the owner asked him what he recommended they stock. Since then, Thompson says he has been able to build a relationship where the retailer understands and listens to his needs.

"Celebration Hardware asked me what I would like to see in the store to make the plumbing department more useful," Thompson says.

This dialogue led to the store adding specific plumbing brands and parts, like name-brand cartridges, basin supplies, faucets, showers, waste line products, pipes, glue, toilet supplies, miscellaneous fittings and other items a service plumber might need.

The pros at Gordon Plumbing, a full-line plumbing service company based in Indianapolis, regularly work with supply houses but inventory can still be an issue, according to Jeff Atwell, who is in charge of business development for the company.

"I work with six to eight supply houses that offer specialty products for plumbing," Atwell says. "What I need dictates where I go in town to get products for the job. You're at the mercy of the suppliers' inventory and sometimes it has to be next-day shipped to us."

RETAILER

Myers' motto at Mayfield Plumbing is all about finding ways "to add value beyond the dollar sign."

"We just had a pro come back to us recently, and he uses oddball fittings that no one else uses, so we are going to try and keep those fittings to accommodate him," says Myers. "We can make decisions the big boxes can't."

To him, price is important but is secondary to product selection.

"Professionals really value that you have the product in stock more than how much it costs," he says. "At the end of the day, if you have it and the competitor doesn't, that's what it boils down to."

Qualheim's True Value has a number of large institutions in its area, such as schools, that require specialty plumbing parts, and Steinke says they have altered their inventory to cater to these customers' needs.

"We get some pretty odd requests from the institutional customers, such as automatic faucets and other items you normally don't sell to DIY customers," she says.



ADDED PERKS

PROFESSIONAL

While a plumber may not immediately think to purchase products from your operation, providing contractor perks can help earn their business.

The team at Gordon Plumbing has had house accounts set up at Home Depot and Lowe's, according to Atwell.

"We've had accounts with Home Depot and Lowe's in the past," Atwell says. "Those are well-structured, and all of our guys had their own card. If they needed materials, they could pick it up and charge it. Then, when the invoicing would come through, we'd pay it."

For Thompson, his relationship with Celebration Hardware has solidified since the business opened in 2012 because the owner, managers and staff go above and beyond to meet his needs.

"When I shop at Celebration Hardware, I know I'm not just a number," he says. "The owner's mom brings

cupcakes in many mornings. It's nice to get a personal touch. We have a good working relationship."

RETAILER

Added benefits, such as house accounts and job-site delivery, or other small perks such as donuts and coffee delivered to job sites, keep professional customers loyal to different suppliers. Job-site delivery for example, goes hand in hand with having the products plumbers need, when they need it.

"We have one delivery guy that delivers all the time, and then we have one to two backup delivery guys," Holthaus says. "We're usually doing deliveries all day long."

Mayfield Plumbing & Electric also delivers product to jobs sites when necessary and offers house accounts for professionals, which is a service A-1 Irrigation offers as well. This service makes getting in and out of the store quicker and helps plumbers balance their cash flow with different projects.

"One plumber has so much going on that he can't get one project completely done and paid to then in turn pay us," Myers says. "We try to be sensitive in those circumstances without making it a habit."



Bill Haws, general manager (left) and owners **Bill** and **Tina Howe** (center) stand with a few of their plumbers. Retailers could benefit by offering clients like Bill Howe Plumbing's on-site delivery.



PROFESSIONAL

For many contractors, location is a determining factor in whether or not they visit a store. Since plumbing is an expensive business and is often determined through hourly rates, they won't drive all over town to save a few cents on a product.

"Knowing the location would be a great way for us to be aware that the business is near us when we're on a job," Haws says. "We try to arm our guys with all the information they need when they're out. If we don't know a store is there, they won't either. If retailers provide us this information, we will be more likely to stop in and cut down on our time driving around."

Atwell adds that location often trumps the importance of price when it comes to working on the clock.

"Depending on what we need, we're going to go to pick up product in the closest proximity to where we're working," Atwell says. "If we're driving all over town, somebody is going to pick up the cost."

"To us, it's worth it to pay a little extra on product rather than driving 10 or 15 miles to pick up supplies," he says.

RETAILER

While many plumbers indicated they tend to visit the closest supplier, retailers are not able to change locations easily.

However, as a retailer, you have the ability to make customers aware of your location and the services you offer.

Consider sending out fliers to contractors who are not yet customers or a greeting card welcoming new contractors or plumbing businesses to town.

To learn more about acquiring new customers in your location, visit TheRedT.com/1HVfLSe. ➔

"To us, it's worth it to pay a little extra on product rather than driving 10 or 15 miles to pick up supplies."

—Jeff Atwell, Gordon Plumbing



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