

# Chicago Tribune

## H&G reporter goes with the flow

By Shaila Wunderlich

TRIBUNE REPORTER

Hooked-up plumbing in a kitchen-and-bath showroom is nothing new. The gleaming Kohler Store in Burr Ridge, for instance, has a handful of tubs and sinks that can be turned on and off. What is unheard of is a near fully operational showroom that invites customers to test out the goods — as in: take showers, soak in tubs, and flush toilets.

This is the scene at the new Banner Plumbing Supply Kitchen and Bath Showroom in Buffalo Grove. The 15,000-square-foot space, the 61-year-old company's first retail showroom, features eight working tubs, 38 working faucets, 18 working toilets and 60 working shower heads. Each of the five stalls in the men's and women's public restrooms features a different toilet. A tucked-away utility closet houses a working dog wash.

"A lot of brands need to

be seen, touched and felt in order to justify spending a lot of money," says Gene Hara, Banner vice president. Makes sense. A customer would have good reason to want to test-drive the Toto Neorest toilet before dropping \$3,200 on it. Most assuredly before buying 14 of them, which is exactly what one customer did not too long ago. The seat-warmer, front- and rear-cleanser, built-in deodorizer and heated air dryer must have sealed the deal.

But not everything at Banner is high-end. Other toilets, including other Toto toilets, can be had for as little as \$200, and faucets cost \$180 to \$1,200. It's the expensive stuff that gets all the attention, though. The latest addition to the showroom is a Cold Storage Medicine Cabinet by Robern (\$1,900). One half of the cabinet is refrigerated, as showroom manager Mi-

chelle Henderson guesses might be for things like bottled water or acne medicine. "You have to keep that stuff refrigerated," Henderson says.

It should be noted that Banner's interactive products are layered on top of an already full array of non-plumbed products. The expansion into retail has afforded the company the opportunity to introduce an extra 38 decorative lines, including Hansgrohe, Elkay, Franke and Porcher. The retail showroom's newness and inconspicuous location off of Lake Cook Road has so far kept it unknown to many potential customers, but employees are hopeful that stands to change. "During [the Kitchen and Bath Industry Show] this spring, we had people renting cars specifically to drive out and see us," Hara says.

Home&Garden reviews local shop- and showroom-openings on a regular basis.

Wouldn't it be interesting, I thought, if we sent a reporter out to the new Banner store to take some of these products for a test drive? "That's a great idea, Shaila," said my editor. "When are you going to do it?"

And so I found myself wrapped in a terry cloth coverup, shower cap on the head, taking baths and showers not only for complete strangers to see, but a newspaper photographer following me around the room paparazzi-style. The experience was informational and amusing, to say the least. For a second or two, the sheer gloriousness of a certain rain-canopy shower head had me forgetting where I was — and what an embarrassing thing I was doing.

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Reporter Shaila Wunderlich tests the Hansgrohe Rain Dance Royal (\$1,570; also shown on our cover).



Our reporter washes from the Hansa Murano bath faucet (\$993) at the new Banner Plumbing Supply showroom.