

SUPPLYHOUSE

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DISTINGUISHED SERVICE

Pictured from left: Lee Grooms, president; Michelle Henderson, showroom manager; and Gene Hara, vice president.

Banner Plumbing Supply sets itself apart from competitors with expanded customer service.

>> By Pat Lenius

Photography by Pat Lenius

Never say never? This wholesaler isn't afraid to take the plunge with its promise to serve showroom customers. "We never say no to a reasonable request," says Gene Hara, vice president, Banner Plumbing Supply, Buffalo Grove, IL.

"Over the last 10 years there have been so many articles about becoming more efficient, rising fuel prices, cutting back on deliveries, but we bucked the trend," Hara says. "We never deviated from putting customer service first. We resisted the idea of imposing a fuel or delivery charge. We don't have rules that your order must be in at a certain time. We do many same-day orders.

"Our drivers make multiple runs, sometimes as many as four," Hara continues. "We know that time is money to our customers. They can't be left waiting. If we promise a delivery window, we take pride in meeting it."

Customer service starts at the reception area of Banner's 15,000-sq.-ft. showroom, which is equipped with comfortable seating and decorated with an art element on the wall intended to provide a calm and relaxing atmosphere.

When the customer leaves, take-home literature is put in a bag labeled Banner Plumbing Supply, hand-tied with a bright, hand-made bow.

"That makes for a nice carrying card they will remember," says Michelle

Henderson, showroom manager. "Customers appreciate it. People don't feel special enough in their lives. We try to make them feel special."

Here are some other ways Banner Plumbing Supply's showroom extends customer service:

- Homeowners can compare experiences with different steam baths, showerheads, bathtubs or even toilets by making an after-hours appointment to visit the showroom and personally try out the working displays in privacy.
- Many of the displays contain minimal information so that customers have to interact with showroom personnel to learn about the product.
- Most customers have the cell phone numbers of Banner's drivers and salespeople.

DISPLAYS AND VIGNETTES

A majority of the displays are branded for the showrooms vs. using the manufacturers' materials or fixtures.

The sheer number of working displays in the showroom also reflects the company's commitment to customer service. There are eight bathtubs, two steam generators, six toilets, 16 lavatory faucets and 16 kitchen faucets that can be tested in the showroom. In addition, the showroom has a kitchen vignette with functioning stove, refrigerator and dishwasher.

SHOWROOM MERCHANDISING



The showroom's many windows bring light and a sense of spaciousness to the facility.



The showroom's vignettes reflect a variety of styles and feature multiple add-on sales ideas.

Banner also has a tankless water heater that can fill four tubs and still have hot water remaining. One of its more popular displays is a working dog-washing station.

"Green" products are integrated throughout the showroom. "People want to be green as long as it's not inconvenient," Henderson says.

The showroom has 16 vignettes, reflecting various styles — from traditional to transitional to contemporary — and a wide range of price points.

The ultimate compliment is when a customer points to a vignette in the showroom and says, "I want that in my home," Henderson notes.

"We have created different lifestyle suites that will appeal to all customers," she adds. "If people don't know what their style is we can help them identify it."

ABOUT BANNER PLUMBING SUPPLY

Banner Plumbing Supply was founded in 1947 by Charles Greenspon, father of Lee Greenspon, president, in a 3,000-sq.-ft. storefront on the south side of Chicago at 73rd and Cottage Grove.

Lee Greenspon took over the company in 1991 when his father died. Gene Hara joined the firm in 1993.

"I've always treated customers as I would like to be treated and insist that all employees do the same, from truck drivers to warehouse workers to salespeople," Greenspon says.

Banner has gained a reputation of delivering orders when promised and having products that are hard to find elsewhere, he says. "Our drivers end up bringing orders back with them," he says.

On the wholesale side customer service has fueled the company's growth, Hara says.

In spite of the economy, Banner has not had to lay off any employees, Greenspon notes.

The company expanded its Chicago facility in 1990 when it won a contract with the Chicago Housing Authority. It now occupies an 18,000-sq.-ft. building with 7,000 sq. ft. of outside storage. The company has a fleet of 20 trucks and eight boom trucks.

The Buffalo Grove, IL, facility is 126,000 sq. ft. The building opened less than two years ago and still looks quite new. The showroom is staffed by four full-time consultants and one full-time coordinator, in addition to the showroom manager. Some have interior design backgrounds while others have plumbing industry experience.

The showroom's business has grown primarily through word of mouth.

"Our customers are treated well and they send their friends over," Henderson says. "We get a lot of repeat business and referrals."

The showroom staff helps customers customize their product selection to better fit their taste and budget.

AVAILABLE ON CALL

"Customers can call any time of day. We do not charge to open our office after hours. We do it just to accommodate the customer," Hara says. Henderson cites an example of the company's customer service: Banner's outside salesman received a phone call at 8:30 one night when heavy rain had been predicted for the following day. A plumbing contractor needed 30 sump pumps to have on his truck in preparation for the storm. The driver met Banner's people at the showroom, and the truck was loaded with 30 sump pumps at 10:30 p.m.

"That's the type of thing we do," Henderson says.

Regular showroom hours are 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Wednesday, 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. on Thursday, 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. on Friday, or by appointment.

CUSTOMERS

On average 15 to 20 customers pass through the showroom in a day.

SHOWROOM **MERCHANDISING**



The showroom offers products of a wide range of price points, from high-end luxury to moderate.

Henderson notes. Because it is not in a strip mall but on a major highway, the showroom is a destination.

Women tend to be the decision makers in the showroom, Henderson says. "They'll bring in their husbands for a final decision or to preview."

The typical customer is a woman in the 35 to 55 age range, she notes. Clients come from as far as Wisconsin and Rockford, IL.

"We can accommodate everyone, whether the home is worth \$7 million or \$300,000," Henderson asserts. "We offer good styles at every price point."

She pointed out a vignette where a \$700 sink in a \$4,100 cabinet was paired with a \$200 faucet, simply because they were the best fit for each other.

Since the economic downturn, customers have become more conservative in their spending and are seeking more value, Henderson says. "They might spend \$12,000 instead of \$20,000 on a bathroom."

PARTNERING

Banner maintains a partnership with plumbing contractors, according to Hara. "We send the plumber the quote unless we have permission to tell the customer. We do all we can to preserve the relationship with the contractor — that sets us apart from other kitchen and bath showrooms that take the approach a sale is a sale. We have been in wholesale and it's important to us to stay true to the channels. That is a core part of our philosophy."

Another aspect of Banner's customer service applies to companies that some might view as competitors.



"We partner with small kitchen and bath showrooms," Henderson says. "We work with their clients and serve as an extension of their staff. If they need access to a display, they will send their client here."

Banner then sells to the dealer so the dealer can make the sale to the homeowner.

"We try to work with all levels: architects, interior designers, plumbing contractors, homeowners," Henderson says. "Plumbers are always top of mind."

TRAINING

At Banner's showroom, training is ongoing. Every Tuesday and Thursday from 8:30 to 9:30 a.m. a manufacturer will be invited to present the latest products and discuss issues and trends with the showroom staff. Monthly product information meetings are offered here for plumbing contractors.

A separate room in the showroom with retractable walls and seating for 70 is designated for training and special events.

Banner belongs to the National Kitchen & Bath Association, the Decorative Plumbing & Hardware Association, the Plumbing and Mechanical Contractors Authority of Northern Illinois, and the Southside Plumbing Contractors Social Club.

"We also attend different trade shows and training events," Henderson says. The association memberships offer Banner's people the chance to learn and network. 