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Cleaning Up in Housewares

A Closer Look at Retailers Focused on Household Staples

Whether it's a New Year's resolution or a spring overhaul, consumers are constantly looking for ways to keep their homes spotless. Do you have the products, advice and tools needed to help them stick to their cleaning goals?

From basic hardware to an expansive garden department, you should always aim to cover the categories that matter in your market in order to become a one-stop shop.

One niche within the housewares category that could offer opportunities for growth and allow you to establish a unique offering within your market is cleaning supplies. While some hardware retailers may shy away from cleaning supplies because there is so much competition, other retailers have embraced the opportunity head-on and have found ways to turn it into a lucrative niche.

Cleaning goods make for easy add-on sales, and can attract a wide audience of customers, from the DIYer to the industrial pro. *Hardware Retailing* interviewed two retailers who have carved out space in their businesses to showcase cleaning products, test out new items and get their customers the supplies they need. Keep reading to discover how these retailers have made their cleaning departments stand out and the products they stock to keep customers happy.

For more insight, we spoke to Melissa Maker, an entrepreneur, author and cleaning expert who films how-to videos on her YouTube channel, Clean My Space. She shares ways independent retailers can become leaders in the cleaning category.

Sweeping the Competition

The Bunge family's hardware store operation opened in Indiana in the 1940s, and has since grown to three locations and involves three generations. In 2016, the third and most recent location opened in a vacant pharmacy in Crown Point, Indiana.

Led by Jake Bunge, son of Al Bunge Jr., who oversees all three stores, Crown Point True Value has used its new location as a way to expand on the cleaning category and attract repeat customers, Jake Bunge says.

"When we moved into this new location, we had a much bigger floorplan than our other two stores," he says. "Before we opened up for business, we went through our co-op's store layout program, and we decided we wanted to feature the cleaning category in this new location."

While all three of the Bunge's retail operations include cleaning goods, the new store is home to the widest selection and has the most shelf space.

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5 Ways to Wow Customers in Cleaning

The cleaning category can be a great source of add-on sales. And with big-box chains and grocery stores grabbing a large share of the cleaning market, it's important to carve out your own place.

To gain a better understanding of the trends influencing the category, *Hardware Retailing* reached out to Melissa Maker, an entrepreneur, author and cleaning expert who films how-to videos on her YouTube channel, Clean My Space.

Maker's original distaste for cleaning has since transformed into a passion that has transcended most areas of her career. For more from Maker, read this Q&A at TheRedT.com/clean-expert.

Here she shares five tips you can use to attract customers to your cleaning aisle, educate them on cleaning techniques and offer expert advice, while also empowering them in the ability to take on this lifelong household duty in the process.

1. Become the expert. When Maker graduated from business school, she decided to start a company that filled a need in Toronto. Although she pictured a different path, the necessity of cleaning turned into a great idea—a cleaning service. “I learned everything I could about cleaning even though it didn’t make me happy,” she says. “But then my opinion started to change. The knowledge I’ve picked up along the way helps me show people the quickest, easiest way to clean in order to have more time to do the things they love.”

2. Decode the aisle. Maker says a challenge many consumers face when heading to the cleaning aisle is knowing which products to buy for different areas of the home. That’s where the retailer can step in and help, she says. “When consumers go to the cleaning aisle in a store, they often look like deer in headlights,” Maker says. “Cleaning is a life skill, and if you’re able to share the products, tools and techniques they’ll need, they’ll return again in the future.”

3. Stock their mop bucket. To draw attention to the category and help get customers started, an endcap featuring must-have cleaning products is a great idea. The must-have products Maker recommends include microfiber cloths, a scrub brush, a vacuum, a spray bottle, a squeegee and a mop and bucket. For an extra level of DIY, she recommends carrying baking soda, dish soap and extra-strength vinegar so customers can try their hand at making their own cleaning solutions. For more on building strong endcaps, check out Page 82.



Photo courtesy of
Shayne Grey

4. Show them how to clean. Consumers don’t always take the time to read instructions. Showing them how to use products can make a big difference. “People need coaching on how products work and from that, they’ll be more likely to try new products,” she says. “In-store demos are a great option. However, to become a resource for a wider audience, retailers can share videos with their followers on social media from experts like myself. Or they can create their own videos to share online and direct customers back to their store.”

5. Create a curated shopping experience. Maker suggests retailers and their employees test out products at home so they can give firsthand accounts to customers of how a product works. To make the cleaning aisle a place for customers to explore and discover new products, she suggests placing callout signs by products that are new, unique or an employee favorite. “By listing something that gives basic information about a product and why it works, the consumer will give it a chance rather than just choosing the items they know from TV,” she says.

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“We have about 40 feet of cleaning supplies on an aisle and have both sides filled,” Jake Bunge says. “Our selection ranges from a variety of cleaning solutions to hand-held tools like brooms and dusters. Our co-op recommended we have this department at the front of the store. This is a change from what we had done before, but it makes sense because these are everyday items that can be an easy impulse add-on. Plus, cleaning products are well-packaged, colorful and have many unique qualities to grab the customer’s attention.”

In Thayne, Wyoming, and the surrounding communities that include about 6,000 people, consumers tackle most of their home improvement shopping at Thayne Hardware.

Store owners Larry and Sandra Rodeck took over the longstanding operation in 2002. Since they were already business owners in the agriculture category and in the real estate business, the previous owner asked if the Rodecks would be interested in purchasing the store.

Being in a location without big-box competition, Thayne Hardware’s customers are mainly homeowners, so Larry Rodeck strives to make his store a one-stop destination.

The Rodecks have established their reputation by carving out a strong cleaning department in the store.

“Our cleaning selection takes up two aisles of goods near the front of the store,” Rodeck says. “Having it there ensures customers who are busy running errands see the goods they may need before heading to the checkout.”

Both Rodeck and the Bunes agree the cleaning category provides an opportunity to grab add-on sales, which make a big difference in growing the average transaction size. Although grocery stores appear to have a larger share of the market, Al Bunge says their stores would be at a disadvantage, missing sales from DIYers and professionals who need cleaning products to finish a project if they didn’t carry a line of well known and unique items.

To ensure the selection of items make a good impression on customers, it’s vital the aisle is tidy, fronted and clean. Rodeck has even built this step into the weekly operations checklist.

“We have made our cleaning category stand out in a few ways,” Rodeck says. “Pricing the items appropriately and keeping the area clean is important. I have an employee who cleans my shelving and items each week and whenever there is extra time. It wouldn’t look good if the cleaning products had a line of dust on them.”



One way **Crown Point True Value** employees organize the cleaning selection is by keeping similar types of products together. They have callout signs that distinguish where different types can be found. Then the customer can choose from a wide array of brands.

Although Bunge says the cleaning category may be smaller than his other core departments, he says there are advantages to stocking cleaning items.

“I can understand why a retailer might not want to go deep into cleaning because they think it’s too small of a category, but I think it’s very important,” Bunge says. “A good hardware store has to have a good cleaning department. It draws in more customers and it establishes repeat shoppers for these disposable goods.”

“For our rotating endcaps, we’ve featured everything from septic products to a spring cleaning-themed endcap with items customers may need to get their homes organized and clean.”

—Larry Rodeck, *Thayne Hardware*

To make customers aware of the category, Thayne Hardware has hosted events that showcase cleaning goods and the products they sell.

“We try to have events a couple times a year, like a ladies’ night,” Rodeck says. “We have a woman in town who makes soap, and she is a big hit at our events. We’re supporting her small business, and our customers are looking at her soaps and potentially other products we sell. It’s a win-win.”

What Customers Want

While housing the cleaning department near the front of the store to make it accessible and keeping it spick-and-span is important, the products offered should be cleaning staples along with new, unique finds.

To introduce the category to all customers, Rodeck reserves endcaps for the quality products he knows customers will return for.

“We have one of our endcaps devoted to a line of floor cleaning products that does very well for us,” Rodeck says. “For our rotating endcaps, we’ve featured everything from septic products to a spring cleaning-themed endcap with items customers may need to get their homes organized and clean.”

Knowing what specific kinds of items your customers need in your area is a key to potential sales. For example, in Thayne, residents don’t have a traditional community sewage system. The Thayne Hardware team knows customers will need the products required to maintain a septic tank, so they always have those products available.

To ensure their customers are aware of their stock, the Rodecks create a unique endcap with all of the items a customer will need in one place so they are readily available. Since these products are a frequent need, they can become a practical impulse purchase for any customer.

And although green products may be popular in some areas of the country, Thayne Hardware has formed its offerings based on what its customers ask for, Rodeck says.

“About 10 years ago, when there was a big push for green products, we tried out a number of items that didn’t do as well as we were expecting,” Rodeck says. “In this category, as in any category, we adjust based on what our customers are buying. We still have green products because there are some people who ask for them, but a majority of our customers want to use something because it’s the right price and they know it will get the job done.”



Jake Bunge of Crown Point True Value emphasizes fronting, filling and dusting product shelves in all aisles, especially the cleaning aisle.

To make the shopping experience easier for customers, both retailers set up the aisles by product, not brand, which makes it easy for a customer to navigate.

Crown Point True Value stays ahead of the curve with new products and items that customers want. “In my opinion, it’s important to have variety in this category, but it’s also important to have what the customer wants,” Bunge says. “If they ask us for a specific product or brand and we don’t have it, we’ll do whatever we can to get it for them.”

While Crown Point True Value carries a wide selection of cleaning products to draw in the DIY customer, the team also tested the waters in commercial cleaning products.

“The majority of our cleaning customers are homeowners, but about 10 percent come to us

for commercial applications,” Bunge says. “Our store is located near a hospital, so we receive their business in cleaning supplies, along with churches and the city.”

Vacuums and the parts to repair them, like disposable bags and new belts, round out the cleaning category at Thayne Hardware. The store has a variety of options on hand so customers can return for items they’ll need after the initial vacuum purchase.

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No matter what products customers look for in the cleaning department, Rodeck says cleaning is a project that homeowners and professionals will always need for standard upkeep.

“This category has been trending toward more DIYers,” Rodeck says. “While consumers may feel more comfortable hiring outside help for plumbing or electrical projects, the trend in the cleaning category has been the return of that customer group. Rather than hiring cleaning companies to manage the mess, consumers are taking these household chores into their own hands.” ➡



Crown Point True Value carries hand-held tools, like brooms and dusters, to make cleaning projects easier. The store also carries a selection of vacuum bags. Thayne Hardware has also carved space for vacuum accessories, parts and vacuums.

