

## Store Wars: Homebase and B&Q

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Each week we look at retailers competing in the same sector. This week: home improvement specialists B&Q and Homebase



Photograph: Frank Baron and Graham Turner

Each week we are looking at two shops competing in the same sector and reviewing what they are offering customers: from how helpful the staff are, to the best bargains currently on offer.

Our review will be based on a visit to stores on the same high street, or online, so it will be just a snapshot of how the retailer is performing.

In order to get a better idea of which retailers are delivering and which are falling short, we would like you to tell us about your experiences of the same shops.

Some weeks, both stores we visit may do a good job, other weeks there will be one that stands out as being much better or worse. Your reviews will help us discover if this is a trend.

This week, with spring in the air and thoughts turning to the garden and sprucing up the home, we went to Homebase and B&Q.

### **B&Q**

Background Since taking its name from founders Richard Block and David Quayle, who opened the chain's first store in Southampton in 1969, B&Q has grown to cover much of the country. The group operates 357 stores in the UK and Ireland, making it the biggest chain of its kind, employing over 23,000 staff.

**The visit** 10.30am, 10 April, Durham.

**What it sells** DIY products, tools, bathrooms and kitchens, homewares, gardening products

**First impressions** This branch occupies an impressive glass-fronted building, far from the usual bland retail park tin sheds. Inside is a bright shop with a comprehensive range of products on offer, the aisles were clearly labelled but plenty of staff were on hand to help those in need of directions. Despite visiting the day after a bank holiday, there were few gaps on the shelves and full stocks of all the special offers. At one end of the store is a huge garden department, while a trade centre at the other end offers a wide range of products for professionals. This branch even contained a small cafe for those needing a break midway through their shopping expedition.

**What were the staff like?** Friendly and helpful. Each section of the store had at least one member of staff positioned to help and advise customers.

**Best bargain** A stack of growbag trays were being given away free of charge by the exit, some of them were a little tatty but perfectly useable.

**What does it charge?** 5-litre Dulux Brilliant White Matt Emulsion Paint: £15.98 (also available as part of a 3 for 2 offer); Black and Decker 12V Cordless Drill: £39.98; 50-litre Miracle-Gro All Purpose Compost £6.98 (2 bags for £12).

**Where can I pay?** There were 11 regular tills and four express lanes. At the time of the visit just one till was manned, with the majority of customers preferring to use the express services.

**Is loyalty rewarded?** The diamond card is available for shoppers over 60 and offers 10% discount on all items every Wednesday.

**Lasting impressions** An enjoyable experience. It can't be easy to create a shop that appeals to both the general public and professionals in the trade but B&Q seems to strike a pretty good balance. The express lanes and dedicated trade counter meant regular customers could get in and out relatively quickly, while members of staff could offer tips and directions to others. As well as having staff dotted around the store there were a multitude of leaflets and guides available. This store even had a small classroom which holds regular "You Can Do It" classes, teaching newcomers the basic plumbing and decorating skills.

**Overall rating** 9/10

## Homebase

**Background** Created by supermarket chain Sainsbury's in the early 80s to capitalise on the burgeoning home improvement sector, Homebase formed a modest chain until the buyout of Texas Homecare in 1995. Sainsbury's sold the chain in 2000, with Homebase eventually becoming part of the Home Retail Group – alongside Argos and Habitat. The chain currently has 341 branches.

**The visit** 11.30am, 10 April, Durham.

**What it sells** DIY products, tools, bathrooms and kitchens, homewares, gardening products

**First impressions** Despite lying in the corner of a busy retail park, this Homebase store seems to have been a little neglected with dowdy colours used throughout and floor tiles coming away at the entrance: not a good sign for a DIY shop. The mismatched signage didn't create a particularly user-friendly shopping experience, and too much of the store seemed to be devoted to homeware goods and kitchen appliances. Operating on a ground floor and mezzanine level meant the store felt dark and cramped, with no easy opportunity to browse the upstairs levels for those using a trolley.

**What were the staff like?** Helpful, but there were nowhere near enough on the shop floor.

**Best bargain** All Bosch branded power tools were 1/3 off – a similar promotion in B&Q offered just 15% discount.

**What does it charge?** 5-litre Dulux Brilliant White Matt Emulsion Paint £17.99; Black and Decker 12V Cordless Drill £44.98, 50-litre Miracle-Gro All Purpose Compost £6.59 (2 bags for £10).

**Where can I pay?** There were seven standard tills at the front of the store, two of which were in operation on this visit.

**Is loyalty rewarded?** After discontinuing its own Spend & Save loyalty card in 2009, Homebase now accepts the popular Nectar card, offering two points for each pound spent in store.

**Lasting impressions** Not great. The store is not particularly well laid out and the presence of items such as vacuum cleaners seemed to be because Homebase shares an owner with Argos, rather than them being a useful addition to the products on offer.

The complete lack of people browsing these areas of an otherwise busy store tells its own story. There's also a seemingly random selection of products endorsed by Jamie Oliver, with everything from wine glasses to growbags displaying the famous chef's face, occupying space which could have been used to stock a more diverse range. But for those simply popping in for some basics then Homebase contains a reasonable selection of goods, as well as some decent special offers.

**Overall rating** 5/10

**Adam's verdict** While the two chains focus on slightly different markets, Homebase covering decoration and accessories with B&Q focusing more on home improvement, the experience at B&Q was far superior. For those serious about their DIY, B&Q offered a depth of products that was rarely matched at Homebase. Even for those at the other end of the scale, beginners would find the helpful advice and easy shopping experience at B&Q preferable to Homebase's confused store and lack of staff.

Link:

[www.guardian.co.uk/money/poll/2012/apr/13/store-wars-homebase-b-and-q?newsfeed=true](http://www.guardian.co.uk/money/poll/2012/apr/13/store-wars-homebase-b-and-q?newsfeed=true)