

# Retail Week



## BIG STORY: NEW LOOK

How the fashion store is shaping up a year after its privatisation

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The sector is undergoing big changes, so what does the future hold?

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## READY, STEADY, REVALUATION

The retail sector braces itself for the hard-hitting Uniform Business Rate

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# A WOMAN'S WORK...

Traditionally a male domain, DIY stores are having to change their offer in response to growing numbers of female customers.

**Samantha Lyster** dons her overalls to find out more

In a recent television ad for *lads'* magazine *Nuts*, a hapless blonde attempts DIY while her male partner flicks through the publication. The punchline for the ad is: "Women, don't expect help on Thursdays," the day that *Nuts* hits the shelves.

Although the ad is tongue-in-cheek, the scenario it paints is fading quickly. According to the Office for National Statistics, in 2003 80 per cent of single women were owner-occupiers and where once a significant number of women relied upon partners to carry out their domestic duties, a new generation of females is leading the way in learning home improvement skills.

Rather than see this as a chore, social commentators say women have embraced what was once a male preserve. A survey by *Sainsbury's Bank* in February revealed that about 8.5 million women have home improvement work, worth an estimated £24.2 billion, planned up until the end of July.

This compares with the figure of slightly more than 1 million men who intend to spend £17.5 billion on improving their homes during the same period.

Clearly the female DIY pound is worth chasing, but are retailers taking the right approach to woo women into stores that traditionally have had a no-nonsense macho image?

Although DIY retailers, such as B&Q and Homebase, are making efforts to make shopping easier for women by lowering shelving and stocking softer products, such as cushions, Anne Blair Thompson, founder and managing partner of brand consultancy *Consultyouth*, does not think they are going far enough.

"It's not just about lighting fixtures in store and changing the look of the shelves and floor," she says. "Women are seeking someone to inspire them to be more experimental, creative and confident in taking on more home improvement projects – not just to offer them the products they are seeking."

Thompson suggests offering an in-store design service for the whole of the home, not just for kitchens and bathrooms. "Through the use of technology and interactive media, a DIY store could give women the assistance they seek, enabling them to visualise what the final result would look like and thereby

eliminating some of the risks and hassles associated with decorating," she says.

B&Q does offer such a service, but only in its stores in China, where affluent Chinese couples are fuelling the expansion of the service because of the new freedom to buy property.

In the UK, B&Q offers design services for bathrooms and kitchens and is trialling two new Warehouse stores, in East Kilbride and Bristol, designed with women in mind. New features include an extended soft furnishings range, room room sets and a select and collect service for bulky goods.

### DESIGNED FOR WOMEN

The East Kilbride store layout has been designed to provide a clearer distinction between trade-focused areas and softer areas, such as furnishings. Separate entrances for male and other shoppers have been provided.

B&Q's female-friendly initiative, which includes an advertising campaign based around design, follows the determined efforts of L2L5-owned Homebase to appeal to design-conscious female shoppers.

Peter Frost, chief executive officer of the marketing agency *Proficiency Group*, which organises the *Rethink Pink* conferences on how to market to women, points out that while women have always been the driving force behind home improvement, they are now taking matters into their own hands, retailers have a fantastic opportunity to attract a new market of loyal customers.

US retailers have picked up on the trend, with online stores, such as *Tomboy Tools* and *Barban K*, selling products that appeal to women for style as well as practical reasons. *Tomboy Tools* even organises the tools equivalent of *Tupperware* parties.

A 2003 survey for the American retailer *Home Depot* showed that 73 per cent of women aged 25 to 49 questioned considered working on home improvement projects to be fun. Eight in 10 women preferred to complete their projects themselves because of the sense of accomplishment, pride and self-expression, as well as the financial benefits of saving money and increasing home value.

However, there is also a growing need for good installation services, as women find they have the money, but

not the time, to complete whole home improvement projects.

MFL, although seen as more of a furniture retailer than a DIY store, does show the potential for the traditional DIY market, with its use of room sets and provision of design and installation services for kitchens, bathrooms and bedrooms.

An MFL spokesman says one of the reasons it appeals to customers and especially to single female customers, is that it offers an all-in-one service, with tiling and plumbing sorted out by the store.

He says: "Our female customers are very well informed and very carry with the questions they ask. They know what they want, but they don't have the time to co-ordinate a plumber, a tiler and a carpenter, so they come to us for that inclusive service." He says the retailer also works hard on layouts to make shopping a pleasant experience.

Pleasant shopping experiences are key when it comes to capturing the female DIY spend and, although it is early days, there are signs that UK retailers are responding in an unpatronising, positive way. ■

