



Green Depot Turns DIY Green

By Debra Hazel

NEW YORK-If greening stores are all the rage, Green Depot takes it to the next step: not only does the Brooklyn-based chain sell eco-friendly building, cleaning and children's products, its 3,500-square-foot flagship store in lower Manhattan hopes to be LEED platinum certified.

The store, which opened on Feb. 12 on the Bowery, is in Green Depot's new "Live" format, one focused as much on the consumer as the contractor. The store also debuts the chain's proprietary product labeling system, allowing shoppers to see why the products are green. Business has been strong despite the current economic environment, reports Sarah Beatty, Green Depot founder and president.

"It's certainly an interesting time to be operating a retail storefront," Beatty says. "But people have been coming in and asking questions. It will be an interesting six months."

The store also boasts an exclusive series of sustainable design solutions, a baby section and a resource/design center for staff to assist customers. A paint bar with zero-VOC paints and cleaning products on tap are major elements.

The new format is a far cry from the chain's warehouse locations elsewhere on the East Coast, which cater to contractors and suppliers. After opening its first location in Brooklyn in November 2005, Green Depot has what it now calls "Build" showrooms in Newark, Philadelphia, Boston, Greenport, NY, and Chicago, as well as 10 additional distribution centers spanning the Northeast. Two additional Build stores will open in Albany, and Newark, DE., in March. The decision to open a consumer-oriented format came from the traffic within the showrooms.

"The one thing that struck us was that we'd have pregnant women standing next to Vinnie the contractor," at the Build showrooms, Beatty recalled. "Both sides of this equation were not being served: the contractor needs to transfer their product to 'green,' and the consumer transition has been so rapid that there is still confusion as to what 'green' means."

The icon system, developed by Green Depot with the support of experts affiliated with the Lowell Center for Sustainable Production, clarifies how and why a product can claim it is 'green', based upon five simple categories: air quality, conservation, local, energy, and responsibility. The icons are then shaded to indicate the level of their performance: the darker the picture, the higher performance the product.

"We spent six months developing our own list of criteria, establishing thresholds," Beatty says.

"Technically, a paint could call itself low VOC and still be bad for the air."

Sourcing the merchandise is not as complicated as one might think. "It's not difficult at all to find products with some element of green to them," says Monica M. Becker, principal of New Haven, CT-based Monica Becker & Associates, who consulted with the Lowell Center on Green



Each potential product gets a first screening to determine whether it contains toxic chemicals. If it passes that first test, it is assessed by other criteria, including whether it is made of recycled or recyclable materials, helps energy efficiency, water-efficient. The icons then indicate which criteria were passed. Not every product passes every test, but all those in the store do provide sustainable benefits. "It's the rare product that is a slam dunk," Becker says.

Tools, for example, were not easy to find. Ultimately, practicality was balanced with sustainability: the store stocks high-quality brushes that are an investment, but are durable and can be reused. And paint strippers remain a challenge. Even so, "We have high quality product at a great price," Beatty says.

It was equally important that the Live store set an example in sustainability, with platinum LEED practically required. Even the company's trucks operate on biodiesel fuel.

"We pulled out all the stops," says Caleb Mulvena, a principal of Mapos LLC, the New York City-based design firm that created the design. "It's not only a showcase of what to do, but also a showcase of the brand."

The store hopes to achieve major points in reuse: The store is a renovation of the ground floor of the 1885 Young Men's Institute, the home of the first YMCA in New York City, the studios of renowned artists Mark Rothko and Fernand Léger, and author William Burroughs.

"The space was in complete disrepair, a palimpsest of illegal added renovations to the space," Mulvena says. "It was just disgusting."

The team peeled away years of renovation to expose the bare bones of the existing building, reusing what they could. The design utilizes recycled glazed ceramic tile on the walls, the maple "gymnasium" flooring and iron structural elements from the original building. It also exposes the tile from the YMCA's first swimming pool, and original wood trim and restored brick that survived a fire. "The space is a story in itself, celebrating the old space while saluting the new," Mulvena added.

A new, high-efficiency air handling system was installed, as were custom light fixtures. "There is not a single incandescent light in the store, except for one in the lighting area [for shopper comparison]," Mulvena says.

The firm worked closely with the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, which was particularly interested in preserving the building's façade. As a result, not all of Mapos' ideas could be included: a plan for innovative LED signage run off solar panels had to be run off standard power for aesthetic reasons.

Building materials also had to be sustainable, as well, providing both designer and contractor with the unique experience of having its client sourcing and supplying most of the building materials. For others, the contractor had to find environmentally friendly products and materials. "This project is unprecedented," Mulvena says.

The privately held company will continue to grow slowly, relying on its shoppers to "tell us the next step," though Beatty hopes to make the leap to the West Coast in the coming year. Urban environments will likely continue to be their main locations. Replicating the design standards for spaces even as large as 30,000 square feet, Mulvena says.

Green Depot may be unique for now, but the concept could be repeated in just about any retail category, Becker says, with many manufacturers looking at how to create and sell more sustainable goods. And their buildings will reflect their green sensibility.

"In 10 years, there will be no such thing as a green building," Beatty says. "It will be automatic."