



Highlights: Furniture Stores

Furniture is a major investment. If you don't buy carefully, you risk spending too much, putting up with defective products or late delivery, getting items you don't like, or getting furniture that doesn't hold up, according to **Bay Area Consumers' Checkbook**, which just released new ratings of quality and service for local furniture stores, available at www.checkbook.org. Highlights from Checkbook's report include:

Customer Service

- A helpful staff can offer good suggestions and provide prompt and full answers to questions without annoying sales pressure. But Checkbook found not all stores' customers were satisfied with the service provided. Some stores were rated "superior" for the advice provided by their staff by 80 percent or more of their surveyed customers; others received "superior" ratings from 40 percent or fewer.
- Some stores were rated "superior" for "reliability"—standing behind products, doing what was promised, etc.—by fewer than half of their surveyed customers, a red flag for headaches ahead.
- To protect yourself against unsatisfactory merchandise, delivery issues, and problems resolving complaints, make all payments by credit card. The federal Fair Credit Billing Act provides important protections for customers who are delivered faulty or defective goods.

Prices

Comparing prices is difficult because many retailers sell items that aren't available elsewhere, and it's unusual to find the same national brand items sold by more than one or two area retailers. But there are steps you can take to find good prices, such as asking independent stores to bid competitively for your business (this process is described in detail in Checkbook's article). When calling local furniture stores using its competitive bidding strategy, Checkbook found the following price differences:

- For a Hooker "Sorella" credenza, prices ranged from \$1,545 to \$2,823.
- For a Kincaid "Bedford" console, prices ranged from \$1,068 to \$1,896.
- For a Lane "Benson" loveseat, prices ranged from \$569 to \$1,188.

Checkbook also examined the pros and cons of buying online. The only compelling reason to buy online would be price, but local retailers quoted Checkbook's shoppers prices roughly equivalent to—and often below—Internet prices when delivery costs were added onto the order. And buying online has disadvantages, including difficulty getting a remedy long-distance if a product is delayed or defective, and problems assigning responsibility between seller and freight carrier if a product arrives damaged.

In addition to getting competitive bids, Checkbook has these tips for finding low prices on furniture:

- *Wait for sales.* Because many furniture stores hold permanent sales, don't assume a sale price is a good price. But if you find something you like at a store that holds legitimate sales, ask the salesperson to hold it for you—then close the deal during the next sale.
- *Look for items on clearance.* The prices may be terrific, but be aware that clearance items are often sold "as is." Inspect them closely for defects.
- *Negotiate lower prices.* This may be difficult (though sometimes possible) at department stores or chains, but independent stores are often responsive, especially if you buy a number of items.
- *Consider buying through an interior designer.* Although this doesn't usually get you low prices, it might if you find a designer who (for a modest fee) will order for you and pass along their discount.

The media may cite selected examples of top-rated furniture stores, as shown in Bay Area Consumers' Checkbook, and Checkbook's editors are available for interviews. Please contact Jamie Lettis at 202-454-3006 or jlettis@checkbook.org to schedule.