

# APPLIANCE STORES

## Champs in price & support



**AT YOUR SERVICE** Independent appliance stores scored well with subscribers in our survey for customer service, including help over the phone and in-home support.

**Amazon.com, for the third year, was readers' top choice for small-appliance price and selection, while a new name, retailer Abt Electronics, was a top scorer for major appliances, mainly for selection.**

Yet the customers of small, independent stores were much more likely than those who went to big chains to get major appliance support without enduring exasperating phone calls.

To help you make appliance shopping a breeze, we enlisted more than 20,000 subscribers, who reported on their experiences buying upward of 35,000 small and major appliances. In another survey, we asked about respondents' efforts to contact retailers and manufacturers about almost 15,000 major appliances.

Amazon.com won a following with free shipping on many small appliances not sold through partners (our category included grills, vacuum cleaners, and air conditioners), and smaller independent stores were cited for service and check-

out ease. For major appliances, Abt Electronics, of Glenview, Ill., earned high marks; it also ships many items free. But when it came to service and support, independent stores outscored all major retailers and manufacturers.

More than 85 percent of the requests for support in the survey were made by phone call to the manufacturer or retailer. Far fewer who'd purchased from an independent retailer and called that business ran into difficulties with automated voice systems, were bounced from one person to another, or couldn't reach a technician without making several calls. Other highlights of our surveys include these findings:

**Lowe's edges out Home Depot.** While neither stood out for product support, Lowe's generally outscored Home Depot for product selection and shopping ease, which includes maneuvering around displays and finding people to answer questions. Readers also found Lowe's faster during checkout for

a major-appliance purchase.

**Mixed results for Sears.** While respondents overall were very satisfied, Sears alone scored below average for its major-appliance pricing, despite a price-competition guarantee. Sears was among the better major companies for service and support, regardless of whether the brand was from the retailer's own Kenmore line or another manufacturer.

**Premium products, same support.** General Electric stood out for its Web site for customer support, according to our subscribers, but it otherwise scored average at solving problems. Problem-solving was similar for GE's high-end Monogram kitchen appliances. Service calls go through personnel trained on all GE lines, says Chuck Dawes, product manager for GE Monogram.

**Low marks for Maytag.** Acquired by Whirlpool in 2006, the company continues to promote its selection of a new "repairman," who doesn't seem to have enough repair work to keep him busy. But Maytag earned among the lowest scores when it came to dealing with real-life complaints. (See box on facing page.)

### BEST WAYS TO BUY

Good prices determined where survey respondents bought major appliances for about half of all purchases. That makes our Ratings of appliance stores a reasonable starting point. Then, consider these strategies:

**Study the market.** Almost all the survey respondents who read product reviews, browsed in stores, or visited relevant Web sites found the time they spent at least somewhat helpful in making the purchase.

**Time major purchases.** In September and October, look for price breaks on cooking appliances as retailers put the previous year's models on sale to free up floor space. Around May, the same goes for refrigerators, and sales after

the winter holidays are common. Good timing, however, includes shopping for major appliances when a store is least crowded and you'll have the salesperson's ear. Lines are also much shorter if you can shop on weekdays or early on weekends.

**Plumb for deals.** Look for rebates, coupons, and related discounts in the store and online. Weeks before a planned purchase, in fact, sign up on a store's Web site to receive e-mail with coupons and similar promotional offers. Such pitches include rebates, free shipping, and notification of so-called VIP sales with discounts on selected products. Also, look up specs at manufacturers' Web sites to compile a list of choices before you hit a store. Combine special offers, say, from store and manufacturer, when possible.

**Skip the extended warranty.** In general, we have found extended warranties to be a bad deal for the customer. Our reliability surveys have found that most appliances do not break during the extended warranty period.

When appliances do break, the repairs do not cost much more than the cost of extended warranties. If you're especially cautious, or opt for a repair-prone brand, and decide to buy extra coverage, make sure that the warranty is both inexpensive (no more than 20 percent of the product's purchase price) and comprehensive. For heavy items, ask whether the extended warranty includes in-home repair or pickup.

#### GET THE SUPPORT YOU NEED

The quality of a company's repair service and warranty were top criteria for retailers for fewer than 10 percent of respondents. But many scorned customers don't hesitate to post their fury on the Internet. Adding to the challenge of competent problem diagnosis is that appliances are growing more complicated, with more electronic controls and, on the way, device-to-device communication and remote user control. Still, built

into the price of any appliance is the cost to support that product over its expected working life. Check our Ratings to see how retailers and manufacturers score for service and support. Here are other tips to consider:

**Do your homework.** Before you contact the company for repairs, read the manual's troubleshooting section and also check the manufacturer's or retailer's Web site for frequently asked questions (FAQs) and other guidance.

Web sites such as *apwagner.com*, *easyapplianceparts.com*, and *repairclinic.com* offer advice as well as parts if you're handy enough to tackle a repair, you understand the risks, and the product is beyond the warranty. (Unauthorized repairs void many warranties.) At the very least, learning what isn't the problem can shorten a call to tech support.

## Service calls

### GIVE THIS GUY A WRENCH



Maytag's recent commercials show its new repairman stuffing a frozen pizza and cake into a steam dishwasher to demonstrate the product's toughness. He's also shown fixing a copier, a teddy-bear assembly line, and even a homeowner's cable connection. The message is reliability: He's got time on his hands, not having to repair Maytag appliances. "Tell me about it," he quips in almost every spot.

As with the original character who sat by a phone that never rang, you won't see actor Clay Jackson (pictured) actually helping anyone with a Maytag appliance. But a survey by the Consumer Reports National Research Center rated the century-old brand, recently acquired by Whirlpool, below average at solving problems and helping over the phone and through its Web site. (Frigidaire and Jenn-Air also scored lower

**Consider the causes.** Since some appliance breakdowns come gradually and are due to maintenance, consider that a simple fix such as replacing the filter in a refrigerator's water dispenser can save a phone call. Sudden breakdowns are more likely due to part failure, but detailing exactly what the product was doing prior to the breakdown, such as broiling salmon fillets in your range, can speed a technician's diagnosis.

**Keep your cool.** Dealing with a faceless company over several phone calls can be frustrating, and it may be the best reason some survey respondents are willing to pay more for appliances bought at a local, independent company.

Either way, recognizing that the technician with whom you're speaking didn't build your faulty product, and behaving accordingly, can go a long way.

than most.) Maytag got especially bad marks for in-home service.

Carolyn Millard of Ames, Iowa, was one dissatisfied Maytag customer in our survey. She complained that her Maytag dishwasher needed repeated repairs to the same part. Once the dishwasher's service warranty ran out, she says, the company would have charged her for further labor even though the part was still covered.

While many Maytag cooking appliances have been reliable, its front-load washers and top-freezer refrigerators have been found to be relatively repair-prone for some time, according to our Annual Product Reliability Survey. Moreover, this year dishwashers and top-load washers joined the list. A recall of 2.3 million Maytag and Jenn-Air dishwashers last year was also attributable to Maytag manufacturing, involving models sold from 1997 to 2001.

Lynn Holmgren, national director of customer care for Whirlpool, acknowledges that before the acquisition, Maytag had issues with phone support. "Maytag had outsourced some of their contact centers, and their volumes were so high that they were inadvertently blocking calls," she says, and she claims that Whirlpool has quickened response on its brands partly through more training. Whirlpool had average marks for support.

# Ratings

## appliance stores



### CR Quick Recommendations

No large company earned stellar scores across the board for price, selection, and later, support. Still, respondents to both surveys were fairly well satisfied with most companies in our Ratings. And although local, independent businesses overall were rated better, our data on particular small retailers other than Abt Electronics are insufficient for specifics. There were also insufficient data for Costco, a top performer last year, in the major-appliance category.

### QUICK PICKS

#### SHOPPING

When price and selection matter most:

- 1 Amazon
- 3 Costco
- 11 Abt Electronics

For small appliances, Amazon was top-notch for pricing and selection; Costco's pricing was better than average. Also impressive were the smaller independents, Lowe's, and Sears. For major appliances, Abt had the best selection. The company received very favorable scores for shopping ease, too, though sample sizes were insufficient for us to include that score.

For the best overall store experience:

- 2, 12 Independent stores
- 5 Sears

While not all smaller, independent stores can be considered equal, the category as a whole stood out for overall shopping ease, in-store service, and checkout. For small appliances, Sears matched independents and was rated better for price.

#### SERVICE AND SUPPORT

For the best support overall:

- 19 Independent stores

Only independent retailers scored above average at giving help over the phone, in-home service, and generally solving problems.

Within category, in order of reader score.

Key number	Retailers	Reader score	Survey results
<b>SMALL APPLIANCES</b>			
1	Amazon.com	92	Price: +, Selection: +, Product quality: -, Shopping ease: -, Service: -, Checkout ease: -
2	Independent stores	87	Price: -, Selection: -, Product quality: -, Shopping ease: +, Service: +, Checkout ease: +
3	Costco	85	Price: -, Selection: -, Product quality: -, Shopping ease: -, Service: -, Checkout ease: -
4	Lowe's	81	Price: -, Selection: -, Product quality: -, Shopping ease: -, Service: -, Checkout ease: -
5	Sears	81	Price: -, Selection: -, Product quality: -, Shopping ease: +, Service: +, Checkout ease: +
6	Home Depot	77	Price: -, Selection: -, Product quality: -, Shopping ease: -, Service: -, Checkout ease: -
7	Sam's Club	77	Price: -, Selection: -, Product quality: -, Shopping ease: -, Service: -, Checkout ease: -
8	Target	77	Price: -, Selection: -, Product quality: -, Shopping ease: -, Service: -, Checkout ease: -
9	Best Buy	76	Price: -, Selection: -, Product quality: -, Shopping ease: -, Service: -, Checkout ease: -
10	Wal-Mart	74	Price: -, Selection: -, Product quality: -, Shopping ease: -, Service: -, Checkout ease: -
<b>MAJOR APPLIANCES</b>			
11	Abt Electronics	89	Price: -, Selection: +, Product quality: -, Shopping ease: -, Service: -, Checkout ease: -
12	Independent stores	87	Price: -, Selection: -, Product quality: -, Shopping ease: +, Service: +, Checkout ease: +
13	P.C. Richard & Son	83	Price: -, Selection: -, Product quality: -, Shopping ease: -, Service: -, Checkout ease: -
14	Lowe's	83	Price: -, Selection: -, Product quality: -, Shopping ease: -, Service: -, Checkout ease: -
15	Sears	81	Price: -, Selection: -, Product quality: -, Shopping ease: -, Service: -, Checkout ease: -
16	H.H. Gregg	80	Price: -, Selection: -, Product quality: -, Shopping ease: -, Service: -, Checkout ease: -
17	Best Buy	79	Price: -, Selection: -, Product quality: -, Shopping ease: -, Service: -, Checkout ease: -
18	Home Depot	79	Price: -, Selection: -, Product quality: -, Shopping ease: -, Service: -, Checkout ease: -

### support

Key number	Companies	Reader score	Survey results
19	Independent stores <sup>1</sup>	77	Solved problem: -, Phone waits: +, Phone staff: +, In-home service: +, Web site: -
20	Kenmore <sup>2</sup>	70	Solved problem: -, Phone waits: -, Phone staff: -, In-home service: -, Web site: -
21	Sears <sup>1,3</sup>	70	Solved problem: -, Phone waits: -, Phone staff: -, In-home service: -, Web site: -
22	Lowe's <sup>1</sup>	69	Solved problem: -, Phone waits: -, Phone staff: -, In-home service: -, Web site: -
23	GE Monogram	68	Solved problem: -, Phone waits: -, Phone staff: -, In-home service: -, Web site: -
24	Home Depot <sup>1</sup>	68	Solved problem: -, Phone waits: -, Phone staff: -, In-home service: -, Web site: -
25	General Electric	68	Solved problem: -, Phone waits: -, Phone staff: -, In-home service: -, Web site: -
26	Best Buy <sup>1</sup>	67	Solved problem: -, Phone waits: -, Phone staff: -, In-home service: -, Web site: -
27	Whirlpool	66	Solved problem: -, Phone waits: -, Phone staff: -, In-home service: -, Web site: -
28	KitchenAid	63	Solved problem: -, Phone waits: -, Phone staff: -, In-home service: -, Web site: -
29	LG	62	Solved problem: -, Phone waits: -, Phone staff: -, In-home service: -, Web site: -
30	Maytag	59	Solved problem: -, Phone waits: -, Phone staff: -, In-home service: -, Web site: -
31	Frigidaire	58	Solved problem: -, Phone waits: -, Phone staff: -, In-home service: -, Web site: -
32	Jenn-Air	57	Solved problem: -, Phone waits: -, Phone staff: -, In-home service: -, Web site: -

<sup>1</sup> Indicates retailer. <sup>2</sup> Sears support of Kenmore appliances. <sup>3</sup> Non-Kenmore appliances purchased at Sears.

### Guide to the Ratings

The Ratings are based on 20,216 subscribers who reported on 35,521 appliance-purchase experiences in the 2007 Appliance Store Shopper Satisfaction Survey, conducted by the Consumer Reports National Research Center. Small appliances include air conditioners, grills, and vacuum cleaners; major appliances include ranges, refrigerators, washers, and dryers. Subscribers do not necessarily mirror the U.S. population. **Reader score** reflects readers' assessments of their overall buying experience and is not limited to factors under "survey results." A score of 100 would mean all respondents had been completely satisfied; 80 would mean very satisfied, on average. Differences of less than 4 points are not meaningful. **Price, selection, product quality, service, and checkout ease** scores reflect percentage of respondents who rated the store as excellent or very good on each item. **Shopping ease** is percentage of people who had fewer shopping hassles. Higher scores mean the store was rated more favorably compared with that attribute's median score. Attributes for small and large appliances are not comparable. "-" signifies not applicable or insufficient sample size.

### Guide to the Ratings

The Ratings are based on responses to the 2007 Service and Support Survey, conducted by the Consumer Reports National Research Center, and use customer-support or repair-service experiences contacting a retailer or manufacturer about 14,897 appliances from January 2006 to June 2007. **Reader score** reflects overall satisfaction with experiences and is not limited to factors under "survey results." A score of 100 would mean all respondents had been completely satisfied; 80 would mean very satisfied, on average; and 60, fairly well satisfied. Differences of less than 7 points are not meaningful. **Solved problem** indicates whether the problem was solved by the company's support or repair service. **Phone waits** covers long waits on hold and other problems navigating the phone system. **Phone staff** indicates whether support staff were knowledgeable and courteous, and communicated clearly. Respondents also rated the companies' **in-home service** and **Web sites**; ratings on the chart represent the percentage who rated these aspects of support or repair service "excellent." "-" indicates insufficient sample size to report results.