

# THE DISH ON HOME

## Woodstock Hardware Gets Creative with Housewares

**E**ven though he has just 800 square feet of selling space dedicated to the housewares category, Vince Christofora has made room for approximately 4,500 SKUs in the housewares department of his 6,000-square-foot store, Woodstock Do it Best Hardware, in Woodstock, N.Y. Most of those SKUs reside in his 750-square-foot gourmet kitchen second story “store-within-a-store” called Diane’s Kitchen.

Such limited space forces Christofora to get creative in every aspect of the category—from shelf-level merchandising to developing unique niches and even the department’s design.

He utilized a unique area to set the housewares selection apart—the store’s upstairs

was originally designed as office space, so each of the department’s niches are housed in separate rooms. Those niches include a bath shop, storage and organization, fishing, eco-friendly lines of cookware and cleaning supplies and more.

And so far his creativity has paid off: In the three years since he set up the housewares department, sales have crept up to 10 percent of the store’s total sales.

Knowing Christofora would be a wealth of knowledge about what it takes to sell housewares, the editors at *Hardware Retailing* sat down with him to find out exactly what keeps his customers coming back and sales growing.



# GOODS



*Photo courtesy of Greg Smith*





The entrance to Diane's Kitchen greets customers with small appliances and a hallway full of aprons and dish towels.

**Hardware Retailing (HR): What is your merchandising strategy? How do you attract customers to Diane's Kitchen?**

**Vince Christofora (VC):** When we first opened up this department, it was a challenge to get our customers upstairs. Three years later, we still have an occasional customer who says, "You have an upstairs?" But that just reminds us that we have to keep working hard to promote upstairs and make sure each of our customers knows about it.

We keep this department top of mind by merchandising endcaps and other small areas throughout downstairs with housewares and kitchen products to raise our customers' awareness of what is going on upstairs. It can take quite a bit of labor to do so, and we have to work around some of the traditionally busy hardware seasons when doing so. We also try to merchandise products at the point of sale to serve as conversation starters for our sales team to talk about the unique location of the housewares and kitchen departments.

**HR: How do you compete with the broad range of retail competitors offering housewares?**

**VC:** To cater to a wide range of demographics, we stock Diane's Kitchen to assure there is a range of price points in any given category. We find that a significant amount of the customers in this department use disposable income, so we try to position the department to have quality alternatives.

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**HR: How do you develop niche concepts within your housewares category?**

**VC:** We developed our niches as a result of the specific needs and requests of our customers and our community. For example, in our housewares department and our kitchen shop, many of our customers are interested in being more environmentally conscious and in eating healthier. In that case, these concerns and interests led to the creation of our Green Living Department.

The common thread of our Green Living Department weaves through our entire store, not only in housewares and in Diane's Kitchen, but also in more traditional hardware areas, such as light bulbs, water and energy conservation, zero-VOC paint and the cleaning and lawn and garden products our customers use. Once we identify a niche concept, we try to apply the concept through our entire store.

**HR: How do you source such a deep assortment of housewares?**

**VC:** Our bath shop, for example, evolved when we combined our traditional bathroom hardware with more specialized bath products from several housewares vendors. Then, to make the group of products more specialized, we mixed in the products from a couple of great homemade, "green" soap vendors, and we had the start of our bath shop niche.



The store's bath shop niche is located in what was originally intended to be an office bathroom on the store's second floor. Shower curtains hang from a shower rod, and wiring racking houses all-natural cleaning products.

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To make it all work, we take our niche requirements into consideration when we are buying new products and considering new vendors. If we feel a product or manufacturer has a connection and commitment to one of our niches, we think and hope our customers will feel it as well.

Our biggest niche is our gourmet kitchen, Diane's Kitchen. We believe the success we have had in this niche has been a result of our willingness to stock a wide range of products from the best kitchen product suppliers, which helps us become a shopping destination for our customers.

The "destination" designation has been big for us.

It has taken some time for us to adjust to having so many vendors in a single department. It is a lot of work and quite different from our hardware departments, where we get the majority of our product from our co-op.

**HR: What product trends are you noticing in the housewares category?**

**VC:** Healthy eating is a big trend. Many people are getting rid of their plastic food storage containers and replacing them with glass containers.

## Three Tips For Increasing Sales in Housewares

Looking for ways to revamp your housewares category? Christofora offers his advice:



*Photo courtesy of Greg Smith*

**Create a destination.** Get beyond the standard mix of housewares products so customers have a reason to shop your store rather than your department store competitor. Be willing to spend some money on trying new lines of products. For example, invest in high-end lines of cookware.

**Assign enough trained manpower to the department.** It is unlikely that you can meet the needs of your customers with floating hardware clerks. Always have someone on the schedule who is passionate about selling housewares and is your go-to expert for the category.

**Modify your appearance.** Create an atmosphere that will draw in your customers. For example, use polished chrome racking or gondolas with wood graining to create an upscale appearance. Visit other high-end retailers and see how they display their products, then bring those ideas back to your store.





Woodstock Hardware's cookware selection includes ceramic baking sheets, muffin tins and more.

Most folks are also replacing anything Teflon-coated in their kitchens with safer, chemical-free coatings.

We tend to stay away from lines of products that focus on the style of the year or anything that might be considered a fad. We certainly provide our customers with information on industry trends, such as products that meet the color of the year.

However, in our product selection, we focus on products that offer simple elegance that withstand the test of time. For example, white porcelain always looks good on a tabletop.

**HR: What time of year is best to promote housewares? How do you increase sales during off-seasons?**

**VC:** The department has only been in our store for two to three years, but our fourth-quarter sales continue to grow. Becoming an end-of-the-year destination has affected the entire store, and we now promote ourselves during this important time of the year.

However, we also focus on other holidays and gift occasions. With the right product selection and mix, we have become a viable gift destination for our customers all year.

For example, last year we used our housewares department as the center of a new promotion called "Off to College." We have ventured into promoting the products popular with students going off to college for the

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first time. This year, we will expand our efforts and add "Back to College," which will include a different mix of products for returning college students.

There are other times we prepare for and cater to, as well. Baking season, early and late canning seasons, berry-picking season and maple sugaring time each require certain supplies. At first it can be surprising, but these activities are projects not unlike other home projects; folks need certain supplies and products to finish their projects successfully.

**HR: What role does technology play in engaging customers in your housewares department?**

**VC:** On the salesfloor, our goal is to provide an atmosphere where people who enjoy cooking like to visit. We want them to feel comfortable so that when they visit, they will find quality products, the newest advertised gadgets and a place to share cooking and product knowledge.

For us, this all starts and continues with our store email campaigns, which have allowed us to keep our customers informed of what is going on in our shop. Coincidentally, the timing was such that we started building our local email list right when we opened the new kitchen shop, so our customers have grown with the category.

So far we have had a favorable response rate to our digital efforts. We do "sell" in these campaigns,

but we put in a concentrated effort to provide and share information. We believe our knowledge "sells" just as much as our sales do.

We have also used technology to expand our customer base and reach customers with our e-commerce site, ShopWoodstockHardware.com. Our entire store, more than 25,000 SKUs, is online and items can be purchased locally or nationwide.

**HR: How do you train your hardware store employees to sell housewares?**

**VC:** It is important that the employees in our housewares and Diane's Kitchen have some type of passion and understanding of food and cooking.

Our on-the-job training is supplemented with vendor information and verbal training provided by several of our sales reps, but having that passion for even the smallest niche in the department provides a solid foundation to build on.

We also learn from our customers every day. ➡



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