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Shopping for Custom-Made Paint

MANY PAINT STORES NOW promise that if customers bring in a color sample, anything from a paint chip to a swatch of fabric, they can mix up a match for them.

In most cases, the shops use devices called spectrophotometers, which shine light on the color sample to determine the blend of tints that are needed to re-create it. Customized colors, they say, are proving popular among customers eager to take the guesswork out of repainting their bedrooms. Last year, Home Depot installed do-it-yourself color-sampling kiosks in all of its stores. Meanwhile, paint manufacturer Sherwin-Williams says it is rolling out a new proprietary color-matching system in its 2,500 stores that adds extra precision. So far, 75% of the stores have these machines.

How foolproof is it? We took paint stirrers with swatches of a yellow that we had used in our kitchen to a variety of stores. They included Lowe's and Home Depot, a Sherwin-Williams shop and an independent paint store. Finally, we tested Wal-Mart, which has been making inroads in the paint market.

The helpful attendant at Lowe's in Brooklyn, N.Y., explained that some paint brands are more watery than others, which can lead to a different look on the wall, even if they use the exact same formula of tints.

But when our electronically color-matched can of paint came back with a slight greenish tinge, the clerk tried to correct the problem by adding a little red. She wasn't satisfied with the result, though, and added a bunch

you the formula," the store clerk said. (One of the store's owners later said the offer was a joke, but confirmed that Deluxe gives its paint formulas only to regular customers.)

At Home Depot, in Valley Stream, N.Y., we didn't get much personalized attention. But we did receive our gallon of yellow paint relatively quickly—about 20 minutes after we entered the store. And while the color wasn't perfect, it was closer to the original than any other.

Wal-Mart, located in the same Valley Stream mall, was the least expensive of the stores we tried. It also came very close in its electronic color match, even though its actual mixing device, unlike all the other stores, worked without a computer. The manager gave us some prescient advice about the necessity of using primer—it

turned out that the paint was on the watery side and had a see-through quality once applied.

The Sherwin-Williams store in Brooklyn had yet to install the chain's new custom-scanning technology, but the attendant took painstaking efforts to help us find a match. The result was wildly off the mark. He admitted upfront to being less than an expert. "Yellow and red make green, right?" he asked. In the end, he offered to discard the paint; instead, we took a 30% discount along with a free brush and bucket. Sherwin-Williams said it has a satisfaction guarantee for color-matching.



Paint by numbers: We wanted to match the shade of yellow in our kitchen—some stores got close, others didn't.

more red, leaving our gallon of paint with a hue that was distinctly orange. In the end, she suggested using a pre-mixed color (Olympic's "Golden Glow"). The result was attractive enough, but not the yellow we had brought into the store. Lowe's says its employees are trained to double-check a matched color for accuracy.

The independent shop, Deluxe Paint & Chemical Co., also in Brooklyn, used an electronic sensor and came up with a respectably close color match. But while the other shops printed out a copy of the tint proportions for the paint they mixed for us, allowing us to re-create the color at a later date, Deluxe refused. "For \$15, I'll print it out and give

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STORE	COST	SERVICE	COLOR	COMMENT
Home Depot	\$14.98 for a gallon of Glidden paint, plus tax	Perfectly competent, but not much hand-holding	A shade too orange, but the closest match of the bunch	Store had a scanner that customers could use themselves—unfortunately, it didn't work
Lowe's	\$13.97 for a gallon of Olympic paint, plus tax	Sales clerk's discourse on brushes was helpful	The attendant tried to correct slight green tint by adding a bunch of red. The result had to be tossed out	Color matching wasn't ideal, though paint itself was nice and thick
Deluxe Paint & Chemical Co.	\$22 for a gallon of Benjamin Moore paint, plus tax	Brusque, but very instructive	Match turned out well—interestingly, the rep didn't even look to see if it was close	Store offered small Benjamin Moore sample colors to test on our wall
Wal-Mart	\$8.94 for a gallon of ColorPlace paint, plus tax	Sales manager was trying to solve a staffing debate as we were seeking to get our questions answered	Very good match, but the paint seemed worryingly watery	Paint section had a dearth of color cards to choose among
Sherwin-Williams	\$17.49 for a gallon of discounted Sherman-Williams paint, plus tax	The dotting sales rep explained the mixing process in great detail	Color was way off, perhaps because the store had no electronic scanner	Provided evidence that scanners can work better than trying to create a color match with the naked eye