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# PM

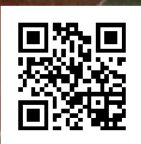
PLUMBING & MECHANICAL

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Showrooms spur  
**remodeling** projects

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Showroom of Seattle-based  
Best Plumbing.

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# Filling the right niche

*Focusing on exclusive, American-made lines helps Seattle's Best Plumbing to grow its remodeling business.*



When Seattle-based Best Plumbing opened its doors in 1968, it was a small plumbing service company with a retail parts counter. Many of the homes in the area were older with plumbing systems in need of repair — and updating. When customers came in to talk about replacing fixtures, a few selected items were brought out front and boxes were opened so customers could see what they were buying.

This happened more and more often so, in the late 1970s, Best Plumbing made its first foray into the showroom business — vignettes. These displays showed customers not only what Best had available in decorative plumbing fixtures, but how they would look in their homes. The showroom continued to evolve slowly over the years until 2001 when **Kathy Lilleness** and her husband, **Bill Lilleness**, bought the business from Kathy's father, **Spencer Bell**.

"We took a good look at the showroom and saw that we were bringing in more decorative lines," Kathy Lilleness says. "So we decided to take the plunge and really develop the showroom. We gutted it and took the next year to put it together. We brought in a retail professional to help design it, using her expertise for the floor plan for good traffic flow and how to attract the higher-end buyer."

Photo credit: Best Plumbing



Above: The showroom staff at Best Plumbing (left to right): Co-owner and showroom manager Kathy Lilleness, Matthew Hoffman, Beth Davis, Jennifer Kowalski and Jenn Ramos. Inset: Kathy Lilleness likes open spaces on the floor and the walls so customers aren't bombarded by product everywhere they turn.

While the 4,000-sq.-ft. showroom started out carrying high-end brands, the Great Recession forced Lillness, the showroom manager, to re-evaluate what Best's showroom was offering its customers. Homeowners didn't have as much money to spend on remodels as they did before. Lillness looked at the showroom's margins to see where it could make money, then made the decision to pull out some of the higher-end brands, especially those found at the area's plumbing wholesale showrooms.

## 'It was a big risk to remove the big names from the showroom, but it's worked in our favor.'

"With the state of the economy, we've adjusted to emphasize the middle price range," she notes. "In the past, we pitched toward the higher-end, more exclusive lines. But we retooled almost our entire product selection, pulling off significant lines because we couldn't compete with plumbing wholesaler prices. For a small, independent showroom, we looked for lines that were high quality, had U.S. ownership and U.S. manufacturing.

"We can buy any brand the customer finds on the Internet. But for us to be profitable, we had to partner with a few faucet lines, a few tub lines and make it worthwhile for them to do business with Best Plumbing."

Those manufacturers, such as California Faucets, like the personal relationship with Best Plumbing. When approached by a manufacturer's rep or salesperson, Lillness finds out where the product is available. If it can be found at the big-box stores or plumbing wholesaler showrooms, she's not interested. For her showroom, she wants lines that customers may not be familiar with, not the "Kleenex brands" found in big-box stores.

When she finds that exclusive line at the price point she believes will interest her customers, she makes sure the manufacturer understands what it

gets by partnering with Best Plumbing.

"We've found over the last five years of transitioning our product line that not only are we personalizing our relationship with the manufacturers, we're helping them understand what we'll do in terms of displays, what they can expect from us such as on-time payments, that we'll be introducing their product to the customer when 50 different faucet lines are available to purchase," she explains.

On some lines, Best can buy better than plumbing wholesalers because of

those relationships.

"Some of these lines are really trying to gain exposure and they're not at the wholesaler level," she says. "There's a line of tubs where we are one of two showrooms in Seattle that carry it. Wholesalers are calling us to buy because the manufacturer has done such a good job advertising and getting its name out that it's now being specified. It was a big risk to remove the big names from the showroom, but it's worked in our favor."

Lillness does anticipate broadening its lines when the economy is on better ground. She is revisiting some higher-end lines for higher-end customers. The construction market is strong in Seattle, in part because of the investment in technology development offices from Amazon and Microsoft, allowing for more downtown housing and infrastructure projects. With Seattle's technology-heavy industry, multimillion-dollar homes are being built, even today.

"We fill the niche for those customers who read *Architectural Digest* and *Dwell* magazines and know what brands they want, or what brands their architects want," she says. "They don't want what's readily available at the plumbing wholesaler, they want something unique."



Best Plumbing's showroom has eight full displays with functional products for bath and kitchen — tubs, toilets, handheld showers, a steam room with several showerheads and fan units, and a bank of kitchen sinks with multiple faucets and accessories.

### Selection and installation

When a customer walks into the Best Plumbing showroom, one thing she notices is the open space.

"I stay away from filling every inch of floor and wall space," Lillness says. "It's common in plumbing showrooms to put as many faucets on the wall or as many toilets on the floor that they can. I do it the other way: I do it the way I like to shop."

The showroom, which employs five salespeople, has eight full displays with functional products for bath and kitchen — tubs, toilets, a handheld showers demo area, a steam room with several showerheads and fan units, and a bank of kitchen sinks with multiple faucets and accessories (garbage disposers, water filtration systems and instant hot water/chiller units).

Water conservation is very important to Best's customers. As Seattle is a very tech-savvy city, many of Best's customers have done their homework online before coming into



## Filling the right niche

the showroom. They know about high-efficiency toilets and low-flow showerheads, and they know the brand names.

“It’s a matter of style, it’s a matter of price point, it’s a matter of what they’ve experienced,” Lilleness explains. “Customers may have seen and used a high-end, high-efficiency toilet while traveling but find it

doesn’t fit into their budget, so we’ll show them a comparable toilet in their price range.”

Showroom customers are encouraged to make appointments with the staff to go over remodeling or building plans and select fixtures. When customers come in, already they are overwhelmed by the selection process, she says. An appointment

allows the showroom staff to find what the customer’s price range is, what products she’s looking for and what her tastes are before she walks through the showroom door. Sales staff makes sure accurate catalogs are pulled and that samples are available to help the customer with the selection process

“Our biggest sales come from when we sit down with customers and walk them through their order if it hasn’t already been specified,” Lilleness explains. “It might take three or four appointments, but we try to limit them to 45 to 90 minutes.”

The first thing the showroom staff asks a customer is who their contractor is. “People rarely do their own installation,” Lilleness says. Since Best Plumbing has its own install plumbers, it’s easy for customers to select product and schedule the install at the same time.

But if the customer has a contractor, Best’s showroom staff will contact him to make sure that the fixtures being purchased are accurate. The plumbing contractor may not want to sit for a couple hours selecting products with the homeowner, but he’s kept in the loop to make sure the product being selected will work for the installation. If the contractor wants to be part of the sale, Best will pass on the pricing he requests to the customer. If he purchases the material himself, he can add on his markup.

Seattle-area plumbing contractors have become comfortable installing the exclusive lines shown in Best Plumbing’s showroom, Lilleness says. They trust the products that the showroom is offering now, in terms of delivery and customer service.

The showroom has definitely helped increase Best Plumbing’s remodeling business, she notes. The company cross-markets its different businesses to customers — service customers wanting to update their homes are told about Best’s bath and kitchen showroom, while showroom customers needing product installed are apprised of Best’s plumbing install and service business.

“Over the last 10 years, we’ve tried to promote the fact that not only can you purchase your faucets, showers, toilets and lavs at our showroom, but we also can do the installation,” Lilleness says. “The plumbers out in the field can say, ‘You want a pedestal sink, visit our showroom and you can see several models on the floor.’ The showroom feeds the service, and the service feeds the showroom.”

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