

Hardwares profit from traditions

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Living up to the image of the guy who has whatever hardware anybody needs isn't always profitable, isn't always easy.

Over the holidays, Jean received an emergency call at 1 a.m. from a distressed customer who needed 40 gallons of kerosene. Lawing, director of administrative services for the Farmington school district, needed to unfreeze the pipes at North Farmington High School which, he said, were apewing out water. "That's the kind of guy Al (Jean) is," says Lawing.

JEAN'S will still custom cut glass, repair screens and thread a customer's two-inch brass pipe.

When people buy off-beat items at Jean's they say, "Aren't you glad to get rid of this?" Jean tells. "But actually, I'm not. I have to order another one."

ACO doesn't stock or service the unusual, says store manager Garry Goldhof. As a result, they can offer lower prices on what they do have, he says.

ACO hardware is a "supermarket-type" store where homeowners and do-it-yourselfers browse, he says. The Christmas music that fills the air adds to the leisurely atmosphere.

"I'm not a browsing store," says Jean. "People come here when they want something." They usually have a clear idea of what they want.

THE TWO stores also differ in their sales staff training. ACO, a modern chain store, has its employees take a correspondence course to familiarize themselves with the barrage of products customers will ask them about. Jean says he hires young help and teaches them the ropes over many years. Those who stick around long enough become managers. He has a manager now who started working with him when he was 13 years old and is now 30.

The stores' divergent marketing approaches are also apparent in the dress styles of their managers. Jean wears a plaid flannel shirt, unbuttoned just enough to show his white t-shirt under-

neath. Goldhof wears a conservative striped tie, a blue oxford shirt and a navy pullover sweater.

BOTH JEAN and Goldhof say their stores cater to the do-it-yourself homeowner and that only 5 to 10 percent of their business comes from builders. Higher prices charged by plumbers,

carpenters and mechanics have led more people to become do-it-yourselfers than ever before.

"I'm seeing a lot of wives whose husbands are in the middle of projects. They say they're sorry to disturb us, but could I help them find something," says Tom Fisher, store manager of Damman Hardware in downtown

Farmington.

The more silk-stocking hardware shoppers he sees, the more he says he believes in the importance of including elaborate directions with each hardware item. The do-it-yourself male shoppers, though, need the directions and sales advice just as much, he quickly adds.



Al Jean, owner of Jean's Hardware in Farmington Hills, takes care of business from his cluttered office above the store.

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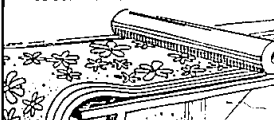
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