



# Divine

Photo: HNK Architectural Photography, Inc.

With walls of slate and granite and bath furniture from Porcher's Tetsu collection, this contemporary bath displays Henderson's desire for a range of texture, material and color to wow potential clients. The mica tiles on the floor were individually hand selected by the designer.

# DPH

By Andrea Girolamo

**M**ore specialized than kitchen and bath showroom professionals, decorative plumbing and hardware showrooms face a narrow but crucial set of concerns. Preparation, product selection and presentation are the name of the game, and DPH showroom professionals recently asked by *Kitchen & Bath Design News* to describe their business strategies consistently noted that failing to address one of the three Ps is a step toward failure.

In his address to members of the Decorative Plumbing & Hardware Association at the DPHA breakfast held at the recent Kitchen/Bath Industry Show, Michael Rockstroh, a strategic business specialist, shared his insights about the decorative plumbing and hardware industry (**see related story, Page 40**). Key among them were his assertions that decorative plumbing and hardware professionals need to take a "lighter, tighter, brighter," approach to their businesses and their showrooms.

That means streamlining offerings and creating a light and bright space that is clean, both visually and functionally.

Decorative plumbing showrooms must combine high style, innovation and versatility at all price points for sustained success.

Michelle Henderson of Banner Plumbing Supply notes that displays such as these are important because they bring into relief the real differences between similar products, and allow the client to interact with the product.



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## PREPARATION

In an industry fraught with concerns about the stagnant economy and the falling dollar, denizens of the DPH world believe their specialized area is what sustains them.

“No matter the size of their project, clients walk into our showroom knowing what they’re looking for. They’re not going into a box store to buy lightbulbs and passing through the kitchen and bath design area casually. They’ve thought it through beforehand. They’ve heard of us, or seen an ad and made the concerted effort to drive across town to visit us,” says Michelle Henderson of Banner Plumbing Supply Co. in Buffalo Grove, IL. “That’s half the sale right there.”

The other half, she says, comes when the client steps through the door to tour Banner’s



Display centers are points of visual interest in the Banner Plumbing Supply showroom.

Below: Banner’s showroom has the luxury of space, so it carries a wide variety of products. Shown here are (left to right): tubs from Jason International and Aquatic Industries, a sink by Zoli and a table from Brazilian manufacturer Deca.

her was to design a showroom with a branding strategy consistent with the other showrooms (a third showroom is located in Aurora, IL) while serving the more urbane market in which the new showroom is situated.

with no street signage and an original design plan that mirrors the area’s haute couture attitude.

## PRESENTATION

While addressing DPHA members, Rockstroh asserted that too much complexity in a decorative plumbing business slows the business down, and that agility in the marketplace is a key to success. Translation: Focus on a particular market and don’t try to do too much. This concept is nothing new to Brad Reddington of Palatine, IL-based R&R Tile and Bath, who has recognized the need to focus more tightly on his target clientele.

“We’ve dropped certain manufacturers not because their lines weren’t appealing, but because their price points eventually just weren’t realistic for our market,” he says.

“I wanted to work with the existing elements of the space to give the new showroom its own identity, but the colors, products and styling are consistent with the other Aquae Sulis showrooms,” she says.

Davis & Warshow, a well-established plumbing supply company based in the New York metro area, has had a head start. The company’s 12th location, in the heart of New York City’s SoHo neighborhood, is an exclusive enclave



Right: Each vignette in the Banner Plumbing Supply showroom shows a wide array of product, resisting manufacturer-supplied displays and other visual branding.

approximately 15,000-sq.-ft. showroom. The company, a member of DPHA, brought Henderson in to design the extensive showroom – a process that took two years.

Michelle Lariviere, general manager of Aquae Sulis, a division of William F. Meyer Co., says the company’s newest location in Chicago was springboarded by the firm’s Glen Ellyn showroom, which opened in 2004. The challenge for





## Decorative Plumbing Showrooms

Knowing a particular market and positioning the showroom's design to address that audience is pivotal, agrees Lariviere. Aquae Sulis' city location is one of three in the Chicagoland area, and she says each showroom has a "Chicago Contemporary" style, with consistent colors, products and positioning. However, the Chicago location retains a number of characteristics unique to the building – including exposed brick walls, concrete floors, wood ceiling and original beams – which give the space a more loft-like urban flavor.

Aquae Sulis works with manufacturers to build custom vignettes and product display

the pods display wares by the nature of the product rather than the make of the product.

Reddington says his suburban location might sell products that a big box store would, but that personal attention, selection and service make R&R stand out.

"Many of our customers come to us after having had a negative experience at a box store," he says, noting that the price of more personalized



Photo: Courtesy of R&R Tile and Bath

Above: Product selection in the R&R Tile and Bath showroom is focused for the market it serves.



Photo: Courtesy of Davis & Warshow



Photo: Courtesy of Davis & Warshow

Left: The loft-like design in the Davis & Warshow SoHo showroom reflects the flavor of its neighborhood.

Far left: Davis & Warshow SoHo aspires to a gallery aesthetic and achieves it through custom architectural panels, spotlighting and a specialized 'pod' system that keeps the line of sight open and moving around the room, as in a gallery.

centers so that all of a particular manufacturer's offerings can be grouped together and compared side by side.

Henderson's showroom goes in a different direction, with a variety of products and practically no branding at all.

"For one thing, it lends us the flexibility to use really interesting boutique brands such as Native Trails or Linkasink, or up-and-comers like Deca alongside the classic heavy hitters like TOTO, Elkay and Hansgrohe," Henderson says. She notes that even the product selection centers in the showroom, such as a trough display of kitchen faucets, feature six separate manufacturers side by side.

At Davis & Warshow's SoHo location, the multitude of galleries in the neighborhood inspired the design. The space features custom woodworked "pods" that contain products on slides and roll-outs, giving a minimalist flavor to the open, loft-inspired space. The company resists branding, and

service quickly becomes evident to prospects who visit the showrom. However, the value of that service also becomes quickly evident. "We suggest to customers who begin to quibble over price early in the design process that perhaps a discount big-box store might be better suited for them. They always say, 'I'm not going back *there* again.' The personal attention we can give here goes a long way."

"We take a 'pride in service' approach," says Henderson, "whether it's with the consumer or other trade professional. In fact, with builders and contractors, we strive to be considered an extension of their team."

### PRODUCT SELECTION

In a more literal interpretation, Rockstroh's exhortation of "lighter, tighter, brighter," is a call to streamline product in the showroom. When space is not a concern, as in Henderson's behemoth Banner showroom, extensive product displays can make a trip to the showroom

an event.

Careful planning goes into a space of any size, however, and possibly more so in a smaller space. Lariviere says that whatever Aquae Sulis doesn't display in its approximately 9,200-sq.-ft. Chicago location, its sales staff can second-source for the client.

Reddington's family operation deals primarily with Danze and bath furniture from Bertch. This streamlined approach lets him display what he feels is smart for his market and smart for his 2,000-sq.-ft. space.

"We're 30 miles north of Chicago. This is Middle America, and certain price points and styles just won't fly here," he says.

In the urban centers, however, the showrooms can be as out-of-the-box as the products themselves, and that includes the usually mundane business of product selection centers. Indeed, much of Davis & Warshow's pod system can be moved whenever it is determined the layout of the showroom must be reconfigured.

The firm has plans to change out the pods regularly to showcase the latest and greatest from its manufacturers.

Sheldon Malc, showroom sales manager for Davis & Warshow, recently noted: "We didn't want to use manufacturers' displays because they tend to be very high and they all tend to be all different finishes. We wanted a more uniform look."

In other words, the company chose to brand its own showroom as a unique product, and use the products in a way that enhances the company's brand more than that of the individual manufacturers.

It's this type of careful design and marketing plan that sets successful showrooms apart. A strategic approach to product, knowledge of the surrounding market and quality customer service form the right business plan for a showroom of any size. Implementation means the future of DPH is light, tight and, best of all, bright.

**KBND**