

Mystery shopper Sunderland

This month our intrepid shopper checks out the standards of kitchen, bedroom and bathroom retailing in the north eastern city of Sunderland...

Tecaz Pennywell Industrial Estate

Showroom: 4
Service: 4
Total 8/10

THIS GIANT showroom had an ugly exterior but, with a huge sign, it was easily spotted from the road and had plenty of free parking, as well as a handy cafe next door.

Once inside, the word 'cavernous' sprang to mind. Just about every bathroom brand under the sun was on display, including Laura Ashley, Hudson Reed, Balterley Bathroom Furniture, Roman and Roper Rhodes. Offers included a free toilet when buying a Heritage freestanding bath, and there were several ex-display bargains, such as a Perla round jacuzzi bath reduced from £1,249.99 to £600.

A smaller selection of kitchens was also on offer – 'Lifestyle' for those on a budget and 'Connoisseur' for those with more expensive tastes.



At the customer help desk, an assistant told me it was the "biggest bathroom showroom in the UK" and laughed that they'd only had one customer who couldn't find the kind of sink she was after.

She also introduced me to Elaine, who organises two teams of fitters and seemed very on the ball. If you can't find what you want here, perhaps it doesn't exist.

● **Cavernous interior, friendly staff and a wide variety of products**

Callerton Kitchen Co Brussels Road

Showroom: 4
Service: 2
Total 6/10

FIRST IMPRESSIONS weren't great, as the showroom wasn't clearly signed. Although I spotted a sign for 'Callerton House', a second sign above the door said 'Mason House Manufacturing'.

Slightly bewildered, I wandered into a lobby with a further doorway to Callerton Kitchens on the left, but there was no one manning the showroom.

Nevertheless, there were around six kitchens on display – including a minimalist handleless design, a shaker grey and wood model, and a slightly more daring design with orange splashbacks. The more expensive designs were combined with appliances from Neff and Bosch, while the value ranges featured CDA appliances.

Also on display was a state-of-the-art new Bosch induction hob with built-in extractor beneath, rather than above.



After popping my head into the corridor, a passing staff member fetched the factory manager to greet me, since the showroom manager was away on a course. He was keen to stress he wasn't a salesperson and wasn't on commission, before explaining how the kitchens were made, complete with colour-matched interiors.

The price point was described as "slightly higher than Howdens, but better quality". Having manufactured kitchens for under £4,000 and up to £80,000, it seems all budgets would be well catered for here.

● **Not easy to find your way into**

Jade Interiors Ellesmere Court, Leechmere Industrial Estate

Showroom: 3
Service: 4
Total 7/10

THIS SMALL showroom on Leechmere Industrial Estate has been making kitchens, bedrooms and studies since 1988, so it was very well established.

I was approached by Anne, who asked what style I was after – not many others did – and brought out some new doors that had just arrived. She told me they sourced their vinyl-wrapped doors from four different suppliers and made the carcasses in their own factory.

Prices typically ranged from £4,500 to £20,000-plus, although the average spend was around £8,000 and the self-employed fitters were paid separately. The fact that 70% of sales



came from recommendations was a reassuring sign.

Anne also mentioned replacing a broken hinge on a kitchen door 10 years after it was fitted, suggesting after-sales care would be a priority. I left armed with brochures by Second Nature, The On-Trend Kitchen Collection and 'A Unique Choice', showing the array of choices the limited showroom was unable to display.

● **Small showroom but attentive, helpful staff**

The Kitchen & Bedroom Studio Monk Street

Showroom: 3
Service: 3
Total 6/10

LOCATED ON a retail park near a large Tesco Extra with free parking in front, it was hard to tell what lay inside this unassuming building.

Around two-thirds of the displays were kitchens with the rest devoted to bedrooms, although I wasn't blown away by the designs on offer. Some kitchens looked a little dated, teamed with tiles featuring fruit motifs. I also found some of the bifold doors on the wall units difficult to open. Appliances from makes such as Hoover, Hotpoint and Rangemaster were on offer, too.

I was approached after a few minutes browsing and discovered the typical customer spend is around £10,000 to £15,000, although they have produced several £20,000-plus



kitchens. They preferred to use their own fitters, who were used to installing their kitchens, as this gave them an element of control. Lead times are around two to three months.

On leaving, I was given brochures from Second Nature, which the showroom has a 28-year relationship with, and Biography, which featured more contemporary, minimal designs.

● **Unassuming on the outside – and on the inside**

Wearside Plumbing Supplies Wilson Street

Showroom: 3
Service: 3
Total 6/10

WITH NO window display, this back-alley showroom had a definite trade feel. However, once inside the Tardis-like space opened up to reveal three sections featuring big brands such as Bristan, Vado, Roca, Burlington, Aqualisa and Frontline.

It featured a good selection of enclosures from the likes of Roman and Merlyn, several on-trend Zehnder radiators and some more unusual offerings like Heritage rose gold taps.

There was even a seating area with black leather sofas, providing space for customers to browse through brochures and samples or discuss plans. It did need a bit of an update to make it more contemporary, though.



Since the staff all seemed busy in their office area, it was quite hard to catch their attention. But after hovering for a while, I eventually got speaking to a friendly assistant who took the time to assess my needs.

She showed me some great-value, contemporary freestanding baths on sale and also provided me with some brochures.

I discovered that most customers opted for supply-only and used their own fitters, but I was told they could suggest plumbers if I'm stuck.

● **Spacious interior and helpful assistant looked after my needs**

Boldon Bathrooms & Kitchens Hutton Street, Boldon

Showroom: 3
Service: 2
Total 5/10

SITUATED A short drive north of Sunderland on the Boldon Colliery Industrial Estate, this high-profile business can often be heard advertising on the radio and has a 20-year history.

This place seemed to be known under various names, including Boldon Baths & Tiles, Boldon Kitchens and Tiles, and Boldon Kitchens, depending on whether you go by their signage, website or business cards – a little confusing for customers, to say the least.

Inside, there were more bathrooms than kitchens, with a good selection of products from names like Atlanta Bathrooms, Pura, Frontline, High Life and Gemini, as well as Marshall tiles, Grohe and Phoenix. Not all displays were clearly priced, though.



I approached the counter to ask about timings and fitting and was told they used self-employed fitters and the next slots were eight weeks away, although the assistant seemed keen to get back to her paperwork.

Prominently displayed was a 'Price Promise', proclaiming that if you see a 'like for like' kitchen or bathroom (including fitting) anywhere else, they'll beat the price.

● **Salesperson seemed more keen on doing her paperwork**

Winner's profile: Tecaz, Pennywell

A HUGE range of choice is on offer at Tecaz, which was established in 1985 and has four mega-showrooms across the North-East covering 200,000sq ft in total. The others are in Newcastle, Ryhope and Stockton, with each displaying around 150 bathrooms and 40 kitchens.

It's so vast, some other showrooms could easily fit into the area given over to shower enclosures in the Pennywell branch.

At one end of the spectrum, it sells designer freestanding baths from the likes of Bagno Design, priced at £1,000 to £2,000. At the other end of the price scale, landlords can find an entry-level bathroom for a rental property from £149.99. Disabled customers are also catered for with walk-in, sit-down bath and showers.

Tecaz also has a web shop with regularly-updated sale items.



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