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0 BUY FURNITURE

How to find things you'll love, whether you're shopping in a store or online. Plus: CR's exclusive ratings of furniture retailers.

BY DANIEL BORTZ



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THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC has forced legions of Americans to spend more time at home. Many of us are using these housebound days to make our surroundings more cozy and attractive. Online home goods sales are up for many retailers, with Wayfair, Williams-Sonoma (the parent company of Pottery Barn and West Elm), and Overstock among those reporting year-over-year increases in U.S. sales revenues for the third quarter.

Knowing where and how to find that perfect couch, ottoman, recliner, or bedroom set has rarely been simple. The range of retailers, prices, delivery and return policies, and quality both online and in-store can be overwhelming.

To help guide your furniture shopping choices, Consumer Reports surveyed more than 38,000 members about their furniture-buying experiences in the previous two years. (The survey was done in April 2020 and primarily reflects pre-pandemic shopping.) The resulting ratings of 48 walk-in stores and 17 online retailers starting on page 40 can point you toward furniture sellers that are right for you.

Whether you decide to head to a store or shop from your (current) couch, our essential intel will help you find the right piece at the best price and stay safe in the process.

HEADING TO A STORE

Some people wouldn't think of buying a sofa or chair without seeing it in person first. "Furniture is something

that you need to see to believe," says Aun Hussain, a CR member in Sammamish, Wash., who recently bought a bedroom set and furniture for his home office at a Room & Board store. Our survey results suggest that walk-in furniture stores do a good job of satisfying consumers. Members we polled reported having very positive experiences in 88 percent of in-store purchases.

Why to shop in person: "If you're looking for something that needs to be comfortable, like a sofa, there's no way to tell online," says Rachel Alcorn, an interior designer in Wheaton, Ill. In a store you can stretch out into a seat, feel the different types of upholstery, and get a sense of the scale of a piece.

Personalized attention can be another bonus. "More likely than not, a furniture store will have a knowledgeable salesperson who can answer questions about things like fabric durability," says Megan Hersch, an interior designer in Los Angeles who shops in-store and online for her clients.

Potential pitfalls: Some shoppers in our survey said that they were frustrated by the limited selection offered in stores, and that customer service varied widely among retailers. Stickley, Room & Board, and Ethan Allen were among the walk-in stores that won high marks for customer service, while shoppers were less enthusiastic about the help offered at HomeGoods, Ikea, and Sam's Club.

Of course, going to a store means spending time in an enclosed space, which these days could increase your chances of being exposed to the coronavirus. To minimize that risk, there are important precautions you should take. "If possible, you should spend no more than 15 minutes in the store," says Ravina Kullar, PharmD, an infectious disease specialist and epidemiologist in Los Angeles. "And be sure to wash your

hands well or use hand sanitizer as soon as you can after leaving."

To keep your visit as short as possible, call ahead to ask if you can make an appointment with a salesperson so that you'll be helped immediately when you arrive. Kullar recommends asking if staff and customers are required to wear masks at all times (if not, don't go) and if the store limits capacity. And find out when the store is less likely to be busy.

Success strategies: "Browse online ahead of time and bring pictures of the room you're shopping for and the styles you like so the salesperson isn't throwing darts at the wall," says Dallas-based interior designer Juliana Oliveira. Kullar, who used this strategy herself when furniture shopping recently, says it's another way to minimize your time in a store.

Ways to save: When possible, comparison shop online in advance to find out what other stores are charging for the same or similar items. "Most independent retailers will price-match if asked and are always prepared to negotiate," says Jennifer Litwin, the author of "Best Furniture Buying Tips Ever!" (Random House, 2005). In fact, a third of our survey respondents told us they tried to haggle in-store. Of those, 72 percent reported success.

Alcorn recommends asking about upcoming sales or promotions and whether the store has any online deals it will extend to an in-store purchase. Requesting free delivery is another possible way to save, Oliveira says.

Delivery details: Nearly 90 percent of the in-store furniture purchases mentioned in our survey that were shipped or delivered were "white glove" deliveries, which means the furniture was brought to the home, assembled, and placed by the delivery team (as opposed to being left in a box at the curb). White-glove delivery usually costs extra, generally between \$60 and \$400 depending on factors

like the price of the furniture and your home's proximity to the store. Curbside delivery may be available free, but you'll need to get the furniture into your house or apartment yourself (and assemble it, if necessary).

You'll probably have to sign a form acknowledging receipt of the delivery. Inspect the furniture carefully while the delivery team waits, and don't accept it if there's a defect or other problem. The store may not accept a return if you do.

Dealing with returns: Before you buy, find out the return window, which can vary widely, and whether you'll have to pay return shipping fees. Also find out if the store will provide a full refund or store credit only. Even if you don't have to pay for return shipping, you may be charged a restocking fee, typically 10 to 20 percent of the sale price. Some stores don't accept returns at all (usually for custom-made items) and most won't refund a customer's original delivery fees.

SHOPPING ONLINE

While you can't test out a sofa or chair before you buy it online, 85 percent of our survey respondents who shopped online reported they were very or completely satisfied, on a par with those who shopped in-store. "I bought my couch, chair, and ottoman online," says Nancy Stillwell, a CR member in Madison, Wis. "It made me nervous, but I couldn't find what I wanted at local stores so I shopped online, and my gamble paid off."

Why to shop online: The variety of styles, colors, and models available is vast. For example, a recent search on Amazon for a pink sofa—not likely the most popular color choice—returned more than 9,000 results. If you have something specific and unusual in mind, chances are you'll be able to find it online. You may also find the same item sold at several different online retailers,



QUALITY IS IN THE DETAILS

Here are some things to look for when reading furniture descriptions and questions to ask when talking with a customer service rep or salesperson.

Upholstered Furniture

SOFAS, ARMCHAIRS, ETC.

CONSTRUCTION: A kiln-dried hardwood frame with eight-way hand-tied springs is tops in quality. Less expensive webbing support can be comfortable but tends to stretch over time. Plywood platform support is the least expensive—and the least comfortable.

CUSHIONS: The best are filled entirely with down (real or synthetic) or, for more support, have a foam core wrapped with down or synthetic down. Less expensive seating will have all-foam cushions, which may look very square and blocky.

FABRIC: "If a fabric starts to pill or stains easily, you'll hate the

sofa or chair long before it wears out," says Juliana Oliveira, an interior designer in Dallas. The most durable fabrics are "commercial grade," "performance," or "indoor/outdoor," she adds. Blends made with polyester are usually more durable, easier to clean, and less expensive than all-cotton or all-linen upholstery.

LEATHER: Extremely soft top-grain leather can stain easily and may not be the best choice for dining chairs or in households with young children. For the look of leather without the high price and upkeep, manufactured versions like "bonded" leather or leather "gel" (essentially leather scraps held

together with glue or polyurethane) may be easier to maintain.

Wood Furniture

TABLES, BOOKCASES, DESKS, ETC.

CONSTRUCTION: Many people think solid wood is best, but wood veneer can be more affordable and work well for bookshelves and other large, solid pieces.

JOINTS: Dovetail joints are strongest, but furniture with "butt" joints (which are glued) can stand up well and cost less.

FINISH: Surfaces should be smooth and finishes even. For dining-room tables and other heavily used pieces, a catalyzed conversion varnish will be more resistant to wear than a lacquer top coat.

PULL UP A CHAIR: 6 POPULAR RETAILERS COMPARED

Here's a closer look at how prices, policies, and products vary among furniture sellers. Refer to our ratings charts starting on page 40 to see how these retailers and others did in our survey.

AMAZON

RIVET FREDERICK CHAIR

PRICE: \$464.20



WHAT YOU GET: Velvet upholstery, foam seat; some assembly required.
DELIVERY: Doorstep delivery is free with Amazon Prime. In-home delivery is available on some items for \$19.99.
RETURNS: Return within 30 days for a refund in most cases; return shipping is free or Amazon will schedule a pickup.
WARRANTY: Amazon brands carry a minimum one-year warranty. For other brands, the warranty varies from manufacturer to manufacturer.
GOOD TO KNOW: Almost an unlimited selection.

COSTCO

WALLIS CHAIR (PAIR)

PRICE: \$219.99
 (available online only at Costco.com)



WHAT YOU GET: Polyester upholstery fabric, foam seat; some assembly required.
DELIVERY: Some items are available in-warehouse. More items are available at Costco.com; prices include delivery.
RETURNS: They're accepted anytime for a full refund. Some large items ordered online may be picked up at the customer's home for no additional charge.
WARRANTY: Costco offers a risk-free 100% satisfaction guarantee.
GOOD TO KNOW: Can shop in-store or online, but must be a member to make a purchase (\$60 per year).

RH (Restoration Hardware)

REGINALD CHAIR

PRICE: \$1,571-\$2,996
 (member's price)



WHAT YOU GET: Italian textured weave fabric, feather down, foam seat; fully assembled.
DELIVERY: White-glove delivery in the contiguous U.S. for \$199-\$599 depending on distance from the nearest RH Gallery.
RETURNS: Contact RH within 30 days of the delivery date. Round-trip shipping is refunded if the item is defective or damaged. RH will pick up large pieces.
WARRANTY: No official policy, but RH says it stands behind its products.
GOOD TO KNOW: Shop online or in-store. Design help and a 25% discount are perks of a \$100 annual membership.

ROOM & BOARD

QUINN CHAIR

PRICE: \$799 and up
 (chair only)



WHAT YOU GET: Performance fabric, fiber-wrapped foam cushions; fully assembled.
DELIVERY: White-glove delivery in the contiguous U.S. for \$79.
RETURNS: A full refund for "timely" returns; damaged or worn items may be refused or result in an adjustment. Return shipping is refunded; original delivery fees are not. Pickup may be arranged for large items.
WARRANTY: No official policy. Room & Board says it will work with customers to resolve any problems.
GOOD TO KNOW: Buy in-store or online. There are extensive customer service options, including free design services.

SAM'S CLUB

HARLOW CHAIR AND OTTOMAN SET

PRICE: \$399



WHAT YOU GET: Chair and ottoman, stain-resistant fabric; fully assembled.
DELIVERY: Free shipping on many items. White-glove delivery is limited and the cost varies by item.
RETURNS: They're accepted anytime. No charge for return shipping. Items purchased in a store must be returned there. Sam's Club may arrange a pickup for the return of large items.
WARRANTY: Varies by item; Sam's Club has a 100% satisfaction guarantee.
GOOD TO KNOW: Shop in-store or online; membership is required (\$45 per year).

STICKLEY

WALNUT GROVE CHAIR

PRICE: \$2,685
 (upholstered in fabric)



WHAT YOU GET: Solid American black walnut covered in fabric or leather.
DELIVERY: Each Stickley retailer has an individual policy.
RETURNS: Warranty-related returns only.
WARRANTY: A limited warranty guarantees against structural defects during the lifetime of the original owner.
GOOD TO KNOW: In-store shopping only. Many Stickley retailers offer complimentary interior design services.

Note: The chairs pictured are among the retailers' top-selling models. They have not been tested by CR.

which could allow you to save money by price shopping.

Potential pitfalls: It's difficult to determine quality or durability from online images and descriptions.

"Be careful if you're unsure of a brand's quality," says Sara Chwatt, an interior designer in Short Hills, N.J. She advises looking closely at an item's measurements and description, reading reviews from verified buyers, and investing as much as your budget allows. "You often get what you pay for," she says.

But even buying from a retailer you know and paying top dollar won't guarantee you'll be happy with the purchase if you don't do your research. "I ordered a pair of \$1,300 sofas online from West Elm and when they came, the seats weren't as deep as they looked in the picture," says Litwin, the furniture-shopping expert. (She hadn't checked the dimensions before ordering.) "I was able to return them, but West Elm didn't refund my original shipping and charged me a 10 percent restocking fee."

Avoid the same mistake by measuring your existing furniture to note the dimensions that are comfortable for your body, and double-check the dimensions of anything you purchase online.

Success strategies: Use the tools online retailers offer, such as detailed measurement and specification information, and the customer service and design teams who can answer questions via chat, email, or phone. Some retailers, including Crate & Barrel and Pottery Barn, employ designers who will meet with you online to create a floor plan at no charge.

Ways to save: Most of the strategies recommended when shopping in a walk-in store hold true online. Comparison shop, and ask customer service about upcoming sales, special discount codes, and free shipping offers. You can often save on your first order by signing up for the company's promotional emails. You can also use

BEFORE YOU BUY

MAKE SURE IT FITS

Measure all the doorways and hallways the furniture will have to pass through to be delivered to your home. The websites of many furniture retailers provide detailed instructions about measuring.

REQUEST SAMPLES

Many stores and online retailers will send you swatches of fabric and sometimes furniture finishes, often for free.

STUDY THE ONLINE

IMAGES Look at all of the images a retailer posts of the furniture you're considering buying, then check its social media accounts to see if there are pictures of the furniture in customers' homes. Zoom in on details like upholstery seams to make sure they're straight and neatly finished.

READ THE REVIEWS

Pay attention to common complaints, such as a color being brighter or darker in real life than it looks online or a piece being hard to assemble.

CHECK THE WARRANTY

A one-year warranty is standard but doesn't cover wear and tear, which can be a gray area. Ratings and reviews from the Better Business Bureau may indicate a retailer's willingness to work out problems.

email or the site's chat feature to ask for a discount. Eighty percent of CR's survey respondents who did this were offered a lower price.

Delivery details: Furniture retailers with in-store and online shopping usually deliver via white-glove service for both—and for about the same fee—depending on the cost of the order and your location. Amazon, Overstock, Wayfair, and other online retailers often offer standard shipping or curbside delivery, free.

CR members in our survey who bought furniture online weren't as happy with the quality of the delivery service as in-store buyers were. Just 17 percent of the online purchases reported by our members came via white-glove delivery vs. a majority of in-store purchases, so it may be worth paying extra for the convenience of white-glove delivery if it's offered. It's especially convenient for large items and those that require assembly. Some retailers offer an assembly service—sometimes by an outside company—for an additional fee that may vary by item. Ikea, for example, bases assembly fees (starting at \$18) on the cost of the item, and may charge an additional \$35 for someone to come to your home.

Dealing with returns: Most online retailers have generous return windows during which you can return an item—undamaged and with a receipt—for a full refund. But returning an item can be a real chore. You may have to repack it and pay return shipping charges, which can be substantial. If the item arrived damaged or missing parts, you typically don't have to pay to return it, and the company may even send its delivery team to your home to remedy the problem.

Always open the box and inspect the goods before you sign for delivery. And keep all of the packaging until you're sure you're satisfied. Some online stores require customers to return items unassembled and in the original packaging.

Ratings ➤ **Talking Shop** Choosing a store with the best combination of quality, selection, service, and price can take the worry out of furniture shopping.

Furniture Store	Reader Survey Results											
	Overall satisfaction score	Quality	Customer service	On-time delivery	Quality of delivery	Policies	Communication	Website usability	Price paid	Selection	Returns	In-store atmosphere
WALK-IN												
Stickley	93	⬆	⬆	—	—	—	—	NA	⬇	⬆	—	⬆
Room & Board	93	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	NA	⬇	⬆	—	⬆
Costco	90	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	NA	⬆	⬇	—	⬆
Independent retailer	90	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	NA	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆
Jordan's Furniture	89	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	NA	⬆	⬆	—	⬆
Scandinavian Designs Furniture	89	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	NA	⬆	⬆	—	⬆
Nebraska Furniture Mart	89	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	NA	⬆	⬆	—	⬆
Baer's Furniture	88	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	NA	⬆	⬆	—	⬆
Ethan Allen	88	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	NA	⬇	⬆	—	⬆
RC Willey Home Furnishings	88	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	NA	⬆	⬆	—	⬆
Crate & Barrel	88	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	NA	⬇	⬆	—	⬆
Cost Plus World Market	88	⬆	⬆	—	—	⬆	—	NA	⬆	⬇	—	⬆
Macy's	87	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	NA	⬆	⬆	—	⬆
Bassett Furniture	87	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	NA	⬇	⬆	—	⬆
American Furniture Warehouse	87	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	NA	⬆	⬆	—	⬆
Living Spaces	86	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	NA	⬆	⬆	—	⬆
Staples	86	⬆	⬆	—	—	—	—	NA	⬆	⬆	—	⬆
HomeGoods	86	⬆	⬇	—	—	⬆	—	NA	⬆	⬇	—	⬇
Havertys	86	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	NA	⬇	⬆	⬆	⬆
RH (Restoration Hardware)	86	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	NA	⬇	⬆	—	⬆
Ikea	86	⬆	⬇	⬆	⬇	⬆	⬆	NA	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆
Steinhafels	86	⬆	⬆	—	—	⬆	⬆	NA	⬆	⬆	—	⬆
Furniture Row	86	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	NA	⬆	⬆	—	⬆
Slumberland Furniture	85	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	NA	⬆	⬆	—	⬆
Target	85	⬆	—	—	—	⬆	—	NA	⬆	⬇	—	⬆
Pottery Barn	85	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	NA	⬇	⬆	—	⬆
Office Depot	84	⬆	⬆	—	—	⬆	—	NA	⬆	⬆	—	⬆
La-Z-Boy Furniture Galleries	84	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	NA	⬇	⬆	⬇	⬆
Raymour & Flanigan	84	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	NA	⬇	⬆	—	⬆
Lowe's	84	⬆	⬆	—	—	⬆	—	NA	⬆	⬇	—	⬆
Kane's Furniture	84	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	NA	⬆	⬆	—	⬆
Big Lots	84	⬇	⬆	—	—	⬆	⬆	NA	⬆	⬇	—	⬇
Star Furniture	84	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	NA	⬆	⬆	—	⬆
Arhaus	84	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	NA	⬇	⬆	—	⬆

Furniture Store	Reader Survey Results											
	Overall satisfaction score	Quality	Customer service	On-time delivery	Quality of delivery	Policies	Communication	Website usability	Price paid	Selection	Returns	In-store atmosphere
WALK-IN <i>Continued</i>												
Value City Furniture	83	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	NA	↑	↑	—	↑
Badcock Home Furniture	83	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	NA	↑	↑	—	↑
Levin Furniture	83	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	NA	↑	↑	—	↑
Bob's Discount Furniture	83	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	NA	↑	↑	—	↑
Home Depot	83	↑	—	—	—	↑	—	NA	↑	↓	—	↑
Sam's Club	82	↑	↓	—	—	↑	—	NA	↑	↓	—	↓
West Elm	82	↑	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	NA	↓	↑	—	↑
Jerome's Furniture	81	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	NA	↑	↑	—	↑
City Furniture	81	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	NA	↑	↑	—	↑
Rooms to Go	81	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	NA	↓	↑	↓	↑
Mathis Brothers	81	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	NA	↓	↑	—	↑
Walmart	80	↓	—	—	—	↓	—	NA	↑	↓	—	↓
Ashley Furniture HomeStore	79	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	NA	↑	↑	↓	↑

ONLINE

Room & Board	91	↑	—	↑	↑	—	↑	↑	↓	↑	—	NA
Costco	89	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	—	NA
RH (Restoration Hardware)	87	↑	—	↑	↑	—	↑	↑	↓	↑	—	NA
Amazon.com	86	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	NA
Independent retailer	85	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	—	NA
Sam's Club	85	↑	—	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	—	NA
Pottery Barn	84	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	—	NA
Macy's	84	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	—	NA
Wayfair	84	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	NA
Target	83	↓	—	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	—	NA
Home Depot	83	↑	—	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	—	NA
Crate & Barrel	83	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	—	NA
Overstock.com	83	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	—	NA
Ikea	82	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	—	NA
West Elm	82	↑	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	—	NA
Walmart	81	↓	—	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	—	NA
Ashley Furniture HomeStore	78	↓	↓	↑	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	—	NA

HOW WE SURVEY: Scores are based on 28,665 ratings from Consumer Reports members on their experience purchasing furniture at a walk-in store and 9,276 ratings of purchases online.

For the overall satisfaction score, 100 means all respondents were completely satisfied; 80, very satisfied; and 60, somewhat satisfied, on average.

For walk-in stores, differences of fewer than 6 points aren't meaningful; for online stores, it's 5 points. Ratings for other attributes reflect average scores on a scale from very poor to excellent.

Results might not be representative of the U.S. population. '—' means the sample size was insufficient to provide a rating.